

On forgiveness

Hannah Arendt

The pages below on forgiveness are from the much-celebrated, thought-provoking book by Arendt (*The human condition*, 238–43) in which it is argued that the unpredictable and irreversible effects of human actions do have corrections. The remedies, claims Arendt, are our twin capacities to forgive and promise. For a self made of others (a node of relationships?), to promise is a capacity to create the ground for lasting relationships with others, whereas to forgive allows one to repair the injuries that occur between people (often by lack of thinking) and develop a rich communal life.

Arendt's text:

FORGIVENESS

[238] 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 [239] 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 a 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,⁷⁶ and

⁷⁶This is stated 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 has power on earth to forgive sins,” the

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 it "likewise," but "if ye from your hearts forgive," God shall do "likewise."⁷⁷ the reason for the insistence on the 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 [240] against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."⁷⁸ 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*).⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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

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).

⁷⁷Matt. 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."

⁷⁸Luke 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 *shuw*—"return," "trace back one's steps," rather than "repentance" with its psychological 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, *I changed my mind*; thou shalt *release him*."

⁷⁹Matt. 16:27

⁸⁰This 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 be hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea"; and then continues by teaching forgiveness for trespassing (*hamartanein*).

unhindered [241] course. In contrast to revenge, which is a 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 Who 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 a "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-[242]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,⁸¹ 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,

⁸¹The 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.

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.⁸² 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 [243] 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 politikē*, 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.

REFERENCES

Arendt, Hannah. *The human condition*. University of Chicago Press, 1958.

⁸²This 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 out. 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, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris, 1953), p. 212.