

NIETZSCHE, ARENDT, AND THE PROMISE OF THE FUTURE

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In considering Hannah Arendt's philosophical debt to Nietzsche, commentators have often drawn attention to the figure of the promise and to its central significance in the work of both thinkers. "The real problem regarding man," as Nietzsche famously wrote in the programmatic opening remarks to the second essay from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, is how "to breed an animal with the right to make promises."¹ For Arendt, too – who cites this remark approvingly in the closing section of her analysis of action in *The Human Condition*² – the faculty of promising distinguishes human from animal life, and she goes still further, describing it as a "miraculous" faculty with the power to "redeem" the man of action from the necessity and anonymity of natural life and from the inherent meaninglessness of productive activity. For neither thinker can promising be grasped simply as one activity among others, as one possible expression or accomplishment of the self; rather, albeit in importantly different ways, promising is for them *constitutive* of the human subject, exemplifying a complicated temporal structure (a dialectic of memory and forgetfulness) that is the indispensable condition of both agency and responsibility.

But if students of Arendt's thought have tended to foreground the act of promising as a fruitful point of entry into her engagement with Nietzsche, it is not simply because both thinkers recognized its importance for the modern thought of subjectivity. Rather, it is because they claim to have discovered a powerful Nietzschean strain in Arendt's own conception of the subject – specifically, the subject of political action. Typical in this respect is Bonnie Honig, who, in her influential comparative analysis, writes that Arendt's focus on promising "pays tribute to Nietzsche" in the sense that "promising, as a form of binding oneself for the future, is the great achievement of the self-disciplined and sovereign individual."³ This seemingly innocuous description of things raises a number of questions. Is Honig correct in suggesting that for Arendt promising offers evidence of a "self-disciplined and sovereign individual"? Does the act of promising testify to the sovereignty of the promising subject? Is this reference to the sovereign self not fraught with difficulty, given Arendt's own radical critique of the

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* trans. W. Kaufmann. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) p. 57.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) p. 245.

³ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) p. 86.

concept of sovereignty in politics?⁴ And although Nietzsche appears to approve this language, reserving “the *right* to make promises” for “those who promise like sovereigns,”⁵ is his own reference to sovereignty not severely complicated and compromised by the structure of promising that his analysis brings to light – by the fact that all promising implies a radical passivity or affectivity, and an ineliminable (if finally sustainable) damage to the promising self? Is it not then misleading to emphasize the sovereignty and heroism of the promising self as the mark of a profound affinity between Nietzsche and Arendt? Although it has become a commonplace to locate Arendt’s Nietzschean inheritance in her supposedly heroic and elitist conception of action, do not their respective insights into the promising activity, and into the affectivity and responsiveness that it implies, serve precisely to undercut this familiar and overhasty judgment?

In what follows I shall suggest that Honig is correct to single out the promising activity as the site of a highly fruitful encounter between Arendt and Nietzsche. But what Arendt learned from Nietzsche, and what finds expression in her own framing and elaboration of the promising activity (with constant recourse to its structural obverse, the act of forgiving), is not “the connection between human sovereignty and the faculty of making promises”⁶; on the contrary, it is the singular structure of passivity – a non-sovereign reflexivity - built into the promise, a passivity whose temporal structure demands our attention. In the act of promising, as we shall see, the promising self pledges itself to the future with a complex gesture that is characterized at once by *remembering* (to make a promise is to have a continuous memory that lasts through time) and by *forgetting* (to keep a promise, to “discharge the will,” requires that the self-violence effected by the very act of promising is forgotten, so that the self can act freely, nobly, without resenting the past or foreclosing the future). This reflexivity attaching to the promising self - by which it opens itself not only to the past (in memory) and to the future (in forgetfulness), but also to a *futurity per se* that stands in excess of all anticipated or pre-ordained future possibilities - finds importantly different expressions in Nietzsche

⁴ For the clearest articulation of Arendt’s critique of sovereignty – which, for her, always amounts to a politics of the will - see her ‘What is Freedom?’ in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), and her chapter on ‘The Social Question’ from *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963). For a comprehensive treatment of Arendt’s critique of sovereignty, see A. Kalyvas, *Democracy and the Politics of the Extraordinary: Max Weber, Carl Schmitt, and Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) especially pp. 210-223.

⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 60.

⁶ In an important footnote in her discussion of Action, Arendt praises Nietzsche for seeing this connection “with unequaled clarity” and that “it led him to a unique insight into the relatedness of human pride and human conscience” (HC, 345, ff. 83). But she immediately thereafter identifies sovereignty in the realm of human action with mastership in the realm of making, and she goes on to define promising (which always involves a plurality of perspective on a shared in-between) in its opposition to all forms of mastery and violence.

and Arendt. For both thinkers, the act of promising commits the promising agent to a particular future (in which the present self, word, or deed, will be recouped) and at the same time to an unknown and undetermined future (for which he risks himself each time anew). Where Arendt departs from Nietzsche, as we shall see, is not in her insistence that all promising requires forgiving and forgetting – something that Nietzsche himself understood as well as anyone – but that one *cannot forgive oneself*. For Arendt, the possibility of acting freely, without resentment toward the past and without anxiety for the future, hinges on one's being forgiven by others. This is because for Arendt, the wounds opened by promising are not only my own to bear (I discipline, stabilize, and order myself by pledging myself to a particular future, a particular juridico-moral subjectivity) but they are also borne by others (every promise is inserted into a “web of relations” where it sets off a chain of events, the effects of which cannot be foreseen or controlled). Because the promising agent must take responsibility for those - potentially endless - effects of his deed which could not have been foreseen or forestalled, and because this responsibility might well become so weighty as to inhibit or paralyze future action, the agent requires the forgiveness of others, of those who will have suffered the effects of his initiative, in order to finally get free of the enduring force (the “it was”) of the initial deed. In granting a certain priority to others, to those who will be affected by my own actions, Arendt overcomes the heroic inflection in Nietzsche's account of the promise, which supposes that it is my own reflexivity alone through and for which I am responsible. By examining this difference, rooted in their importantly different conceptions of the reflexivity and futurity implicit in the promise, I hope to challenge the familiar picture of a shared elitism, a shared commitment to the glory and heroism of sovereign selves.

Nietzsche's articulation of the complex dynamics of the promising activity is found in the first three sections of the second essay from *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Let us briefly recall his account. In the first essay, Nietzsche had observed that human beings are by nature creatures governed not by consciousness and memory but by forgetting. Forgetting is natural to us, but not in the manner of a passive endowment. “Forgetting,” Nietzsche writes, “is no mere *vis inertiae* [inertia] as the superficial imagine; it is rather an active and in the strictest sense positive faculty of repression.”⁷ This natural faculty is especially in force in the figure of the noble man, who is defined precisely by his capacity to forget. The noble, Nietzsche tells us, has “no memory for insults.” Indeed, “to be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long – that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mold, to recuperate and to forget.”⁸ The power to form and the power to forget are directly related to one another, and Nietzsche makes clear that it is only on account of the latter capacity that any creative action is possible at all. It is only because he can forget, because he can “shake off with a single shrug” all the past sufferings and misfortunes which might breed resentment in others, that the noble is able to exercise his will, to seek and welcome novelty and adventure, in short, to act freely in the world.

⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 57.

⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 39.

The second essay begins by straightaway complicating the above discovery. It opens with the famous lines cited at the beginning of this essay: “To breed an animal *with the right to make promises* – is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?”⁹ That this promising animal is the noble in a new form (or in its historical accomplishment) is clear from Nietzsche’s affirmation that it is an animal “which needs to be forgetful, in which forgetting represents a force, a form of robust health”.¹⁰ But this description confronts us with a paradox: to make a promise is to sustain a memory over time. Nietzsche emphasizes both the force of will required for such an enterprise and the disciplining of the self that it takes for granted:

[Telling a promise] involves no mere passive inability to rid oneself of an impression, no mere indigestion through a once-pledged word with which one cannot ‘have done,’ but an active *desire* not to rid oneself, a desire for the continuance of something desired once, a real *memory of the will*: so that between the original ‘I will,’ ‘I shall do this’ and the actual discharge of the will, its *act*, a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed without breaking this long chain of will. But how many things this presupposes!...Man himself must first of all have become *calculable, regular, necessary*, even in his own image of himself, if he is to be able to stand security for *his own future*, which is what one who promises does!¹¹

There is an evident paradox at issue here: the same animal who requires forgetting as the condition of action (of “the actual discharge of the will”) breeds in itself an “opposing force,” the faculty of memory, which also serves action, only at a distance (enabling an utterance to exceed the time and occasion of its enunciation). In the case of the promise, Nietzsche says, natural forgetfulness is “abrogated” so that a memory can be sustained and projected into the future. But every such abrogation comes at a cost to the animal in whom forgetfulness is a mark of robust health, and whose openness to an unknown and undetermined future is thereby sacrificed to some particular future, a future to which it pledges itself, and the enactment of which presupposes the disciplining and regulation of its self in the service of its willed object. How shall we understand this costly operation? What are the foreseeable effects of the noble’s “labor upon himself”?¹² And perhaps just as importantly, what distinguishes this heroic “abrogation” of the natural condition (in the service of a continuous will) from the disciplinary regime of the slavish type, which Nietzsche diagnosed so mercilessly? Is there not still, in the making

⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 57. Italics are Nietzsche’s.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 58.

¹¹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 58. Italics are Nietzsche’s.

¹² “The task of breeding an animal with the right to make promises evidently embraces and presupposes as a preparatory task that one first makes men to a certain degree necessary, uniform, like among like, regular, and consequently calculable. The tremendous labor of that which I have called ‘morality of mores’ – the labor performed by man upon himself during the greater part of the existence of the human race, his entire prehistoric labor, finds in this its meaning...” p. 59.

and keeping of promises, some trace of the “self-terrorization” – the will venting itself against itself – that characterizes the man of *ressentiment*?

Here we may recall Nietzsche’s account of the origins of responsibility and the self-responsible subject. This subject did not come into being as a result of philosophical reflection or by a gradual process of spiritual enlightenment. As Nietzsche put it in *Twilight of the Idols*, culture was inaugurated “not in the soul,” but with the “persuasion of the body,” and it is, first of all, the body that had to be disciplined, regulated, and transformed in the production of the ethico-juridical subject. Nietzsche rehearses at great length the “fearful means” – the “stoning...breaking on the wheel...piercing with stakes...cutting flesh from the chest” - employed by the German people in mastering their courser instincts and “acquiring a memory”.¹³ It is by such disciplinary measures – what Nietzsche describes as a “mnemonics” of pain – that a “real memory of the will” is created. And only thus does it become possible to open a gap in time between an original decision (“I will”) and the future discharge of that will (the act). Only thus, through the sustaining and projecting of certain selective memories, does it become possible to make promises, to anticipate a future, and to recoup in that future a past that is now present.

It would be a serious mistake to suppose that Nietzsche stands in simple opposition to this long and painful history, or to its hard-won product, the reflexive and responsible subject (i.e. the subject that is not simply identical to itself but “stands security for his own future”). On the one hand, as we have seen, it is by way of a pervasive social disciplining that the self becomes the juridico-ethical subject, normalized according to convention and embodying prevailing codes and standards. But on the other hand – and this is why the disciplinary techniques deployed by the noble are not immediately reducible to the self-terrorization of the slave - it is by virtue of this same hard-won reflexivity, and the self-critique and self-transformation that it makes possible, that we are able to achieve a radical *openness* to the future, a responsiveness that exceeds mere affect and brings the self into relation with an undetermined future in excess of all prevailing norms and standards. There is nothing especially mysterious about this reference to an undetermined future. It follows directly from Nietzsche’s insistence on unending interpretation – that is, his insistence that passivity is never present in us devoid of some activity, that the active and reactive forces which structure the self (the sensations and affects that, in Nietzsche’s account, displace the traditional prioritizing of consciousness) are always already shot through with interpretation (the body itself is an interpretation, a differential relation of dominance and submission). Indeed, the body seeks to enhance pleasure and escape pain, but since pleasure and pain (and indeed, all bodily forces) are always already interpreted and re-interpreted – are themselves interpretations, orderings of effects in accordance with some dominant striving – there is never an end (or a beginning) to the endless contestation and transformation. But this means that the self must be grasped as both an affect and a futural responsive movement beyond all mere affect. It implies a movement of *constant* and *unending* self-critique and re-evaluation.

¹³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 62.

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Nietzsche seeks to register these two senses of the affective self (or rather, the two senses of its reflexivity or responsiveness to the future) with the important distinction between “conscience” and “bad conscience”. When Nietzsche describes thinking itself, or “that somber thing called reflection,” as a “mastery over the affects”¹⁴ whose governing concern is the avoidance of pain and the exploiting of pleasure, he grasps it as a manner of relating to the future, a form of responsiveness. And it is that form of responsiveness that serves as the condition of “bad conscience,” a form of conscience marked by an attentiveness to prevailing norms and the self’s embodiment of them. But accompanying this form of conscience, with its assimilation of the order of the day and its prudential calculus, is a second form of conscience which stands in a reflexive but critical relation to the self normalized by convention. This form of conscience – which Nietzsche calls, simply, “conscience” – renews the endless contest of interpretations, and thereby exposes the self to the force of an unknown and undetermined future. It is interesting to note that for Nietzsche ‘bad conscience’ is, in some important sense, prior to ‘conscience’, inasmuch as the existing self always embodies the prevailing juridico-moral code, even as it surpasses that ideal in its reflexive futurity. Moreover, the co-existence of the two forms of conscience exposes the self to a dangerous possibility, a possibility that we have already discovered in connection with the promising activity. We saw that the temporal structure of the promise assumes the self’s ability to commit itself to a particular future and, through a selective memory, to recoup what is past in the present. But in this way, by selecting and anticipating in advance what is still to come – or more to the point, by assuming the endurance of a pre-ordained image of the self (as shaped by prevailing norms) – the promise comes at the expense of futurity as such, pre-empting other possibilities, and insulating the self from the slings and arrows of fortune. In an illuminating essay, Rosalyn Diprose further clarifies the danger at issue here:

The ‘real problem regarding man,’ for Nietzsche and, I suggest, for us in the present, is that this body in its responsiveness and futurity is at risk, most notably from the ideal of juridical responsibility that governs it. A condition of somatic reflexivity is that a relation to both the juridico-moral code and the future be maintained, not that the self is entirely engulfed by either. In assuming responsibility for itself, the self risks itself for an unknown future; the self “goes under” as Nietzsche puts it. But the ideal of juridical self-responsibility would remove this risk: it assumes the endurance of a pre-ordained image of the self as the faithful embodiment of the prevailing moral code.¹⁵

Now it might be objected that there exists an obvious gap between the stability and orientation introduced by the promise and the wholesale pre-emption of the future hinted at here. There is surely a difference between those who foreclose certain possibilities in the name of a certain ideal (and thereby overcome the abstemiousness of Hegel’s “beautiful souls”) and those who, in Diprose’s words, “embody the juridico-

¹⁴ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 62.

¹⁵ Rosalyn Diprose, ‘Nietzsche, Levinas, and the Meaning of Responsibility’ in *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the Death of a Certain God*, ed. R. Stauffer and B. Bergo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) p. 122.

moral code they have inherited so extensively that they merely repeat it with resignation.”¹⁶ This is certainly true, but Nietzsche will insist upon a dialectical relation here: the noble cannot simply avoid identification and normalization. The very constitution of the self is normalizing. What distinguishes the noble as a conscientious person (in Nietzsche’s sense) is not his avoidance of all ‘polluting’ worldly significations – indeed, this is the mark of the cowardly, the abstemious, the resentful type – but his will to risk himself, and to risk his inherited significations, to an unknown future (to new interpretations, evaluations, and constellations of power). In the terms suggested by Diprose, the noble is the one who takes responsibility for himself, both for his inheritance (the juridico-moral code which he currently embodies), and for the transformation of this inheritance in a future still to come. But how might this self-responsibility relate to the act of promising that concerns us here? Again, we have already hinted at the answer. I suggested that the noble’s commitment to futurity as such finds its chief expression in his commitment to interpretation, contestation, transformation. But if this is the case, we must revisit and qualify one of the passages cited earlier from the *Genealogy*. Nietzsche wrote that between the “I will” and the discharge of that will in action, “a world of strange new things, circumstances, even acts of will may be interposed without breaking this long chain of will.”¹⁷ At first glance, this passage appears to suggest that to remain faithful to a promise is to remain true to something past, to some original cause, in the face of all intervening circumstances. Thus promising would require a refusal to adapt, to transform, to re-evaluate. But in light of the above clarification – regarding the claims made upon the conscientious self by the future – we shall introduce an important refinement to our interpretation of the passage. Namely, we shall ask whether the “long chain of will” cannot accommodate fresh interpretations, adaptations, and re-evaluations. Nietzsche himself suggests as much when he returns to the image of the “chain” just a few pages later. After pointing out that the “origin of a thing and its eventual utility...lie worlds apart” and that “whatever exists...is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it,”¹⁸ Nietzsche observes that

[t]he entire history of a ‘thing,’ an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain [*Zeichenkette*] of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another.¹⁹

Reflecting on the apparent shift in Nietzsche’s use of the ‘chain’ image, Judith Butler has rightly observed that “the second use of the ‘chain’ seems to reverse the first...When the text makes this shift, the will, still called noble, not only adapts to new circumstances but endows its customary utterances, including promises, with new

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 123.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 58.

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 77.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 77.

meaning.”²⁰ This shift suggests, perhaps paradoxically, that nobility (and conscientiousness) lies not in keeping one’s word in the face of radically changed circumstances, but rather in a willingness to risk oneself (and the normative ideal that one has identified with) by reinterpreting the promise to new ends, divorcing it from its original intention in a gesture of fidelity to an unknown future. This latter is an important discovery for us, as we now turn to consider both the continuity and the break between Nietzsche and Arendt on the matter of promising. As I suggested above, both thinkers celebrate the futurity implicit in the promise, but they both see in the very act and structure of promising a dangerous threat to this futurity. For Nietzsche, as we have seen, the threat lies in the fact that the promising agent always embodies (through various forms of social disciplining) certain inherited moral and juridical norms which he seeks, in the act of promising, to recoup in a particular future. In this way, he refuses to risk himself and his normative inheritance, to respond to the unforeseeable contingencies of historical existence by constant adaptation and reinterpretation. However, Nietzsche argues that a certain kind of promising, the “noble” or “conscientious” practice of promising, contains within itself the resources to combat this structural danger, inasmuch as it exposes itself to changing circumstances and has the courage to adapt, revise, and endow the initial utterance with new meaning. In this way, the promise can be turned against its own governing ideal, the ideal of juridico-moral responsibility, which threatens to foreclose the future and dissolve the risk attaching to it. The promise, in sum, redeems itself through a will to interpretation.

Here is the point at which Hannah Arendt will introduce an important caveat. Having followed Nietzsche thus far, she will insist that although promising does have a certain “redemptive” power – by which it responds to its own structural “frustrations” – it nevertheless opens on to an abyss which it cannot, by its own power, escape. Herein lies the real heart of Arendt’s doctrine (and the reason why the language of sovereignty, either with reference to the promise itself or to the above-described will to reinterpretation, is seriously misleading). For Arendt, as we shall see presently, the promise is both preceded and succeeded by forgiveness – specifically, the forgiveness of the other – and no heroic resoluteness in the face of the future, no willingness to expose one’s own most deeply cherished ideals to the “play of forces” still to come, can overcome or pre-empt this requirement. To be sure, there is a powerful agonistic dimension in Arendt’s theory of political action, and her conception of the public sphere as a site of “incessant contestation” has led certain commentators to emphasize her own ostensible understanding of politics as an unending play of competing interpretations. But however striking we may find Arendt’s agonism (especially in its departure from the administrative and proceduralist conceptions of politics endorsed by her liberal contemporaries), it is finally a qualified agonism, which cannot serve as a placeholder for futurity *per se*, as it does in Nietzsche. It is forgiveness alone—the other side of the promise—that serves this function in Arendt.

²⁰ Judith Butler, ‘Ethical Ambivalence’ from *Nietzsche and Levinas: After the Death of a Certain God*, ed. R. Stauffer and B. Bergo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) p. 76.

Let us briefly recall the backdrop to Arendt's account of promising. In her most philosophically important work, *The Human Condition*, Arendt sets out to distinguish and describe the three activities that together constitute the *Vita Activa*. Having distinguished action—the public sharing of words and deeds—from the related activities of labor and action, Arendt draws attention to the “structural limitations” that characterize all action as such. She emphasizes two above all: unpredictability and irreversibility. Action is unpredictable, she claims, on account of the essential unreliability of human beings “who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow”.²¹ And action is also irreversible—this, on account of the fact that action is never possible in isolation, that it always takes for granted a “web of relations,” and to act into this web (an always already existing network of shared interests) is to set off a chain of reactions that can neither be predicted nor controlled. Indeed, the chain of unforeseen consequences set into motion by every act is potentially endless. To be sure, it is not action alone that is beset by structural limitations. Labor and work also stand in need of “redemption” or “salvation” from their constitutive frailties.²² But very importantly, whereas neither labor nor work possess “internal remedies” to the frailties that mark their activity – each must have recourse to other, higher faculties – action has internal resources and potentialities by which it can respond to the unpredictability and irreversibility that marks it. These internal remedies lie in the “redemptive faculties” of promising and forgiving. It is by way of these two faculties that man is able to introduce some stability into the public realm of action, and thus to mitigate (without denying or annulling) the radical contingency—i.e. the inherent unpredictability and irreversibility—that characterizes it.

How shall we understand the stabilizing capacity of promising and forgiving? And how does Arendt's account of these activities provide an antidote to the individualistic inflection of Nietzsche's account? Promising, Arendt claims, responds to the unpredictability inherent in action by “setting 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 relations between men.”²³ So far, this sounds very much like Nietzsche, who also emphasizes the “security” made possible by the promise. But whereas Nietzsche treats this securing of the self as the expression of a certain psychic requirement—an insulating tactic which concentrates the self in itself, stabilizing and sheltering the self against affective forces that might unsettle it—Arendt's thought moves in the opposite direction, emphasizing the worldliness of the promise, which takes the self out of itself and gives it direction and relationality. The “islands of security” achieved by the promise do not refer here to normalized and self-responsible selves (juridical subjects) safely secured from the threats posed by an incalculable future;

²¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 244.

²² Arendt's account is peppered with theological language – action is “miraculous,” a “revelation,” a “miraculous faculty,” etc. This fact has not been shown nearly enough attention. For an important exception to this rule, see Susannah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). I will refer back to this illuminating study in what follows.

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.

on the contrary, they refer to what is *established by the promise outside the self*—namely, to the new relationships, shared enterprises and worldly institutions inaugurated by the promise. For Arendt, it is precisely on account of this exteriorizing tendency that promising is so important for—indeed, constitutive of—the identity of the self. She notes that “without being bound to the fulfillment 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.”²⁴ But this means that for Arendt the stability afforded by promising has an intersubjective character: it is in binding individuals together and giving them a shared interest (inter-est, literally, a shared in-between space, a shared world) that the promise responds to (without finally overcoming) the contingency that characterizes it.

It is this shared world outside the self, then, which is the condition of stable identity. But this shared world is at the same marked by an ineliminable contingency—a contingency that finds expression not only in the unpredictability that calls forth the promising activity, but also in the irreversibility that calls forth forgiveness. Arendt argues that promising and forgiveness are intimately bound up with one another, with forgiving “serv[ing] to undo the deeds of the past” and promising serving as “the remedy for the chaotic uncertainty of the future.”²⁵ We have seen how promising combats the uncertainty of the future by establishing binding relationships and shared enterprises. Forgiveness, by contrast, refers to the past, and to the potentially paralyzing consequences of past deeds. “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 would never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever...”²⁶ Arendt’s conception of forgiveness relies on her claim that all action is “inserted” into a pre-existing “web of relations,” setting off a chain of consequences that can never be predicted. Since an actor is not a producer, and the effects of his activity are not under his control, he must accept responsibility not only for his original action but also for the innumerable consequences that will follow upon it. He must act, all the while knowing that he will be “unable to undo what [he] has done, even though [he] did not and could not, have known what he was doing.”²⁷ These structural features of action, Arendt suggests, threaten to paralyze – or at least seriously inhibit – the actor, preventing him from risking himself (and the world) anew by continued action. It is only by being forgiven for his past deed, and for the present and future consequences of it, that the actor is liberated from this “original sin” and liberated as well for the possibility of future action. This last point is important: for Arendt, what is redeemed by the act of forgiveness is neither the past as such nor any particular past deeds (whose redemption, for Arendt, is the task of memorializing works) but rather the very possibility of continued action in the future.

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.

²⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.

²⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.

²⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 237.

The two redemptive faculties, promising and forgiving, are evidently determined in temporal terms by Arendt. This means that they are determined not simply in terms of their past- or future-directedness, but also in relation to beginnings and endings. We have seen that promising is a faculty of beginning, a faculty which introduces something new into the world; by contrast, forgiving brings some earlier beginning to an end, precisely so that there may be a new beginning. This latter is further complicated by the fact that action, for Arendt, has beginning itself as its sole end, as she often noted, quoting Augustine, “that a beginning be made” man was created. But it might now be asked: how are these activities themselves internally ordered? How do they stand with respect to one another? Here I cite from Susannah Gottlieb’s illuminating commentary:

One of Arendt’s central insights, which distinguishes her analysis of promising from the tradition that culminates in Nietzsche’s *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, is that the stabilizing power of promising is predicated on the interruptive faculty of forgiveness. Against the traditional ordering of these two faculties, which expresses itself in the almost irresistible sequence, ‘promising and forgiveness,’ Arendt places forgiveness first...²⁸

This crucial inversion of the Nietzschean order calls for our attention. First, Gottlieb is certainly correct about the secondary character of forgiveness in Nietzsche. If for Nietzsche it is the “slave revolt in morality” which has “given birth to values” – including pity, tolerance, and benevolence – then forgiveness, too, must be included in this list, as a symptom of *ressentiment*. Indeed, Nietzsche practically defines the noble in terms of the absence of this symptom: “To be unable for any length of time to take his enemies, his accidents, his *misdeeds* themselves seriously – that is the sign of strong, full natures...”²⁹ In his admirable study, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, Charles Griswold has suggested that Nietzsche’s tendency to see forgiveness as a mark of baseness, as part of a moral system in which the weak and ignoble are empowered, is hardly original to him. It can be traced back to the “classical perfectionist” outlook of Aristotle and the ancient Stoics, according to which “forgiveness is not a virtue because the perfected soul is by definition almost, or entirely, immune from receiving injury, or from doing injury.”³⁰ Since the character type held up as morally exemplary in these theories is defined by rare virtue, and by a hard-won indifference and invulnerability to the slights or offenses of his neighbors, he simply has no need to forgive. As Griswold points out (and as Nietzsche himself would have insisted), “forgiveness is more appropriate to an outlook that emphasizes the notion of a common and *irremediably finite and fallible human nature*, and thus highlights the virtues that improve as well as reconcile but do not aim to ‘perfect’.”³¹ This claim for the Judeo-Christian roots of forgiveness will be further confirmed by Arendt, who suggests (perhaps too sweepingly) that the political significance of forgiveness was an insight “entirely unknown to the

²⁸ Gottlieb, p. 153.

²⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, p. 39.

³⁰ Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

Greeks,” and that its “discoverer” was none other than Jesus of Nazareth.³² But whereas Nietzsche held this Judeo-Christian echo against forgiveness, Arendt—who insists as well upon the Abrahamic roots of the promising activity—emphasized it.

To be sure, Nietzsche’s critique of forgiveness must be qualified in the light of our earlier discussion. If the noble is characterized by a certain indifference to the *effects* of action—both the effects of his own deeds on others, and the effects of the deeds of others on himself—he is not indifferent to the self-violence implicit in the promising activity. He recognizes that openness to the future requires attending to the injuries he has himself sustained in his embodiment of the juridico-ethical norms of the day and his preemptive futural projection of these norms. Some intervention into the past is needed in the name of the future. This is accomplished, as we saw, by way of a courageous will to re-interpret, to risk one’s identity anew by risking all one’s inherited determinations in the service of an ever-more affirmative posture. (Exemplary in this regard is the celebrated doctrine of the eternal recurrence, by which the will frees itself from the impotence inherent in trying to change the past against which it is powerless. Rather than submitting to a resentful wrath against the past, against the “it was,” and pretending to a false autonomy with respect to it, the will takes responsibility for its limits, steps out of the determinism that underpins its desire for revenge, and only thereby is able to create new values by transforming and reinterpreting the past under the sway of an undetermined future). One is struck by the heroic and individualistic pathos attaching to Nietzsche’s description of the will thus liberated by itself for its future. It is the heroism of the disciplined will that “shrugs” in the face of the trespasses of others, and conceals the hard work of self-transformation and self-overcoming implicit in the forgetting of its own.

Things are importantly otherwise in Arendt. This is perhaps because we find in her work an implicit recognition of the distinction between ‘forgetting’ and ‘forgiving’. Bonnie Honig is mistaken, or at least one-sided, when she speaks of “the practice of dismissing that Arendt calls forgiveness,” and claims that “Arendt’s theorization of forgiveness recalls...the indifference of Nietzsche’s lords and their lordly practice of dismissing.”³³ It is true that Arendt describes forgiveness as a process of “constant mutual release” from the effects of one’s actions, but there is more to Arendtian forgiving than mere forgetting or dismissing. She would agree with Griswold when he observes that “what Nietzsche seems to be advocating is forgetting wrongs... [but] that is deeply different from forgiveness even if the effect is to liberate the wronged party from

³² See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 238. Griswold points out that notions of “reconciliation” and the “foreswearing of revenge” “did circulate in pre-Christian pagan thought and culture (counting here the Roman as well as the Greek), contrary to common wisdom” (p. 1). Arendt’s categorical claim to the contrary would have to be refined. However, inasmuch as she is speaking not simply of forgiveness but of its political significance – which goes beyond the forestalling of revenge and calls forth a posture of radical openness to futurity per se – she is surely correct.

³³ Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) p. 86.

resentment.”³⁴ If simply giving up resentment were a sufficient condition of forgiveness, it could be accomplished by oneself, by the various strategies of self-discipline and self-overcoming rehearsed by Nietzsche. But Arendt says explicitly that “nobody can forgive himself,” and this for the very important reason that we do not know the ‘self’ we would be forgiving. I cite this important passage:

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.³⁵

There can be no forgiveness without the other person – or rather, persons – since the acting self, the one in need of forgiveness, does not appear to himself but only to those who are witness to the deed. Like Nietzsche, Arendt will insist that “the deed is everything,” and that prior to acting the self is a fragmented and indistinct entity; the self only attains an identity and becomes a “who” by its actions. But for Arendt, the acting self does not know himself as such. He is dependent upon those others to whom he appears – those same others who will suffer the effects of his deeds. They alone can “put an end to the consequences of the first misdeed” and thereby liberate the acting self for action, for new risks and initiatives and promises. This is why, as Gottlieb observes, Arendt treats the “interruptive” faculty of forgiveness as the prior condition of the “inaugural” faculty of promising. Every beginning supposes an ending, and the individualistic inflection of the former is crucially qualified by the vulnerability and dependence of the latter. Recalling Arendt’s telling recourse to Abraham as the discoverer of the stabilizing power of promising – “it is as though he departed from his country for no other reason than to try out the power of mutual promise in the wilderness of the world”³⁶ - Gottlieb adds:

It is as if Abraham could not have set out on his journey without some sense that he could be forgiven his trespasses, including, of course, the binding of Isaac. The anxiety surrounding the act of promising...is potentially so great that this act would issue into a speechlessness that would deprive the speaker of the capacity to promise – were it not for a prior promise, issued by another, of forgiveness for failing to fulfill one’s promises.³⁷

With this provocative suggestion, Gottlieb goes beyond what is strictly justified by Arendt’s text. Although Arendt does suggest that forgiveness is the condition of promising, she does not extrapolate from this *structural* priority to an original act of forgiveness – implicit, by necessity – at the origin of the deed. Is it Isaac’s forgiveness

³⁴ Griswold, p. 16.

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p 243.

³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 243-44.

³⁷ Gottlieb, p. 153.

that Abraham must suppose in order to set out at all? Is it God's? We do not need to enter into these speculative questions here. It is enough, for our purposes, to register the extreme vulnerability and dependence that precedes the promise and that, for Arendt, can not be substituted for by the solitary subject's self-overcoming.

It would be a mistake to conclude, without further ado, that we have arrived at a simple opposition, and that in their distinct accounts of the promising activity Nietzsche's thought betrays a lingering romanticism and individualism while Arendt emphasizes the passivity, vulnerability, and exposure of the promising agent. We have seen that neither thinker can be easily accommodated by the conventional opposition between activity and passivity. The responsible self, in Nietzsche, who has come (at great cost) to embody the prevailing juridico-ethical norms, and who makes a promise with the idea of recouping himself without loss in some particular and preemptive future, is just as much marked by the will to power as the noble, who promises himself to the future as such. And since the will to power names, in the first place, an affectivity, and a responsiveness to the play of forces and energies that situate the self, neither the slave nor the noble can be called simply voluntaristic without serious qualifications. Conversely, although the priority of forgiveness in Arendt's account does suggest an originary sociality, vulnerability, and passivity that would undercut the voluntaristic strains in Nietzsche's doctrine, she nevertheless endows the forgiving self with a power that even God does not have (citing with approval the biblical view that "if ye from your hearts forgive," God shall do "likewise").³⁸ The two theorists elude easy oppositions, challenging us to rethink both the subject and the time of the promise, and no thoughtful reconstruction of the encounter between Arendt and Nietzsche can afford to avoid this challenge.

³⁸ Arendt praises Jesus of Nazareth for maintaining "against the 'scribes and pharisees' first that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, 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" (HC, 239). Arendt's suggestion that Jesus discovered the human prerogative of forgiving *against* prevailing Hebrew tradition is surprising, indeed, since this same doctrine boasts a very long history in the Hebrew messianic tradition. See Gottlieb, p. 250, ff.18.