2. Forgiveness and the Human Condition

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Forgiveness and the Human Condition

If we begin with a cursory survey of literary portrayals of forgiveness, narratives of forgiveness exhibit a recognizable pattern of crystallizing in dramatic scenes of encounter between the one who forgives (or refuses to forgive) and the one who stands to be forgiven (or not to be forgiven). Such encounters unfold around an axis of recognition and transformation for those who come to see each other anew in forgiveness: the person who forgives forswears resentment and revenge in accepting the forgiven person’s declarations of remorse and responsibility; the forgiven person commits herself to becoming otherwise than who she had been in light of which the forgiving person adopts a change of heart, releasing her from the lien of moral resentment, revenge, and vindictiveness. Whether in the fabric of literary portraits or in the folds of everyday life, forgiveness is a space of encounter, a time of transformation, and a form of recognition. Under the heading of “forgiveness as encounter,” let me broadly delineate the contours of this common framing of forgiveness before examining in detail one of its more original statements in Arendt’s *The Human Condition*.

Encounters in forgiveness are usually animated by the dynamic of reconciliation and regeneration; yet they can often possess sharpened edges against forgiveness, as when an aggrieved person lords the request for forgiveness over her aggressor, or when feigned forgiveness becomes weaponized into an instrument of revenge (as it is in *Jane Eyre* with Mrs. Reed on her deathbed), or when David Lurie’s search for absolution in *Disgrace* further eviscerates his own sense of accountability. However we judge these scenes of forgiveness, however forgiveness becomes enacted or misfires, different conceptions of forgiveness can be seen as varied proposals for the orchestration of forgiveness as an encounter. Conceptions of forgiveness are transposable into staging instructions for the narrative emplotment of forgiveness; theories of forgiveness contain virtual theaters of forgiveness.

Seen in this way, claims regarding the proper conditions of forgiveness, for the person who forgives as well as for the person standing to be forgiven, function as structuring principles for the encounter of forgive-
ness, its performance. What it means to prescribe and describe such conditions is itself varied, open to debate: conditions of achievement, conditions of warrant, conditions of initiation. In Charles Griswold’s account, for example, “paradigmatic forgiveness” between two persons aims at mutual reconciliation on the basis of sympathetic understanding and forswearing of resentment (on the part of the forgiving person) in light of the acceptance of self-responsibility and self-repudiation (on the part of the person beseeching forgiveness). Considered as a virtue, forgiveness occurs “at its best” under reciprocal (though asymmetrical) conditions: forswearing of revenge, mitigation and eventual abdication of resentment, and change of heart for the forgiving person; repudiation of the past self, respect toward the injured person, sincere remorse and shouldering of responsibility for the person standing to be forgiven.¹ According to Griswold’s account, “paradigmatic forgiveness” is a “face-to-face” interpersonal relation between an aggrieved person and an offending person in which the offender has inflicted a moral harm against the aggrieved, such that the proper and primary moral response of the aggrieved consists in the retributive attitude of moral resentment, as distinguished from revenge, vindictiveness, and indifference. Setting aside the distinctive merits or particular inadequacies of Griswold’s account, this approach to forgiveness exemplifies how debates and disagreements concerning the conditions for forgiveness, or, even more strongly, for requiring forgiving (such that failing to act under such stipulated conditions would become blameworthy), are translatable into debates and disagreements regarding the proper orchestration of forgiveness as a space of encounter, time of transformation, and form of recognition.

Even proponents of unconditional forgiveness (often called unilateral forgiveness), or more nuanced proposals for the volatility of the distinction between conditional and unconditional forgiveness, are beholden to this framing of forgiveness as an encounter in response to antecedent harm, which may become for that reason especially, or all the more, susceptible to theatricality. Margaret Holmgren, for example, argues for “unconditional genuine forgiveness” where the victim “unilaterally cultivates her own attitude of genuine forgiveness independent of the offender’s actions and attitudes.”² This independence of what she calls the “internal preparation of the person who forgives” stands under the imperative of forgiveness, since, by her claim, failing to forgive would amount to the hardening of a victim in a retributive attitude of resentment and thus commit the fault of failing to respect the wrongdoer as a moral person. This emphasis on respecting the wrongdoer as a “sentient and moral agent” impels us to forgive unilaterally; in failing to do so, our abiding resentment would forever fix the person to their wrongdoing and thus fail to
recognize in respect, compassion, and benevolence the person as distinct, for her own sake and future flourishing, from her misdeed. In this view, forgiveness is not “an expressed emotion in an interaction but a continuous conviction about the basis of what it means to live as a flawed being.”

Even as Derrida’s reflections on the aporia of forgiveness might seem at first glance far removed from the approach to forgiveness in Griswold’s account (or Holmgren’s), Derrida’s argument for the undecidable situation of forgiveness, caught between conditional forgiveness and unconditional forgiveness, nonetheless retains the recognizable gestalt of forgiveness as an encounter—to wit, as an undecidable encounter and encounter with the undecidable. As Derrida insists, conditional forgiveness and unconditional forgiveness are “absolutely heterogeneous” and irreconcilable, and yet indissociable; the “purity” of unconditional forgiveness “becomes effective in a series of all kinds of conditions.”

Derrida’s own posture of asking to be forgiven when addressing forgiveness reflects a conscientious responsibility dictated by the aporia of forgiveness itself: speaking about forgiveness must here ask to be forgiven, given the dual risk of succumbing to the theatricality of its own rhetorical performance or remaining suspended within a capricious profundity (and often wrongly seen as a “negative theology” of forgiveness), even as this suspense bears the weight of being haunted by what appears impossible—namely, forgiveness, “s’il y en a,” as Derrida never fails to remind us.

Much as different theoretical conceptions of forgiveness can be read as implicit prescriptions for the staging of forgiveness, portrayals of forgiveness in literature can be read as implied theories of forgiveness. In both instances, forgiveness is cast as a space of encounter, a time of transformation, and a form of recognition in response to antecedent harm.

Whether among philosophers or writers, whether among the theologically minded or the secular in persuasion (as well as those who challenge the meaningfulness of this distinction), and however we might argue for the proper configuration of forgiveness as concept and orchestration, the common framing notion underlying different theories and theaters of forgiveness as an encounter is additionally beholden to an understanding of forgiveness as a capacity, or “moral power,” of transformation and beginning anew in response to antecedent harm. Forgiveness is not only a space of encounter between persons; it is inseparably a time of transformation and transformation of time itself, centered on the promise and significance of renewal. A space of encounter in forgiveness is inscribed within narrative temporality, or, more accurately stated, within the temporality of narrative contestation (in both subjective genitive and objective genitive senses). Such contestation regarding the truthful narrative for the soliciting, warranting, and meaningfulness
of forgiveness becomes woven around a determinate past. This contested past is both what is common to us and what separates us from each other. Bound to each other on account of this past, we encounter one another across the divide placed between us by this past. The past binds us to the encounter of forgiveness (what you have done to me or what I have done to you) insofar as we find ourselves confronted with each other and with the question of forgiveness. This damaged past divides us in setting contested narratives against each other: we fail to share and accept the same narrative of events; we wish that the Other and her deed could be expelled from our own life story; we feel ourselves belonging and wanting to belong to a time that is not yours, or yours to own, even as we are each held hostage to this past as well as to each other in terms of the wrongdoing that you committed against me, or that I committed against you. We are forgiven (or not forgiven) for what we have done, yet only because what has been done remains not entirely over and done with, not settled once and for all, must forgiveness happen (or fail to happen) in the present in response to a determinate yet unsettled past. Responsive to antecedent harm, after injury, forgiveness performs in the present. I now forgive you (or refuse to forgive you) for what you once did to me. I now beseech your forgiveness for what I once did to you. Whatever it is that forgiveness seeks or achieves, its redress occurs in the present in view of a future where we might find ourselves reconciled, together once more, or, alternatively, where we might not find ourselves together again, having been allowed to take leave of each other in the benediction of peace and safe travels.

As space of encounter and transformation of time as well as time for transformation, forgiveness unfolds around an axis of recognition. In the encounter of forgiveness, I stand recognized before you and you stand recognized before me; each of us does not leave the stage of forgiveness untransformed. Altered self-recognition is equally implied: recognizing myself as forgiven or recognizing myself as forgiving. Forgiveness turns on conversion, transformation, moral (or spiritual) rebirth, or metanoia. This transformative recognition of persons in forgiveness is predicated on the impossibility of self-forgiveness: I cannot forgive myself for what I did against you. I might struggle to reconcile myself with my poor judgment, character flaws, and miscalculations and, in this sense, forgive myself but remain beholden to your forgiveness for what I did to you. Likewise, you cannot forgive yourself on my behalf for wrongdoings done against me. Only the Other, the aggrieved, can forgive me; only I, the aggressor, can stand to be forgiven by the Other. What it is that forgiveness accomplishes and signifies can be variously understood (and hence debated) as reconciliation, regeneration, or rebirth. In its most elemental
form, as portrayed in the biblical narrative of the prodigal son, forgiveness announces the homecoming of finding one’s place among others once again. The wayward person who has departed returns to the fold of friendship, family, community, nation, or humanity.

Forgiveness in *The Human Condition*

This framing of forgiveness as space of encounter, form of recognition, and time of transformation is nowhere more compellingly elaborated in its ontological significance for human existence than in Arendt’s *The Human Condition*. As Karen Pagani remarks, Arendt’s discussion of forgiveness remains “the seminal text in critical literature on forgiveness in contemporary secular ethics” and “exceptional insofar as it has become a touchstone for a wide variety of approaches.” Although Arendt does not provide “any detail of how the individual . . . conceives of the process (or even whether the individual conceives of forgiveness as a process at all),” as Pagani justly recognizes, what Arendt’s compact discussion of forgiveness lacks in development it more than makes up for in suggestiveness. Arendt’s discussion of forgiveness is notable for proposing an original conception of forgiveness even as it draws from traditional features of forgiveness, thus placing her account within a conceptual history of forgiveness that she herself traces back to the origin of Christianity with the life of Jesus. This invocation of the origin of forgiveness with Christianity masks, however, Arendt’s subtle restitution of the “very ancient symbolism” of unbinding/binding. In this manner, her account of forgiveness circumvents an established grammar of forgiveness as gift and grace (as inscribed in the etymologies of the terms “forgive,” “pardoner,” Vergeben) that remains prevalent within a Christian discourse of forgiveness and its more contemporary, philosophical variants. Arendt effectively “unlearns” a Christian conception of forgiveness and, more specifically, a Pauline understanding of interpersonal forgiveness as conditioned by divine forgiveness, in order to think once again, and hence learn once more, the significance and meaning of interpersonal forgiveness for the human condition.

Arendt argues for the fundamental bearing of forgiveness on the human condition in a manner that “had yet to be so forcefully articulated in modern times.” Arendt’s innovation consists in reformulating the traditional framing of forgiveness as space of encounter, form of recognition, and time of transformation in its ontological significance for human plurality in the life-world. *The Human Condition* does not provide a “theory”
CHAPTER 2

of forgiveness but sketches instead “trains of thought” from which a more elaborated account might find inspiration and orientation.13 Within the sweep of her trains of thought, Arendt inscribes as well as deepens the paradigmatic framing of forgiveness as encounter within an analysis of the human condition. This existential deepening of forgiveness accounts for its indeterminate position within the established topological distinction between “the moral” and “the political.” Arendt’s treatment of forgiveness in *The Human Condition* has often been seen as “baffling,” given that forgiveness here “is not of the moral domain as traditionally conceived.”14 In the same vein, Arendtian forgiveness should not be placed within the political domain as traditionally conceived. Arendt’s concern is neither politics nor political philosophy but rather “the predicament from which politics must start,” yet equally from which moral thinking, as traditionally conceived, must likewise begin anew.15 This indeterminacy of where to situate the hold of forgiveness on the human condition scrambles any facile assumption of what “ontological” means in Arendt’s analysis. At best, Arendt’s thinking offers a “prolegomenon” with its “preliminary investigation of human activities that have most bearing upon politics and have been most misunderstood” and, by the same token, that have the most bearing not only upon moral thinking (as conventionally construed) but also upon a renewed thinking of the human condition in its being-in-the-world.16

In its most general expression, Arendt understands forgiveness as indispensable for human agency in coexistence with others in the life-world, or, in her terms, plurality. This emphasis on forgiveness attests to plurality’s robustness as well as its vulnerability. The life-world, as sustained through human action (and speech), is exposed to ruptures of its own doing, but likewise renewals of its own undertaking. In terms of “openness” in an entwined sense of openness toward the manifestation of the world and openness toward the manifestation of others, Arendt astutely develops an appropriation of the phenomenological concern with the life-world, or “being-in-the-world.”17 In recognizing the existential import of forgiveness for the vitality of plurality in the life-world, forgiveness contributes critically to the disclosure of the world in truth. Arendt follows a central Heideggerian insight that “reality” becomes genuinely disclosed only within the life-world of human plurality. The life-world is the opening “where-in” the world comes into its own self-manifestation and, inseparably, where others, as persons, come into their own self-m manifestation for each other. Insofar as forgiveness proves indispensable to the life-world as the vital space of world-manifestation, the world cannot endurably be held in truth without the possibility of truthful forgiveness. Would the human capacity for forgiveness become irrevocably
silenced or indefinitely curtailed, the disclosing locus of the life-world in which the world becomes truthfully manifest would likewise become severely foreclosed. In a world thus fallen under the sway of ressentiment and the reign of indifference, as Kierkegaard diagnosed his present age, the leveling of respectful distance and increasing anonymity of individual life governed by abstract principles make for a world where “modesty, repentance and responsibility cannot easily strike root in the ground.”

Forgiveness proves indispensable not only for the restoration of human plurality but also, insofar as human plurality remains entwined with the openness of the life-world as such, for the renewal of this openness of the world held in truth. In speaking the truth, one bespeaks the world beheld in truth.

In addition to this depth of forgiveness for the life-world, Arendt emphasizes the ontological purchase of forgiveness for human agency and plurality. In Arendt’s conception, forgiveness intimately expresses natiity, the human capacity for beginning anew. The genuine orientation of human existence toward its beginnings, that we are created and conditioned beings, is not backward-looking but forward-looking, thrust into the future in natiity, as the capacity for new beginnings. Along with our exposure to existential rupture, the breakages and crises of human existence, we are endowed in our freedom to originate new beginnings. Within the finite span of birth and death, human existence is storied with multiple beginnings and endings. Within the finite span of human existence, the unfolding of an individual life is structured by the pluralization of temporality, insofar as we can endeavor new beginnings in forgiveness yet conversely remain hostage to the purgatory of an unyielding past that never truly comes to pass. Moreover, within the human condition in its “being-in-the-world,” human existence as such is structured by the pluralization of temporality. The intrinsic connection between both these essential forms of temporalization (within an individual life, within the human condition) becomes exemplified in forgiveness, given the way in which The Human Condition situates the existential temporalization of forgiveness on the axis of “conversion” or “transformation” (metanoia) within a consideration of the human condition as composed of different forms of temporalization. In forgiveness, the drama of the human condition plays itself out in concentrated form within the drama of an individual human existence in concert and conflict with others.

Within the sweep of her analysis of the human condition, Arendt argues that what renders forgiveness indispensable for human plurality must be situated within the domain of acting in relation to laboring and making. Forgiveness encapsulates the predicament of the human condition and its redemption. If acting is always marked by exposure to unpre-
dictable contingency, where the significance and consequence of acting in the world along with others remain perpetually at risk through its own temporal openness, such a defining vulnerability of action becomes redeemed only through forgiveness in undoing the *bondage* of irreversibility. No contingency (as haunts every human action) should ever pass from the past present to the eternal past that would thus establish an unalterable, timeless ground for the present, and so fashion within time a dimension of necessity other than time’s self-defining contingency. Against such fatalism produced by a devolution of natality, forgiveness proclaims the advent of beginning anew through a renewal of time itself. Arendt’s thinking in this manner assigns to forgiveness a sacralized power of redemption for the human condition without which there could be neither enduring plurality or love of the world. What is at stake in Arendt’s account is nothing less than the redemption of the human condition, albeit without any offer of historical finality to the world or theological salvation from the world.19

Being in the World

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt’s threefold distinction of laboring, working, and acting characterizes three different forms of temporality in their respective ontological significance—that is, as temporalizations of human existence. Human existence thus conceived is conditioned through a nexus of ontological movements, or ways of being in the world, with each movement (laboring, working, acting) unfolding in tandem with the others, the constellation of which as a whole defines and textures what it is for human life to be. What distinguishes the temporality of acting and the life-world sustained through acting is that human existence breaks with the cyclical temporality of metabolic life, or *animal laborans*, as well as with the rectilinear temporality of making, or homo faber. Whereas *animal laborans* lives immanently within repeating, and hence transient, cycles of biological need and satisfaction in the maintenance of life for the sake of living, the fabrication of a world of things, tools, and institutions, which endure beyond the life span of individuals, inscribes human life, as homo faber, within a chronological order of temporality, or “world-time.”

One of the more suggestive ways in which Arendt understands the relation between these ontological movements, between *animal laborans*, homo faber, and *vita activa*, is in terms of the problem of redemption. This concern with redemption runs throughout Arendt’s understanding
of the human condition, including, most crucially, her account of acting and forgiveness. In Arendt’s understanding, redemption expresses two distinct meanings: release from and liberation to. Within each movement of human existence, redemption releases from and liberates to without abolishing or sublimating the respectively redeemed movement of human existence. Already in the movement of labor—laboring to secure the necessary resources for the maintenance of biological existence—human existence confronts the issue of redemption. This need for redemption points beyond the domain of labor to the movement of working, thus implicating the world of work in the field of labor. As Arendt argues, “the redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication.” In this argument, the production of a durable world through work releases—distances—human life from metabolic temporality while simultaneously incorporating it into the world of work. With this separation from biological life, human existence attains a form of life that Arendt broadly calls the social. This distancing from biological life opens a space of visibility (worldliness) essentially determined by the form of visibility of fabricated things while projecting human life onto another axis of orientation toward the world, or, to speak more exactly, of nature transformed into a world of human habitation by means of human artifice. It is only upon this constructed stage of worldliness, as the world of institutions, dwellings, and artifacts, that human existence finds a place of inhabitation and cohabitation. The world of durable institutions—taken widely to span culture, language, and social organizations—allows for a common world between humans in which human beings can appear to and encounter each other. The durable world founds stability—the lived space of appearances—against an inhospitable and inhuman movement without any sort of permanence. Through human artifice, the earth becomes a home, a place of dwelling, storytelling, and encounter.

The durable worldliness of homo faber and its dominant instrumental rationality stands itself, however, in need of redemption, given its own predicament of meaninglessness, understood as “the impossibility of finding valid standards in a world determined by the category of means and ends.” Techne transforms the relationship of human existence to what is through a transformation of the relation of human existence toward itself as well as toward meaning and value. Although fabricated worldliness redeems the life of animal laborans by instituting another (incorporating) order of meaning and habitation for human life, this accomplishment of homo faber suffers from its own unsuccessfulness to safeguard against the relativity of its own worldliness. Any effort of providing any theoretical foundation, or justification, for the instituted meanings of the world of human making by thinking, and hence, in this sense, a theo-
retical redemption of the world, is likewise judged by Arendt as leading to an impasse, since theoretical thought is itself afflicted by a predicament that thinking engenders but that thinking cannot on its own resolve or redeem. As Arendt argues, the threat of meaninglessness belonging to the worldliness of homo faber, in its pinnacle form as the “devaluation of all values,” finds redemption only in acting and speaking (*vita activa*), the latter as fashioning “meaningful stories” that reconfigure the significance of acting from a purely instrumental logic of means and ends.

It is, however, this promise of redemption for worldliness through *vita activa* that the historical primacy of *vita contemplativa* effectively suppressed since the establishment of Western philosophical thought with Plato. In Plato’s doctrine of Ideas, Arendt discerns an inaugural image of theoretical thinking that captivated the history of philosophy. The mechanism of this self-fashioning of thought attests to the impasse of *vita contemplativa* for the redemption of worldliness. Arendt’s treatment of Plato is much broader in significance than simply offering a critique of Plato per se, since Plato, or, better, Platonism, represents in her view the original model and inspiration for the Idea of political utopia and the entrenched conceit of Western philosophy that human action requires a theoretical foundation. Plato’s image of theoretical thinking and its doctrine of Ideas are based on the hypostatization of fabricated things and the inversion of worldliness. Fabricated things are defined by a permanence outlasting the activity of their own making as well as outliving the finite span of individual human existence. This quality of permanence characterizes the substantial form of a thing with its definitiveness of beginning and ending, hence as intrinsically imbued with predictability. The *Idea* of the bed, to which Plato (in Arendt’s reading) ascribes true-being, is said to enjoy permanence over and above the impermanence of individual material beds. Thought in terms of the Idea, being is elevated above becoming; eternity as a permanence without beginning and end is foisted above endurance through beginnings and endings. Under the titular guise of the Idea, Plato effectively projects into the sphere of thinking the very form of permanence that characterizes fabricated things of the world while in the same gesture *inverting* the relationship between theoretical thinking and the worldliness of things. Whereas the term *eidos* originally designated the form of things in the world of making (“the look of things”), *eidos* now comes to take a displaced philosophical meaning as designating the Idea of a thing, as the truth of the thing that in itself is not a thing and, indeed, outlasts all things.

Plato’s legacy is thus twofold: making usurps acting, which in turn facilitates the establishment of thinking as a foundation for acting, albeit in the image of action fashioned on the model of making. As Arendt
notes, “Von der ‘vita contemplativa’ her gesehen, werden alle Formen nicht-denkender Aktivität essentiell identisch, weil ihnen allen das Um-willen zu eigen scheint.”22 The circle is complete: only an image of thinking fashioned in the image of making can establish itself as providing a foundation for worldliness. In this metaphysical view, an action without foundation either in an Idea or a telos is unthinkable, but only because thinking has appointed itself as the foundation for acting on the image of making. Arendt’s argument drives against this dual Platonic-Aristotelian legacy of metaphysical thought since, in her argument, “in der praxis gibt es weder telos noch Idee.”23 Without disregarding the weight of thought for determining our actions (indeed, in strident argument against the prevalence of “thoughtlessness” in our world), acting remains, in this sense for Arendt, anarchic, without theoretical foundations, first principles or eternal laws, and, for that reason, in need of promising and the exercise of critical judgment, as well as, most significantly, the eminently humane power of redemption called forgiveness.

Aside from such ontological consequence, it is the political implications of this Platonic doctrine of Ideas that especially concerns Arendt. When transposed into political thinking, as with Plato’s Republic, the vision of an Ideal polis, which, as a model for political existence, offers a theoretical framework for the shaping of human plurality, represents an effort to eradicate human vulnerability from the world, and hence the creativity and risk of acting. There always remains a discrepancy between how one thinks the world to be, or should be, and how it will become. The value of this discrepancy is essential for judgments about how to act as well as the possibility of forgiveness in the aftermath of injury, harm, and errancy.24 Whether political utopia is understood in Platonic terms, in terms of the City of God, or, in its modern variation, as a historical telos meant to determine the course of history, such an understanding of the relation between worldliness and theoretical thought hinges on a promised unification of the world of actuality with the world of thinking. The redemption of worldliness is thus conceived as involving a volatile mixture of principled violence and extraterrestrial miracle: the course of human existence must be shaped according to an image or ideal in such a manner that requires the necessary reduction of plurality and ever-elusive quest for that apocalyptic instant when the world would become one with its envisioned Idea, Telos, or Principle.

In Arendt’s argument, however, for each of these movements of human existence—animal laborans, homo faber, and vita contemplativa—redemption can occur only from outside these respective domains, arriving as a non-self-generated “miracle.” The predicament of each movement of existence is compounded by this inability to secure redemption through
its own means. As Arendt writes, “What in each of these instances saves man—man *qua animal laborans, qua homo faber, qua thinker*—is something altogether different; it comes from outside—not, to be sure, outside of man, but outside each of the respective activities.” Ushering or guiding the world toward an Idea or telos does not accomplish genuine redemption but confuses redemption of the world with salvation from the creative volatility of the life-world. An image of redemption that thus becomes seen as arriving only from outside the world of human activity, as with laboring, working, and thinking, easily offers up the temptation for an escape from the world or the absolutization of the world in the promise of finality. This shift from redemption of the world to salvation of the world incites a desire for salvation from the world, at the expense, paradoxically, of the world said to be in need of salvation. Such a displacement of redemption by salvation motivates an attitude of *contemptus mundi*: the desire for salvation from the world facilitates the destruction of the world as the destruction of plurality and openness toward the future as inescapable openness. This movement of salvation in view of an outside, or transcendence, or beyond, throws the world off-kilter by decentering the world from the precariousness and creativity of human acting in the situated context of plurality. As Arendt argued in her analysis of totalitarianism, this conflation of salvation for redemption was most acutely manifest with the apocalyptic narrative of salvation coursing through Nazi ideology as a political religion. In this virulent form, Nazism represents an unbridled fanaticism for an idol of salvation armed with a perverse mixture of technological-bureaucratic mania, *völkisch* culture, and cultish mysticism. Welt-Erlösung becomes horrifically disfigured into Welt-Erlöschung. Sovereignty becomes fictionalized absolutely and thus all the more prodigal in its rampant destruction of worldliness and plurality. Yet even in politically and ethically less-catastrophic forms, this fanaticism for salvation, as the quest for overcoming the worldliness and finite condition of the human, of the humane, arguably drives transhumanism and other concerted efforts to extricate human existence from its earthbound condition, which, as Arendt so eloquently stated, was first heralded with the launch of Sputnik and its symbolization of the cosmic allure to taking leave of the Earth in Promethean shame.

**Acting and Narration**

The domain of acting enjoys a categorically different status. Unlike laboring, working, and thinking, the predicament of acting finds its redemption through a distinctive power of acting, and through this distinction the
predicament of the human condition in its finitude becomes redeemed, not abolished or suppressed. Redemption does not arrive from beyond the domain of acting but emerges immanently within acting itself in order to transcend and transform—to begin anew—human relations forged in the plurality of the life-world. Redemption arises from the potentiality of acting insofar as the domain of acting contains the potentiality for two kinds of acting uniquely capable of redressing the predicaments of irreversibility and unpredictability: forgiving and promising. Whereas promising liberates us from the predicament of the unpredictability of the future, forgiving liberates us from the predicament of the irreversibility of the past. “Without being forgiven,” Arendt writes, “released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.”

Such a characterization of forgiveness in no way implies the forgetting of the past, the condoning of past wrongdoings, or the exculpation of the wrongdoer from her deed. As an ontological feat, forgiveness transforms, or “retemporalizes,” the relationship between who the person is and what she has done, as well as the relation between the person who forgives and the person who stands to be forgiven. This transformation of temporality, as binding persons to their own self-manifestation through acting, as well as binding persons to other persons, becomes effected not only within the ambit of those lives principally affected (the person who forgives, the person who is forgiven). Just as significantly, the life-world as such, as woven from reconfigured vectors of acting and story lines, becomes duly transformed in forgiveness.

Even as forgiveness centers on an interpersonal encounter involving the transformation of the forgiven person and the forgiving person, forgiveness critically reinvigorates the life-world in its openness to self-manifestation, not only with respect to others (the affected parties in forgiveness as well as the community of spectators) but also with respect to the world in its truthfulness. Persons who would remain unforgiving toward each other, engaged in consuming cycles of retribution and revenge, or who would remain stagnant in resentment without end, facilitate the withering away of world-openness. Fragmented and atomized within prideful self-righteousness or stubbornness against seeking forgiveness, the failure of interpersonal reconciliation brings along a failed reconciliation of the life-world with itself. Worlds in which forgiveness becomes increasingly scarce, feigned, or theatrical become increasingly subject to the automatism of violence, endemic tribalism, and the flattening of complexity. Within such an unforgiving world in its loss of the humane, the truthful disclosure of the life-world becomes foreclosed as well as the truthful self-disclosure of our respective standing toward each other, as well as for ourselves.
This imperative of forgiveness for the reinvigoration of the life-world as “stage of appearance” reflects one of the more compelling consequences of Arendt’s dismantling of Platonism. Metaphysical thought is founded on the conceit of thinking over acting— namely, that action requires theoretical foundations, and hence that the world in truth depends on a theoretical foundation or justification of truth. This conceit of thinking relates directly to Plato’s doctrine of truth as correspondence, or what became canonized in the medieval ages as the doctrine of veritas as adaequatio intellectus et rei. In Arendt’s (Heideggerian) reading, truth is established in Plato as a correspondence between Idea and thing on the basis of an ontological divide between “being” and “appearance” at the expense of obfuscating a more primordial sense of truth as revealing or disclosure. In dismantling this metaphysical separation between “being” and “appearance,” or what Arendt identifies as the “two world theory” of canonical metaphysical thought, Arendt’s return “to the things themselves” in their respective manners of manifestation (and what she cleverly calls “the value of the surface”) inaugurates a thinking of the life-world as a stage of appearance in which “being” and “appearance” are not ontologically divided. As Arendt writes, “In this world which we enter, appearing from a nowhere, and from which we disappear into a nowhere, Being and Appearing coincide.”

This coincidence of being and appearing does not, however, imply identity. On the contrary, this coincidence of being and appearing implies plurality and, in fact, plurality in plural senses as the principle of being in appearances. Appearances are always appearances for someone for whom there are appearances. Nothing appears without an attestation of appearance. This implication of attestation for appearances further implies that the someone for whom there are appearances (to whom something appears) must likewise appear. Given our sentient being, we are present to the world as much as the world is present to us. We are, accordingly, not just “in the world,” we are “of the world,” and this precisely because we “are subjects and objects— perceiving and being perceived—at the same time.” How we exist in the world, not only with regard to ourselves but also with regard to others— how we are here in the world— conditions how the world becomes disclosed, and thus appears to us— how the world is there for us. This does not make human existence the condition for the disclosure of the world. Appearances are there not for the sake of life but, on the contrary, life is here for the sake of there being appearances, including its own. In this respect, sentient life is animated by an urge for self-display: “Whatever can see wants to be seen, whatever can hear calls out to be heard, whatever can touch presents itself to be touched.” This “urge for self-display” provides the ground for the meaningfulness of different func-
tions of human life, such that, in the framework of The Human Condition, the meaningfulness of different movements of human existence (labor, work, contemplation) are grounded in the domain of acting and speaking insofar as the life-world opens the stage of self-appearance, of the world, of others, of ourselves. To be in the world in attestation of other appearances in our own self-display is further inscribed within appearing onto and disappearing from the world. We appear on the stage of the life-world “from a nowhere” and likewise disappear from the stage of the life-world “to a nowhere.” We find ourselves in a world always already there as a world preceding us and already always there as a world continuing without us. Appearing to a world that has appeared (to others) and disappearing from a world that will continue to appear (to others) define the “primordial events” that “mark out the time, the time span between birth and death.” These various aspects of the sense in which being and appearance coincide define the elemental sense in which we exist in the openness of the life-world. As Arendt notes, “Nobody has succeeded in living in a world that does not manifest itself of its own accord.”

That appearance implies openness toward other appearances (no appearance without plural appearances) gives space for attestation in the “potential recognition and acknowledgement” of appearance. To recognize appearances for what they are (or, conversely, to be taken in by appearances that seem to be what they are not) is to recognize the sense of what appears as not fully determined in its appearance for us. “Reality,” that vexing term in philosophy, becomes geared into the many senses of appearances. “Reality” is not divorced from or veiled by appearances, for the sense in which we adhere to “reality” always hangs on how we adhere to appearances. As Arendt writes,

That appearance always demands spectators and thus implies at least potential recognition and acknowledgement has far-reaching consequences for what we, appearing beings in a world of appearances, understand by reality, our own as well as that of the world. In both cases, our “perceptual faith,” as Merleau-Ponty has called it, our certainty that what we perceive has an existence independent of the act of perceiving, depends entirely on the object’s also appearing as such to others and being acknowledged by them. Without this tacit acknowledgement by others we would not even be able to put faith in the way we appear to ourselves.

This “perceptual faith” in “reality” is visceral, inscribed within the five senses of attestation (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting), as well as woven into the intersubjective fabric of the life-world, as refer-
ring to the implied attestation of others. Yet this anchoring of “percep-
tual faith” in “reality” is not merely intersubjectively textured; it depends
just as much on what Arendt calls the “context qua context,” which itself
never appears clearly and distinctly within the situated encounters of the
world, and yet which, in turn, should not be designated as “Being.” Com-
mon sense is that pervading sense for the “reality” of appearances that
is “guaranteed by its worldly context,” or “worldliness as such.” This re-
jection of an embracing and unified sense of “Being” sparkling through
the manifold differences of being, or the plurality of appearances, holds
on to the meaning of an “ontological difference,” while dislocating this
original difference from its inscription into the difference between Being
and beings. This dislocation of the ontological difference serves, on the
one hand, to dismantle Plato’s doctrine of truth as correspondence and,
on the other, to slip away from any devotion to “the truth of Being.” Both
Plato and Heidegger (at least, the Heidegger of Arendt’s concern) are
committed to subsuming meaning to truth and thus, in their own way,
to a suppression of an open politics in favor of a regime of truth.33 But,
as Arendt expresses her critical insight, “The need of reason is not inspired
by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are
not the same. The basic fallacy, taking precedence over all specific meta-
physical fallacies, is to interpret meaning on the model of truth.”34 Pla-
tonism names this inaugural metaphysical fallacy.

Arendt does not thereby abandon “reason” or “thinking,” nor the
significance of truth for human existence. On the contrary, she proposes
a reformulation of their respective stature for human existence. Taking
her cue from Kant’s distinction between Verstand (translated into English
by Arendt as “cognition” and “intellect,” not as “understanding”) and
Vernunft, whereas the intellect looks for correctness in whether some-
thing exists and measures its meaning according to the correspondence
of truth, reason (“thinking”) does not inquire into whether something
exists but as to the meaning for something to be—that is, for how some-
thing appears in attestation.35 As Arendt remarks, “Thinking is equally
dangerous to all creeds and, by itself, does not bring forth any new creed.”
In the domain of acting, as Arendt further comments, “practically, think-
ing means that each time you are confronted with some difficulty in life
you have to make up your mind anew.” This renewed quest for meaning
is the animating principle of the human condition in its attestation of ap-
pearances and self-appearance. It is, however, a principle that can betray
itself. As Arendt writes, “The quest for meaning, which relentlessly dis-
solves and examines anew all accepted doctrines and rules, can at any mo-
ment turn against itself, produce a reversal of the old values, and declare
these contraries to be ‘new values.’”36 Thinking can revolt against itself to
become thoughtlessness much as thinking can revolt against thoughtlessness to renew thinking.

When reformulated in terms of the ascendency of meaning over truth as well as the inseparability of appearance to being and being in appearance, the traditional concern for truth, configured as correspondence between thinking and thing, becomes reconfigured into a primary concern for the truthfulness of appearances. This emphasis on truthfulness forms the core of Arendt’s account of thinking as intrinsically a form of conscience through which the thinking and acting subject crystallizes as a person in the element of freedom. For Arendt, “nothing perhaps indicates more strongly that man exists essentially in the plural than that his solitude actualizes his merely being conscious of himself . . . into a duality during the thinking activity. It is this duality of myself with myself that makes thinking a true activity, in which I am both the one who asks and the one who answers.”

This inner dialogue takes the form of self-possession in thinking where thinking is not construed as correspondence or correctness, either in the mode of intuition or logical reasoning. Looking back to Socrates, Arendt argues that thinking, as an inner dialogue, takes the form of striving to be consistent with oneself (homologein autos heautō). To think is to be truthful to oneself. The opposite of thinking is self-contradiction and bad faith; that is, a failure or absence of self-attestation (not attesting to one’s contradictions or attesting in order not to attest). To have a conscience is to possess oneself in truthful self-attestation; it is to stand before oneself, yet not before the tribunal of guilt, before oneself in giving a truthful account of oneself as informed by the capacity of judgment—namely, to take into one’s own consideration the standpoint of others and thus become for oneself a stranger while remaining a friend to oneself. In thinking, self-questioning, and judging, we are at home with ourselves. To be at home with oneself, however, is to contest any absolute self-identification with oneself by welcoming alterity (the viewpoints of others) within oneself. To be at home with oneself—to think—is to be “two in one,” as both friend and stranger to myself in truthful self-attestation. As Arendt quotes from Hippias Minor, “Even Socrates, so much in love with the marketplace, has to go home, where he will be alone, in solitude, in order to meet the other fellow.” It is in this Socratic sense that the voice of conscience, as the daimon within us, is neither the commandment of God, nor natural law within the heart, nor lumen natural. The daimon of thinking speaks without prescribing, instructs without commanding, and inspires without absorbing; it “fills a man full of obstacles.” As Arendt observes, “What causes a man to fear it [voice of conscience] is the anticipation of the presence of a witness who awaits him only if and when he goes home.”
In her brilliant words, “Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home.”

This precedence of the self-disclosure of appearances, as truthfulness, is defining not only of how persons are disclosed to each other within the life-world but also of how the world as such becomes self-disclosed and to whom. The indispensable significance of forgiveness, and hence redemption, for the life-world follows from this reversal of Platonism and, especially, Arendt’s argument for the precedence of meaning over truth. Forgiveness becomes ontologically indispensable in terms of its regeneration of the meaningfulness of the life-world through the redemption of self-disclosure from the predicament of its own obfuscation.

Because acting almost never achieves its intended purpose, according to Arendt, given that acting always operates within entangled webs of human relationships and the discrepancy between our considered ambitions and their unconsidered effects, the exposure of acting to contingent consequence and unexpected significance solicits and situates the generation of narratives such that acting comes to have weight and substance only by virtue of narrative incarnation. As founded on acting, the public sphere of the life-world is a space of narration in which different narratives concerning the consequence and significance of acting become fashioned, recounted, and contested. Acting always finds itself oriented within a space of narrative contestation. Different narratives regarding the how, what, where, and why of acting provide the threads from which the fabric of how we appear to each other becomes woven—that is, told. Arendt’s claim, however, is not that we just are our stories but rather that the meaningfulness of who we are and what we do comes fully into appearance only in narrative manifestation. Acting finds fulfillment in narratives, not in the sense of finality but as openness to accountability, responsibility, and truthfulness. We are launched into narrative from acting and turn to acting within narratives already under way. The initiation of acting is at the same time an invitation to speak and to be spoken about.

The intentionality of acting therefore not merely aligns itself toward its intended object and effect but also does so in such a manner that the meaningfulness of acting—its significance and consequence—comes into play and is displayed through narration. There is no claim to the truth of what we do without a certain meaningful narration of what we did do and who we are in this doing. The movement toward the fulfillment of acting in narration, not in terms of its completion but in terms of its completing incompleteness—that is, its openness to contested meaning—issues from acting in its ontological predicament. What is profoundly human about the appearance of unpredictability and irreversibility in our world is that
both predicaments incite us to speech and, more generally, storytelling. Stories give place in our world to contingencies such that we can grant ourselves leeway and orientation toward their inevitability. Acting and speaking each bear witness to the finitude of the human condition, yet each are expressive of the robustness of the human condition insofar as it is only through storytelling that who we are becomes revealed to each other through our acting. As Arendt remarks, “The world is not humane just because it is made by human beings, and it does not become humane just because the human voice sounds in it, but only when it becomes a topic of discourse. However much we are affected by the things of the world, however they may stir and stimulate us, they become human for us only when we can discuss them with our fellows . . . We humanize what is going on in the world and in ourselves only by speaking of it, and in the course of speaking of it we learn to be human.”

We are manifest to each other in both word and deed. To act, to be acted upon, to speak, and to be spoken about are different ways in which a person becomes manifest to other persons within the life-world’s stage of appearance. Arendt distinguishes between the subject of narrative and the author of narrative. Although I am the subject of those narratives that reveal who I am in the context of my acting, I am not the exclusive author of such narratives. To have a life is to span a stretch of time marked by a beginning and an end, yet this span of time is emphatically a time for narration as well as a time of narration. In an important sense, our lives have already begun even before we enter the world; we are first born to the world before being born into the world, insofar as we have already appeared within the narratives of others, which serve as placeholders and places of welcome for our own living yet to come. We are born to the world as singular beings already lovingly bespoken; we enter plurality in the baptismal act of being-properly-named (an act that we never witness ourselves); our lives have already accrued meaning and value with respect to who (and for whom) we are yet to be. As Arendt remarks, “We are born into this world of plurality where father and mother stand ready for us, ready to receive us and welcome and guide us and prove that we are not strangers.”

Our lives begin already begun, not in thrownness but in natality, and hence as entrusted to others and in trust with others. We are received into the world in the berth and birth of narration. Likewise, our narrative incarnation does not cease with our passing from the stage of the world; our lives continue after we die in narrated afterlives insofar as stories from our lives continue to be fashioned, recounted, and contested after we have passed away. This span of time called my life is a space of self-manifestation and contestation of who I am through stories told about me in the context of what I do, my acting in the world. I am the
subject of my life narrative, yet I am not the author of my life narrative, since the author function is essentially plural. What is specifically human about human life as \textit{bios}, as distinguished from animal life (\textit{zoe}), is this possibility of a narrating and narrated life (\textit{biographie}).\textsuperscript{43}

This distinction between subjects and authors of narratives receives Arendt’s qualification that who I am in fact never entirely coincides, and hence becomes revealed, with how I appear to others in either word or deed. The engagement with others and appearance to others that properly constitute the humaneness of life are at the same time an “in-between” of distance and discretion. The “who” of the person, her singularity, retains what Arendt calls a “curious intangibility” throughout the narratives of her individuation and individual actions. While we become manifest to others in our words and deeds, \textit{who} we are remains an unfinished question, an open question for a life as yet unfinished, such that who we are can never become completely captured or absorbed by what we say or do. As Arendt expresses this insight, “The revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence.”\textsuperscript{44} This paradoxical combination of distance toward the life-world of public appearance \textit{and} engagement with others in the life-world is crucial for any sustaining and nurturing of the life-world. The collapse of such proper distance and intangibility of the person (or the “who”), as fostered by the excessive demand to make oneself known and predictable, but equally with the increasing absorption of the political into the social, produces a withering away of the critical distance required for thought and judgment within oneself, as the space within for any willingness and capacity to take into account another person’s perspective. Without this distance toward the world reflected within a distance toward oneself, as the “two-in-one” of thinking, the “who” cannot discover and define herself in the partisanship for the world of \textit{amor mundi}.

Forgiveness as Encounter

Arendt recognizes forgiveness, like its counterpart promising, as an indispensible act without which the fabric of human coexistence in the life-world would not be durably renewed—that is, enduringly possible, time and again. Forgiveness exemplifies natality and plurality.\textsuperscript{45} I cannot forgive myself on your behalf for what I have done against you. Only you can forgive me for what I have done against you and thus allow me to
regain a potentiality for acting and standing as a person that I myself have forfeited in having wronged you. Along with this dimension, forgiveness brings redemption to the human condition, albeit in a form that, as opposed to eschatological salvation, remains itself precarious and in need of renewal. Redemption must become perpetually redeemed given its exposure, on the one hand, to the vulnerability of redemption to unforeseeable trials of the future and, on the other, to the unforgivable.

In drawing on an established idiom of forgiveness as transformation or conversion (metanoia), Arendt understands forgiveness as enabling the recovery of a person from her past wrongdoing, or what she did. As Arendt notes, “das Unrechte, das man getan hat, ist die Last auf den Schultern, etwas, was man trägt, weil man es sich aufgeladen hat.” In forgiveness, who you are becomes released from the entrapping burden of what you did. Arendt’s account suggests a constitutive role for the attitude of moral resentment on the part of the injured person and, more broadly, the community (or moral spectator). Insofar as wrongdoing provokes indignation, or moral resentment, as well as the demand for retribution and even revenge, the wrongdoer remains bound to her wrongful deed in the condemning eyes of the victim and the community. Our sense of having been wronged by the doings of others motivates us to regard the other’s agency as indistinguishable from her wrongdoing; in my resentful eyes, you will remain this person who wronged and harmed me. Ever since the influential sermons of Bishop Butler, moral resentment has been recognized as an essential acknowledgment and registering of moral wrongdoing on the part of the victim and the moral community. While we are resentful for wrongdoings and injury toward ourselves, we are indignant at wrongdoings and injuries to others, and although the line demarcating resentment and indignation is not always stable, in an ideal case when we find ourselves the victim of moral harm, we are both resentful and indignant, insofar as we combine, as Adam Smith argues, both “first person” and “third person” judgments. We are resentful for the harm done against our standing as a moral individual, yet we are likewise indignant that a moral value has been violated from the perspective of the moral spectator. This conjunction of first- and third-person judgments proves critical for the sway of the impartial spectator (indignation) over a first-person resentment. The former keeps the latter measured, while the latter directs and anchors the former. As a “reactive attitude” that is neither indifference nor morally culpable revenge (or vindictiveness), moral resentment registers the wrongdoing both emotionally and cognitively (as moral judgment of disapprobation). Resentment holds the wrongdoer accountable and responsible while at the same time placing a demand on their responsibility; in resenting
the other, I place a moral lien on the other’s standing as a moral agent until that time when self-repudiation and self-responsibility are sincerely and adequately expressed. We cannot forgive what we have not properly resented; forgiveness thus requires the forswearing of resentment. To be sure, the forswearing of resentment is not exhaustive in forgiveness’s overcoming; it might also include overcoming other vindictive passions such as anger and sadness.50

In forgiveness, the person becomes released from the claim made upon her by past wrongdoings as well as liberated for a revitalized future and renewed potentiality for acting. Forgiveness recovers—and, in this sense, redeems—who the person can (still) become from (just) being what the person has done. As Arendt explains, “Forgiving does not aim at the destruction but on the contrary at the restoration of the persons involved and of the relationship between them.”51 Such recovery of the person neither covers over nor forgets the past, nor all too conveniently consigns the past to irrelevance. As transformed, the person gains a new lease on her own agency through a power that only the Other, as the person who forgives, can bestow. This recovery of the person from her (past) actions is never possible through the power of one’s own agency but granted, as an act of generosity and respect, only by the person who has been wronged. The person who once wronged me becomes reborn in her potentiality for acting and appearance through a forgiveness that gives back to the person, without any lording sense of sovereignty, what the person took away from herself in her wrongdoing against me. In so doing, on the basis of remorse and responsibility on the part of the wrongdoer, as well as self-repudiation of her past self (or that aspect of her self responsible for wrongdoing), the person who forgives must release herself from the grasp of anger, vindictiveness, and revenge. The past remains what it was: irreversible. A past wrongdoing can neither be undone, nor forgotten, nor made as if it had never happened. Yet the person, or the “who,” becomes restored to her proper standing as not fully coinciding with her action. What becomes recovered is not what you did but who you are as distinct from what you once did.

In an important sense, a past wrongdoing can be said to have attained its constitutive sense of irreversibility only once forgiveness has released its hold on the present and, as significantly, on the future. Irreversibility here afflicts not only the past wrongdoing with regard to the victim; it likewise afflicts the wrongdoer, who, until released and redeemed, cannot get past her own wrongdoing. Only through forgiveness is the past granted passage to the past, as opposed to remaining rigidly fixed in its claim on the present, and hence as a past that remains impossible to overcome in the present. The wrongdoer remains beholden to accountability
and responsibility, yet, per Arendt’s argument, reconciliation with the wrongdoer releases her wrongdoing from the corrosive impermanence of fixing the person to her past as well as the “automatism” of revenge with its cycles of retributive violence. It is only in terms of forgiveness that a distance between the past and the future can be forged in such a manner as to allow for a genuine remembrance of and responsibility for the past. Only when we find ourselves rehabilitated to each other as well as reconciled with ourselves can we truthfully come to terms with the significance and consequence of what we have been through. The encounter of forgiveness is therefore never without a pacification of narrative contestation, such that the act of forgiveness requires the joint authoring of a truthful narrative of what has been done, to whom, and by whom, which, as with any author function, essentially invokes the attestation of plurality. The act of forgiveness requires narrative fulfillment, or completion, in which the “who” of the person can be revealed; forgiveness requires self-disclosure in acted narratives. What becomes restored is the truthfulness of the world, or the world in truth. Forgiveness lays the past (wrongdoing) to rest in giving it a proper, truthful place in narrative (and public) remembrance. Even if wrongdoing should ever have any place, or remain accommodated, in our world (so as to not be condoned), forgiveness forges a place in the world for wrongdoing under the sign of truthfulness and remembrance. That place in which a wrongdoing finds place in the world is no longer the place of its wrongdoing but the place forged together in forgiveness, hence in plurality, through which the life-world can be held in truth once more. Forgiveness is thus not only “place forging” for those who stand toward each other reconciled; it is just as significantly place forging for the wrongdoing itself—the event—in the space of truthful remembrance. This restoration of the world to truth is directed as much toward the past as toward a future. Forgiveness is thus not directed exclusively toward the past, since in asking to be forgiven there emerges an implicit (or explicit) promise to not wrong or harm you in the way I once did wrong or harm you. Forgiveness and promising imply each other as ecstatic events structured along the horizons of past, present, and future.

In this temporalizing form, forgiveness is an ontological performative: it reactualizes the potentiality of acting qua potentiality. It is transformative of human existence qua capacity to begin again as such. As Arendt notes, the predicament of irreversibility is not just that what is done cannot be undone—namely, what is done remains unfinished (unchangeable yet unfinished) as long as consequences continue to reverberate; it is also that, if bound to irreversibility, our “capacity to act would be confined to a single deed from which we could never recover.” Our
capacity to act falls victim to its own effected single deed. This ontological accomplishment of forgiveness as the repotentialization of potentiality accounts for its virtuality as an act. It should not be conflated with its invisibility as opposed to its visibility, since, in Arendt’s thinking, forgiveness remains a public, that is, self-disclosing, act. Nonetheless, forgiveness retains a virtual character, as expressive of the intangibility of the person at stake (or, in cases where forgiveness is refused or feigned, the person at risk) in its “miraculous” transformation (as both transformation of the person who forgives and transformation of the forgiven person). When regarded as ontologically more effective than merely involving reconciliation, rehabilitation, and recognition, the act of forgiveness would seem to do nothing. The act of forgiveness would seem curiously intangible to the point that forgiveness might seem to genuinely occur only silently, without any flash of theatricality, even if such silence bespeaks a performative self-disclosing act (for example, Jane Eyre’s forgiveness of Rochester). Forgiveness would seem to do nothing in the present since its accomplishment resides at once in the past as well as in the future, as renewing the capacity, or potentiality, of acting as such to the person, or, in other words, the person in her natality. In releasing us from the consequences of what we have done, forgiveness releases the capacity to act from its petrification in the amber of wrongdoing. This regeneration of the capacity to act is tantamount to granting again the standing of the person to be forgiven as a person. We forgive the person for what she did and for her sake; in so doing, we proclaim the person to be forgiven for what she did, not innocent for what she has done. This repotentialization of the potentiality of becoming other than who I have been—that is, other than the person who committed a wrongdoing against you—speaks to the generosity of the person who forgives me, as giving back to me what I had forfeited from myself, and, in so doing, removing herself, as the one who forgives, from any position of authority over me, other than this granting recuperation of my own agency and standing as a person.

Unlike the durability of fabricated things and worldliness in the form of substantial permanence, the durability of human potentiality for acting does not enjoy any substantial permanence; its endurance comes instead from a continual renewal of potentiality through forgiveness. Potentiality must always become repotentialized through itself—that is, through an acting that reactualizes potentiality qua potentiality in the act of actualizing itself as forgiveness. Without forgiving, there would be no enduring potentiality of beginning anew in human acting, yet precisely because the potentiality of acting anew must repeatedly become repotentialized there is nothing eternal to the human potentiality for acting, including forgiveness, even though there remains something immortal
in the aspiration of such acting. Without erasing or undoing the irreversibility of past actions per se, forgiveness liberates human agency from the fatalism of irreversibility, not irreversibility as such. Unlike a Christian conception of forgiveness, where forgiveness, as proposed by the orthodox theologian John Milbank, is conceived as “decreation,” forgiveness for Arendt re-creates without ontologically undoing the fact that “it was.” For Milbank, God’s forgiveness is “miraculous” since it brings being into nothing, thus echoing in reverse the miracle of God’s creation (bringing being out of nothing). As he writes, “With equal miraculousness [forgiveness] decreates, and causes what is not merely to be as if it were not, but literally not to be.” When Arendt, however, argues that forgiveness responds to the predicament of irreversibility, she does not mean to claim that forgiveness undoes the past in this metaphysical sense of “decreation.” The past is neither literally or figuratively erased; rather, it is given place and meaning, laid to rest. This redemption of the life-world from fatalism by means of the potentiality of acting itself gives to forgiveness the power of sacralization in placing the redemption of the world within the reach of human acting in the world. Forgiveness does not break into the world from the outside but emerges gracefully and generously from within. In forgiveness, there is redemption without salvation.

This transformation of forgiveness critically assumes that who we are has not become entirely absorbed or eviscerated by what we have done. Forgiveness presupposes a salvageable form of recognition in which the person who wronged me remains potentially and meaningfully distinguishable as a who, as “curiously intangible” within her appearance, despite the collapse of her agency into her wrongdoing, as petrified in the amber of her acting. A difference, or “space,” between who the person is and what she has done must survive her wrongdoing. Without this space remaining intact, there would be no room for forgiveness. This space between the who and the what, between the person and her act, must be recognizable by both the person standing to be forgiven, as a condition for self-repudiation and self-responsibility, and the person offering her forgiveness, as a condition for respect. But likewise, the person who falls victim to wrongdoing must have also survived; a space within the victim between her agency, or “who,” and what happened to her must retain a recognizable form for the victim herself. Such recognition (as recognition of the wrongdoer and self-recognition of the victim) presupposed in the encounter of forgiveness, such that both persons still stand as recognizable to each other as persons, hinges on a minimal distance between what she did (the wrongdoer) and who she remains—namely, that the wrongdoer could have done otherwise, and might have thought otherwise, or had the circumstances of her acting been otherwise. The
person who forgives must still recognize herself as distinct from her desire for vengeance and moral resentment as well as the wrongdoer as distinct from her wrongdoing. Forgiveness reopens a space for the singular intangibility of the Other, or, in other words, for the Other to no longer have to appear as who she appears to have been in terms of what she did against me.

When such distance between the who and the what fails, when such a form of recognition has itself become an ontological victim to wrongdoing, we stand before the inhumanity of evil. Either as the absorption of the person into her wrongdoing or as the evisceration of the person from her wrongdoing, such wrongdoings are emphatically evil in an unforgivable sense. The unforgivable represents a scandal against plurality, in contrast to those trespasses of plurality called wrongdoings, which remain forgivable in principle. In the instance of diabolic evil—knowingly committing evil for the sake of evil (which admittedly Arendt seems to rule out) —the person has become entirely absorbed into her evil deed; it is as if the deed itself received the unfathomable depth, or intangibility, of the who, and yet, paradoxically, of a who who has abdicated her agency entirely to her evil doing. In the second instance, we find the meaning of Arendt’s controversial and often misunderstood notion of the “banality of evil.” Whereas those who knowingly commit evil are wicked, those who mindlessly enact evil are thoughtless. Wickedness and thoughtlessness share in the complete destruction of any distance within the person, as the “two-in-one” of thinking and judgment, that constitutes the dialogue of thought with oneself. For Arendt, what she identifies as unforgivable “radical evil,” even as she misuses this Kantian term, “transcends the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance.”

Cases in which who the person is has not survived (in the Arendtian sense of “who”) their own wrongdoing, as with diabolic evil or the banality of evil, are cases in which there is no possible form of recognition; there no longer remains a person there to be forgiven. Evil in this radical form is the place where there no longer stands a subject. The unforgivable would thus represent a catastrophic situation for plurality as such, since this touch of evil consists in the “radical destruction” of “potentialities of human power,” including, most imperatively, the power of forgiveness itself. With the potentiality for forgiveness destroyed in a world perforated by holes of oblivion, the potentiality for the endurance of the world of plurality becomes directly threatened. Can there remain a meaningful common world in plurality in the aftermath of the radical destruction of the potentiality to be human, that is, in a world in which being-human has been renditioned into superfluousness? As
Arendt observes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, perpetrators of radical evil in the Nazi regime did not “care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born.” A world in which the human, the humane, becomes ever more superfluous, whether in explicit or silent complicity with totalitarian means, or by the pursuit of totalitarian ends by other (including putatively “democratic”) means, becomes an anti-world in which forgiveness itself becomes impossible. Such destruction of forgiveness remains, however, topological, circumscribed to spaces within the world, without engulfing the public stage of the world as such, as long as there remains spaces for distance, from which evil can be thought, without thereby becoming forgiven. When forgiveness becomes impossible, the love of the world remains, only on the condition that truth can (and must) still be spoken, and, especially, the truth about what is unforgivable. Understanding allows for reconciliation with the world marked by evil, allowing human beings to find peace in the world, even as evil itself remains without redemption.

Forgiveness, Redemption, and Trust

In a marked break with a Christian vision of forgiveness, forgiveness does not centrally involve love, but respect. We forgive essentially not from love for the Other but in respect for the Other as a person, as a “who,” as discerned in her potentiality for acting and beginning anew, or, in other words, her freedom. In distinguishing respect from love as the axis upon which forgiveness turns, Arendt separates her conception of forgiveness from established Christian notions, for which forgiveness is intimately bound up with the promise of salvation, unbounded charity, and the equality of human beings under the doctrine of original sin, and, moreover, the original dispensation of forgiveness in God. This emphasis on respect, not love, further sharpens the ontological sense in which forgiveness restores that critical element of distance, or in-between, within the world without which plurality could not endure and remain potently creative. In contrast to love as “destroying the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others,” respect is a form of recognition without “intimacy” and “closeness.” As a renewal of the respect for the Other, forgiveness enables a recognition of nonidentification with the Other, thus preserving, in retrieving, the other’s “curious intangibility” as a person. And yet insofar as respect is bound to self-disclosure, the standing of the Other in respect allows for a bond of “civic friendship” or “friendship without intimacy” with the Other as a person. Love
regards the Other independently of what they do and have done, or, in other words, the qualities that give form and substance to their appearance in the world. Love is absolute, unconditional, and, in an Arendtian sense, bound to “unworldliness.” This displacement of forgiveness from love to respect does not discount the possible and meaningful significance of love, as either an emotional bond to an individual or benevolent fellow feeling, in the transaction of forgiveness. Arendt’s point is rather to recover an original meaning of interpersonal forgiveness. According to a theological model, interpersonal forgiveness is anchored in God’s forgiveness: we are to forgive each other because we are forgiven in God. Human forgiveness imitates God’s forgiveness, given that we, in our finite condition, as created and dependent beings, “do not have enough being for this kind of forgiveness” in lacking the requisite “ontic weight.” Arendt’s foreclosure of theological forgiveness recognizes this lack of ontic weight (for, indeed, humans do not have the power to literally—that is, ontologically—“decreate” the past) as giving forgiveness its meaning: because it is impossible for the past to be undone, it becomes all the more necessary to be done with the past, as something we must endure and survive in forgiveness, despite its irreversibility.

With an emphasis on respect as the axis of recognition upon which forgiveness turns, Arendt broadens as well as deepens her account of forgiveness in its significance for the restoration and redemption of plurality in the life-world. As based on respect, forgiveness entails, as often recognized, not only the forswearing of vengeful intention and resentment but also a revision of my standing toward the Other, such that my judgment of the Other becomes revised in such a manner that I liberate who the person is from what she did. Forgiveness requires that the forgiving person adopt a position of “due distance” toward the other. This due distance likewise appeals to the standpoint of the moral spectator, as an impersonal perspective capable of taking into account appropriate circumstances in terms of which the standing of the person to be forgiven becomes revised and restored. More to Arendt’s point, this distance of respect grants the Other the dignity of being more and potentially other than what she did. This renewed discernment of the Other as a “who” entails a restored acceptance of her potentiality to begin anew. To allow the Other to be “reborn” in forgiveness is to recognize, grant, and affirm the Other’s natality. Forgiving the Other for her sake (and not for what she did) requires due recognition of the other person, as to who she might still become, in a way that a forgiven person is not able to recognize completely about herself and hence grant to herself. In standing to be forgiven, I must proclaim, “Here I am” and disclose myself truthfully in self-responsibility and self-repudiation, yet I am able to disclose myself
as here only in the eyes of the Other who stands there to forgive me. Self-repudiation and self-responsibility on the part of the person standing to be forgiven mirror the respect granted by the forgiven person; the due distance of respect accepts once again the unpredictability of the forgiven person even as she promises to be otherwise than how she had been. On the part of the forgiving person, the forswearing of resentment and retribution allows the ontological vulnerability of acting as such to be afforded once again in the world not only for the sake of the person’s restitution to the world but also for the sake of the life-world’s restoration to itself. In respecting the Other, I recognize that the Other might have acted without truly knowing what she was doing, for which she now claims before me her own responsibility. In respecting the Other in her finite human condition, the forgiving person must not remain hard of heart or take up the position of the beautiful soul but must respect the condition of being human that dramatically plays itself out in the acted narratives of each individual human existence. The connection with promising is robust here: in asking for forgiveness, I promise to be other than the person who did what I did, and so promise to become the kind of person who would not have done what I did do. This element of respect and due distance restores a space of equality in which we can appear to each other and act in concert with others as unequal with each other. The uniqueness, or “curious intangibility,” which the Other had forfeited in her wrongdoing is given back to her again and anew, such that she might once again respectfully stand as unequal to her appearance. Forgiveness is the allowance to receive the Other as once more both friend and stranger.

Through forgiveness, this restoration of the Other who stands forgiven as friend and stranger allows for the reaffordance of the predication of the human condition with its characteristic unpredictability of action. This reaccepted unpredictability within the life-world becomes enacted in the unpredictability of forgiveness itself. Arendt speaks of the “miraculous” quality of forgiveness as consisting in its interruption of the automatic reaction of revenge and retribution as well as the hardening of retributive attitudes (i.e., endless moral resentment). As an expression of freedom, as forging a new beginning, the spontaneity of forgiveness is “always startling and occurring under the guise of the miraculous.” The supererogatory act of forgiving detaches itself from the conditions of its own provocation and priming. In this sense, forgiveness is not reactive but creatively responsive. As an act of freedom, or, better, an act in freedom, forgiveness is not reducible to or captured by its motivation and anticipated aims; it unfolds in the element of freedom and duly renders manifest this elemental human freedom in transcending its own determining conditions.
This supererogatory unfolding of forgiveness with its reconfiguring interruption of temporality is not without dramatic effect. While vengeance and resentment tend to paralyze and to petrify the temporality of the life-world, any strong tethering of forgiveness to promising and priming conditions, including the occasion of wrongdoing itself, renders forgiveness automatic and habitual; in both instances, history loses its dramatic character. Forgiveness, by contrast, “appears on the stage as an unexpected development in a story that was tending toward a predictable outcome.” As Arendt herself observes,

Assuming that history is nothing but the miserable story of mankind’s eternal ups and downs, the spectacle of sound and fury may perhaps be moving for a while; but the curtain must eventually descend. For in the long run, it becomes a farce. And even if the actors do not tire of it—for they are fools—the spectator does, for any single act will be enough for him if he can reasonably conclude from it that the never-ending play will be of eternal sameness.

The “miraculous” quality of forgiveness does not issue from beyond the remit of forgiveness as human action, yet forgiveness remains intrinsically “unpredictable” and, in this sense, impossible until its advent, when, in the opacity of whether it is we who seize upon forgiveness or we who are seized by forgiveness, forgiveness becomes imminently possible and urgently actual in situ. This virtual impossibility does not stand outside the capacity to forgive (its potentiality) but attests instead to that curious and insightful paradox inherent to Arendt’s account that I can neither promise nor expect that I am to forgive, nor can I promise or expect never to forgive. Whereas forgiveness is the unwinding of the unbindable, promising is the winding of the unbindable. Forgiveness thus stands in an orthogonal relationship to promising. I cannot promise that I will forgive you, but nonetheless I must stand able to forgive, or, as implied in Arendt’s thinking, available to forgive without ever having promised myself in this manner to you. Were I to promise that I will or should forgive, the act of forgiveness would become beholden to the self-prescribing predictability of promising. On the other hand, were I to promise that I will or should never forgive you, I would remain hostage to the automatism of revenge and the purgatory of a past never laid to rest. Forgiveness “gives a new beginning to the one who is forgiven” and, at the same time, to the one who forgives, “and this is precisely where [a] new beginning seems most impossible.” Forgiveness is the anarchy of the impossible, resisting any normalization or institutionalization. As Arendt writes,
Insofar as morality is more than the sum total of *mores*, of customs and standards of behavior solidified through tradition and valid on the ground of agreements . . . it has, at least politically, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them. These moral precepts are the only ones that are not applied to action from outside, from some supposedly higher faculty or from experiences outside action’s own reach. They arise, on the contrary, directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking.\(^{71}\)

If forgiveness remains unpredictable, I must *trust in myself* that, despite this accepted unexpectedness, I could still stand able to forgive when finding myself in the encounter of forgiveness. *Self-trust* is the unspoken and tacit dimension to this apparent paradox that forgiveness must remain unpredictable even as I must remain in good standing with forgiveness—that is, available, without expecting or promising, to the possibility of forgiveness. For if, on the one hand, the miraculous quality and unpredictability of forgiveness prevent any promising of forgiveness in advance, I must trust in myself that, when called to the encounter of forgiveness, I am available to forgive, not just as a capacity of acting in my possession but also as a possibility to which I am available, and upon which I am able to act.

The “miraculous” advent of forgiveness should not be construed, moreover, as a surreptitious incarnation of violence, given its intrinsic disruption and, hence, anarchic manifestation, including the interruption of promising itself. Every act of forgiveness would have something revolutionary about it, and so, as with revolution, would appear to be imbued with violence. Yet if forgiveness expresses the purest pitch of prodigal human natality, how could forgiveness *be* violence and thus be caught up with “power,” which are (for Arendt) “diametrically opposed”?\(^{72}\) Forgiveness, however, does not circumvent violence through the incarnation of another violence; on the contrary, it circumvents violence by disarming violence of its need in respecting the Other in her need. Even as forgiveness cannot be promised, its marked unpredictability cannot be said to “conspire with the chaotic uncertainty of the future.”\(^{73}\) Instead, forgiveness issues a *benediction* of the restored person in the element of her freedom; the forgiven person’s standing—her “curious intangibility”—and natality are granted once more, in the granting of respect. To forgive the Other is to allow and afford once again the “unpredictability” of the Other, even as the Other *must* meaningfully promise to be the kind of
person who would not do again what she once did (self-repudiation and self-responsibility).

On the one hand, forgiveness restores through the due distance of respect “self-disclosing action,” but, on the other, respect cannot obtain without self-disclosure, and self-disclosure cannot obtain without “self-revelatory action” (namely, the truthful character of her acts of remorse and the like). This circularity between “respect” and “forgiveness”—no respect without forgiveness, no forgiveness without respect—reveals the unspoken and unexamined assumption in Arendt’s account of forgiveness in its ontological significance for the life-world. This allowance and affordance of the unpredictability of the Other rests on a form of “perceptual faith,” or trust, in the Other. In giving ourselves once again to the unpredictability of the Other, licensed, as it were, in the unpredictability of our own forgiveness, we must trust again in the Other as friend and stranger. Even when trust has been broken, in order for the Other to be forgiven, to be recognized as forgivable, I must still recognize the Other as trustworthy despite her wrongdoing against me. Despite the “collapse of her agency” into wrongdoing, I must nonetheless still find the Other trustworthy enough to accept as sincere and truthful her expression of remorse, declaration of self-repudiation, and shouldering of self-responsibility. In so trusting that the Other remains trustworthy, forgiveness reinstates the Other in trust. Arendt briefly signals—but never examines—this operative function of trust in the following manner: “Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free-agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.”

The rebirth (metanoia) in forgiveness critically hinges on trust: to receive the Other is to receive them in trust but also to entrust ourselves to them once more, as well as to entrust the world to the Other. We allow ourselves and others to become unpredictable once more, and, in this sense, to trust and be trusted once again. Forgiveness grants again the very predicament of acting against which it reacts and redeems. Human frailty is once again accepted in welcoming back into the sphere of public appearance a person who, in her wrongdoing, had trespassed and placed at risk the plurality in which we had once found ourselves and to which we now return together, in civic friendship. There is, in this regard, no final act of redemption in forgiveness since, even as there is deliverance and release, the Other stands before me as the person who might wound me again, and whom I might have to forgive once more, without ever having thereby to forgive myself for having once already forgiven them. As implied by Arendt’s own suggestive statement that in forgiveness we make ourselves ready “to receive the new arrivals, newcomers to whom
we prove what we no longer quite believe, that they are not strangers after all,” to forgive the Other is to entrust myself once again to the Other as well as to trust the Other in order to forgive.78 It is to place my hope again in the hands of the Other and the world of others—plurality—as if for first time, once more. As Arendt writes, “It is this faith in and hope for the world that found perhaps its most glorious and succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospel announced their ‘glad tidings’: ‘A child has been born unto us.’”79