

## *The Human Condition*

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not defeated by reality, or to put it another way, whether the capacity for action does not harbor within itself certain potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty.

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#### IRREVERSIBILITY AND THE POWER TO FORGIVE

We have seen that the *animal laborans* could be redeemed from its predicament of imprisonment in the ever-recurring cycle of the life process, of being forever subject to the necessity of labor and consumption, only through the mobilization of another human capacity, the capacity for making, fabricating, and producing of *homo faber*, who as a toolmaker not only eases the pain and trouble of laboring but also erects a world of durability. The redemption of life, which is sustained by labor, is worldliness, which is sustained by fabrication. We saw furthermore that *homo faber* could be redeemed from his predicament of meaninglessness, the "devaluation of all values," and the impossibility of finding valid standards in a world determined by the category of means and ends, only through the interrelated faculties of action and speech, which produce meaningful stories as naturally as fabrication produces use objects. If it were not outside the scope of these considerations, one could add the predicament of thought to these instances; for thought, too, is unable to "think itself" out of the predicaments which the very activity of thinking engenders. What in each of these instances saves man—man *qua animal laborans*, *qua homo faber*, *qua thinker*—is something altogether different; it comes from the outside—not, to be sure, outside of man, but outside of each of the respective activities. From the viewpoint of the *animal laborans*, it is like a miracle that it is also a being which knows of and inhabits a world; from the viewpoint of *homo faber*, it is like a miracle, like the revelation of divinity, that meaning should have a place in this world.

The case of action and action's predicaments is altogether different. Here, the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities

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of action itself. The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose "sins" hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.

Without being forgiven, 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; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell. Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities—a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel. Both faculties, therefore, depend on plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no one can forgive himself and no one can be bound by a promise made only to himself; forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self.

Since these faculties correspond so closely to the human condition of plurality, their role in politics establishes a diametrically different set of guiding principles from the "moral" standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule. For Platonic rulership, whose legitimacy rested upon the domination of the self, draws its guiding principles—those which at the same time justify and limit power over others—from a relationship established between me and myself, so that the right and wrong of relationships with others are

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determined by attitudes toward one's self, until the whole of the public realm is seen in the image of "man writ large," of the right order between man's individual capacities of mind, soul, and body. The moral code, on the other hand, inferred from the faculties of forgiving and of making promises, rests on experiences which nobody could ever have with himself, which, on the contrary, are entirely based on the presence of others. And just as the extent and modes of self-rule justify and determine rule over others—how one rules himself, he will rule others—thus the extent and modes of being forgiven and being promised determine the extent and modes in which one may be able to forgive himself or keep promises concerned only with himself.

Because the remedies against the enormous strength and resiliency inherent in action processes can function only under the condition of plurality, it is very dangerous to use this faculty in any but the realm of human affairs. Modern natural science and technology, which no longer observe or take material from or imitate processes of nature but seem actually to act into it, seem, by the same token, to have carried irreversibility and human unpredictability into the natural realm, where no remedy can be found to undo what has been done. Similarly, it seems that one of the great dangers of acting in the mode of making and within its categorical framework of means and ends lies in the concomitant self-deprivation of the remedies inherent only in action, so that one is bound not only to *do* with the means of violence necessary for all fabrication, but also to *undo* what he has done as he undoes an unsuccessful object, by means of destruction. Nothing appears more manifest in these attempts than the greatness of human power, whose source lies in the capacity to act, and which without action's inherent remedies inevitably begins to overpower and destroy not man himself but the conditions under which life was given to him.

The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense. It has been in the nature of our tradition of political thought (and for reasons we cannot explore here) to be highly selective and to exclude from articulate conceptualization a great variety of authentic

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political experiences, among which we need not be surprised to find some of an even elementary nature. Certain aspects of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth which are not primarily related to the Christian religious message but sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel, certainly belong among them, even though they have been neglected because of their allegedly exclusively religious nature. The only rudimentary sign of an awareness that forgiveness may be the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action may be seen in the Roman principle to spare the vanquished (*parcere subiectis*)—a wisdom entirely unknown to the Greeks—or in the right to commute the death sentence, probably also of Roman origin, which is the prerogative of nearly all Western heads of state.

It is decisive in our context that Jesus maintains against the "scribes and pharisees" first that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive,<sup>76</sup> and second that this power does not derive from God—as though God, not men, would forgive through the medium of human beings—but on the contrary must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also. Jesus' formulation is even more radical. Man in the gospel is not supposed to forgive because God forgives and he must do "likewise," but "if ye from your hearts forgive," God shall do "likewise."<sup>77</sup> The reason for the insistence on a duty to forgive is clearly "for they know not what they do" and it does not apply to the extremity of crime and willed evil, for then it would not have been necessary to teach: "And if he trespass

76. This is seated emphatically in Luke 5:21-24 (cf. Matt. 9:4-6 or Mark 12:7-10), where Jesus performs a miracle to prove that "the Son of man hath power upon earth to forgive sins," the emphasis being on "upon earth." It is his insistence on the "power to forgive," even more than his performance of miracles, that shocks the people, so that "they that sat at meat with him began to say within themselves, Who is this that forgives sins also?" (Luke 7:49).

77. Matt. 18:35; cf. Mark 11:25; "And when ye stand praying, forgive, . . . that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses." Or: "If ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15). In all these instances, the power to forgive is primarily a human power: God forgives "us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

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against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."<sup>78</sup> Crime and willed evil are rare, even rarer perhaps than good deeds; according to Jesus, they will be taken care of by God in the Last Judgment, which plays no role whatsoever in life on earth, and the Last Judgment is not characterized by forgiveness but by just retribution (*apodounai*),<sup>79</sup> But trespassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly.<sup>80</sup> 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.

In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered

78. Luke 17 : 3^4. It is important to keep in mind that the three key words of the text—*aphienai*, *metanoein*, and *hamartanein*—carry certain connotations even in New Testament Greek which the translations fail to render fully. The original meaning of *aphienai* is "dismiss" and "release" rather than "forgive"; *metanoein* means "change of mind" and—since it serves also to render the Hebrew *shuv*—"return," "trace back one's steps," rather than "repentance" with its psychological emotional overtones; what is required is: change your mind and "sin no more," which is almost the opposite of doing penance. *Hamartanein*, finally, is indeed very well rendered by "trespassing" in so far as it means rather "to miss," "fail and go astray," than "to sin" (see Heinrich Ebeling, *Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testamente* [1923]). The verse which I quote in the standard translation could also be rendered as follows: "And if he trespass against thee . . . and . . . turn again to thee, saying, / *changed my mind*; thou shalt *release* him."

79. Matt. 16:27.

80. This interpretation seems justified by the context (Luke 17:1-5): Jesus introduces his words by pointing to the inevitability of "offenses" (*skandala*) which are unforgivable, at least on earth; for "woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea"; and then continues by teaching forgiveness for "trespassing" (*hamartanein*).

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course. In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. The freedom contained in Jesus' teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance, which incloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.

The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offenses which, since Kant, we call "radical evil" and about whose nature so little is known, even to us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene. All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance. Here, where the deed itself dispossesses us of all power, we can indeed only repeat with Jesus: "It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea."

Perhaps the most plausible argument that forgiving and acting are as closely connected as destroying and making comes from that aspect of forgiveness where the undoing of what was done seems to show the same revelatory character as the deed itself. Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it. This, too, was clearly recognized by Jesus ("Her sins which are many are for-

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given; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little"), and it is the reason for the current conviction that only love has the power to forgive. For love, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives,<sup>81</sup> indeed possesses an unequalled power of self-revelation and an unequalled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions. Love, by reason of its passion, destroys the in-between which relates us to and separates us from others. As long as its spell lasts, the only in-between which can insert itself between two lovers is the child, love's own product. The child, this in-between to which the lovers now are related and which they hold in common, is representative of the world in that it also separates them; it is an indication that they will insert a new world into the existing world.<sup>82</sup> Through the child, it is as though the lovers return to the world from which their love had expelled them. But this new worldliness, the possible result and the only possibly happy ending of a love affair, is, in a sense, the end of love, which must either overcome the partners anew or be transformed into another mode of belonging together. Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.

If it were true, therefore, as Christianity assumed, that only love can forgive because only love is fully receptive to *who* somebody

81. The common prejudice that love is as common as "romance" may be due to the fact that we all learned about it first through poetry. But the poets fool us; they are the only ones to whom love is not only a crucial, but an indispensable experience, which entitles them to mistake it for a universal one.

82. This world-creating faculty of love is not the same as fertility, upon which most creation myths are based. The following mythological tale, on the contrary, draws its imagery clearly from the experience of love: the sky is seen as a gigantic goddess who still bends down upon the earth god, from whom she is being separated by the air god who was born between them and is now lifting her up. Thus a world space composed of air comes into being and inserts itself between earth and sky. See H. A. Frankfort, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, 1946), p. 18, and Mircea Eliade, *Traite d'Histoire des Religions* (Paris, 1953), p. 212.

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is, to the point of being always willing to forgive him whatever he may have done, forgiving would have to remain altogether outside our considerations. Yet what love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs. Respect, not unlike the Aristotelian *philia politike*, is a kind of "friendship" without intimacy and without closeness; it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem. Thus, the modern loss of respect, or rather the conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem, constitutes a clear symptom of the increasing depersonalization of public and social life. Respect, at any rate, because it concerns only the person, is quite sufficient to prompt forgiving of what a person did, for the sake of the person. But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive.

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#### UNPREDICTABILITY AND THE POWER OF PROMISE

In contrast to forgiving, which—perhaps because of its religious context, perhaps because of the connection with love attending its discovery—has always been deemed unrealistic and inadmissible in the public realm, the power of stabilization inherent in the faculty of making promises has been known throughout our tradition. We may trace it back to the Roman legal system, the inviolability of agreements and treaties (*pacta sunt servanda*); or we may see its discoverer in Abraham, the man from Ur, whose whole story, as the Bible tells it, shows such a passionate drive toward making covenants that it is as though he departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the