

The Frailty of Action

Forgiving and Promising: The Redemption of Action through the Potentialities of Action itself in Arendt¹

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In 1972, at a conference on her work organized by the Toronto Society for the Study of Social and Political Thought, to which Hannah Arendt was invited not only as the guest of honor but also, as it was her own wish, to participate, she said that “the main flaw and mistake of *The Human Condition*” [1958] was to “still look at what is called in the traditions the *vita activa* from the viewpoint of the *vita contemplativa*, without ever saying anything real about the *vita contemplativa*”. The main flaw, then, of her inquiry into the *vita activa* was to have in a way accepted that thinking is contemplative – though the lines of Cato which she quoted at the very end of that book (“Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself”) already pointed to the fundamental experience of the thinking ego, “an experience of sheer activity”, she now insists, “unimpeded by any physical or bodily obstacles”².

Arendt’s analysis of the *vita activa* in *The Human Condition*³ can be described, and was characterized by Jacques Taminiaux, in 1992, in *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*⁴, as a replica to the Heideggerian “reappropriation” of the Greeks during the phase of the genesis of his “fundamental ontology”, and, to be more precise, in the lectures he delivered at Marburg, in 1924-1925, on the Sophist - Interpretation Platonischer Dialoge (Sophistes)⁵- to which she, entirely fascinated, attended (Arendt was then 18 years old and Heidegger 35). This replica was written basically in function of a non-Heideggerian criterion – the excellence of the *bios politikos*. Heidegger, as you all certainly know and remember, is not once quoted in *The Human Condition*, and according to Taminiaux if he is not cited or mentioned at all, it is because Arendt does

1 The present paper is part of a larger research project I am developing as a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, in Belo Horizonte (Brasil), at the Department of Philosophy. I am particular grateful to the DAAD (the German Academic Exchange Service) and CAPES (Brasil) for a three month grant which provided me with this unique opportunity for carrying out my research at the *Hannah Arendt Archiv*, at the Carl von Ossietzky University, in Oldenburg. In January 2002, the *Forschungskolloquium: Politische Theorien der Moderne* offered me the opportunity to present a first version of my work. I want to express my sincere thanks to Professor Antonia Grunenberg and to Professor Zoltan Szankay for their most helpful comments and criticism on this first draft of my paper and for their warm welcome during my whole stay in Germany. Stefan Ahrens and Bettina Koch deserve a special measure of thanks for showing patience, encouragement, and concrete help while I was doing my work, and for the lively exchange of ideas.

2 H. Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt”, in: Melvyn A. Hill (ed.), *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1979, p. 305.

3 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition [HC]*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. *The Human Condition* owes its origin to a series of lectures, delivered in April, 1956, at the University of Chicago, under the title “*Vita Activa*”. German edition: *Vita activa oder Vom tätigen Leben*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1960.

4 J. Taminiaux, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel. Arendt et Heidegger*, Paris, Payot, 1992

5 Edited by Ingeborg Schüssler, these lectures were published in 1992 (M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 19, *Platon: Sophistes*).

not examine the bios theoretikos itself in this book (cf. *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, p. 26).

Hannah Arendt had already announced her last work (*The Life of the Mind*⁶) not only when she said that thought “is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under the conditions of political freedom”, that “no other human capacity is so vulnerable” (in fact, she reminds us, “it is far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think”), that although thought, as a living experience, “has always been assumed (...) to be known only to the few”, perhaps it was not presumptuous to believe, as she did, “that these few have not become fewer in our time” [my emphasis], and, finally, that “if no other test but the experience of being active were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*” – that is, to labor, to work or fabrication, and to action – “it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all”, but also when she had asked at the end of *The Human Condition* if thinking was not a sheer activity, and quoted the lines that were ascribed by Cicero, in *De Republica* (1,17), to Cato: Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset (HC, p. 297).

The starting point, then, of *The Life of the Mind* is this activity mentioned by old Cato in those lines which were quoted by Arendt at the very end of *The Human Condition*, and her aim - explicitly stated when she drew our attention at the end of the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*⁷ not to her “method” or her “criteria”, but to what, at least in her opinion, is the basic assumption of her investigation, and told us that she had “clearly joined the ranks of those who for some time now have been attempting to dismantle metaphysics, and philosophy with all its categories, as we know them from their beginning in Greece until today” (*Thinking*, p. 212) – was to elucidate the authentic experiences of thinking, willing and judging, or in other words, the actual experiences of the thinking, willing, and judging ego, which is aware of being active.

The *Life of the Mind* can be read as a critical appropriation of Heidegger, but one should not confuse the destruction [Destruktion] of the philosophical tradition done by Heidegger, in the context of the project of his fundamental ontology, or his critical deconstruction [Abbau] of the history of ontology - and is it really necessary to add here that this destruction or critical deconstruction does not at all mean for Heidegger the negation of tradition or condemning tradition to nullity and void but, on the contrary, a positive appropriation of that tradition⁸? -, which was actually done from the point of view of the Seinsfrage, with the dismantling of the three basic mental activities (thinking, willing, and judging) done here, in *The Life of the Mind*, by Arendt. Taminaux had already made a distinction, in 1985, between the obvious formal kinship of the “deconstruction” projects in Heidegger and Arendt and the basic traits that separate these two projects, and had refused to consider Arendt a mere “disciple” of Heidegger:

6 H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (Mary McCarthy, ed.). Vol. I: *Thinking*; Vol. II: *Willing*, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978. In 1975, in the “Description of Proposal” to *Introduction into Politics*, Arendt writes that *The Human Condition* “actually is a kind of prolegomena to the book which I now intend to write. It will continue where the other book ends” (Box 23, *Special Correspondance*, Rockefeller Foundation).

7 See also the *Conclusion* to the course she gave, in 1971, on the *History of the Will*, in New York, at the *New School for Social Research* (Box 44, *Subject File*, Courses, History of the Will).

8 Cf. M. Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe* 24, p. 3.

“In both cases, the relation to the Greeks plays a very important role. (...) In both cases, what is at stake is to question conceptual schemes that became passe-partout (...). In both, finally, this questioning aims at bringing back these conceptual schemes to the forgotten phenomenal bases which, at the origin, founded them (...) In contrast, (...) [i]t is much more the extra-philosophical testimony of the experience of action (particularly, Homer) and of the experience of political activity (for example, Thucydides), that helped Arendt and allowed her to rejoin the phenomenal bases of *vita activa*. No archaism here: these bases would not be exactly that if they were not susceptible of an actual retake (...).”⁹.

And so, it is precisely because Heidegger made thought his home or exclusive dwelling, while Arendt had to learn, at her own cost, the price of an entirely different dwelling – the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us – that her project remains irreducible to Heidegger’s. In contrast to Heidegger’s “destruction” of the history of ontology, the dismantling of the tradition in Arendt does not claim for thought any exclusive privilege. Her own experience of the effects of totalitarian rulership taught Arendt that her home was a world shared by a plurality of men, and not the activity of thinking. She knew, of course, that the activity of thinking is also necessary to protect this common or public realm. But this does not mean for Arendt that thinking could or should command all the other activities, fabrication, action, willing and the activity of judging. Her own “deconstruction” of the tradition aims at dismantling the fallacies produced by the privilege which was given to thinking¹⁰. And such dismantling is possible only, says Arendt, “on the assumption that the thread of tradition is broken and that we shall not be able to renew it” (Thinking, p. 212). The rupture of tradition liberates our sight: the dismantling process itself does not consist in destroying or breaking up, but in showing, manifesting, or revealing, that is, in a “phenomenological” deconstruction. Her own technique of dismantling consists in saving the phenomena from the involucre of inherited theses that amalgamate what one has to distinguish¹¹. In other words, the dismantling process itself aims to differentiate or to distinguish what the “professional thinkers” (the *Denker von Gewerbe* as Kant, not without irony, called them in his *Critique of Pure Reason*) tend to amalgamate.

When I tried to elucidate the “phenomenological” deconstruction or the dismantling of the faculty of the Will and, more specifically, to expound the complexities of this dismantling process in the long section of *Willing* on Augustine (“Augustine, the first philosopher of the Will”, pp. 85-110), at a Colloquium on Hannah Arendt, organized by the Philosophy Department of the State University of Campinas, in São Paulo¹², I had already said something about the Will’s redemption and also that the price of this redemption is freedom.

9 J. Taminiaux, “Arendt, disciple de Heidegger?”, *Études Phénoménologiques*, N° 2 (1985), pp. 121-123.

10 Cf. J. Taminiaux, *La fille de Thrace et le penseur professionnel*, p. 36.

11 See also here R. Peeters, “La Vie de l’Esprit n’est pas contemplative. Hannah Arendt et le démantèlement de la *Vita Contemplativa*”, in: A.-M. Roviello and M. Weyemberg, *Hannah Arendt et la modernité*, Paris, Vrin, 1992, pp. 9-26, and F. Xarão, *Política e Liberdade em Hannah Arendt*, Ijuí, Unijuí Press, 2000, pp. 93-96.

12 Th. Calvet de Magalhães, “Hannah Arendt e a desconstrução ‘fenomenológica’ da atividade de querer”, *Anais do Colóquio Hannah Arendt* (June 2000), Campinas, Unesp Press, 2002 (in print).

As far as willing is concerned, Arendt had already told us, in the Postscriptum to the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, that the will can be considered as “an organ of free spontaneity that interrupts all causal chains of motivation that would bind it”, but that, as Bergson had said, in 1889, at the very end of his *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, “il nous arrive rarement de vouloir”, that is, that “free acts are exceptional”, or in other words, “that it is impossible to deal with the willing activity without touching on the problem of freedom”, that she not only takes the “internal evidence” (what Bergson called the “immediate datum of consciousness”) seriously but also agrees that “this datum and all problems connected with it were unknown to Greek antiquity”, and, therefore, that she must accept that the faculty of the will was “discovered”, that “we can date this discovery historically, and that we shall thereby find that it coincides with the discovery of human “inwardness” as a special region of our life”¹³, that it is a “paradoxical and self-contradictory faculty”, that projects (and not objects) are the subject matter of the Will, and that this faculty is, therefore, turned to the future, and, finally, that “volition is the inner capacity by which men decide about “whom” they are going to be, in what shape they wish to show themselves in the world of appearances” (*Thinking*, pp. 213-214).

But she had also announced, in this Postscriptum, that modern thinkers have always covered with metaphysical fallacies these phenomenological features. In the “Introduction” to *Willing*, Arendt explicitly says that the phenomena she has to deal with, in this second volume of her work, “are overlaid to an extraordinary extent by a coat of argumentative reasoning, by no means arbitrary and hence not to be neglected but which parts company with the actual experiences of the willing ego in favor of doctrines and theories that are not necessarily interested in ‘saving the phenomena”’ (*Willing*, p. 3). What I tried to elucidate at the above mentioned Colloquium on Hannah Arendt, in Campinas (São Paulo), was how, in *Willing*, she saves the phenomena from the conceptual fallacies that cover or overlay them.

At the very beginning of *Willing*, Arendt observes that “[i]t is in the nature of every critical examination of the faculty of the Will that it should be undertaken by “professional thinkers” (Kant’s *Denker von Gewerbe*), and this gives rise to the suspicion that the denunciations of the Will as a mere illusion of consciousness and the refutations of its very existence, which we find supported by almost identical arguments in philosophers of widely different assumptions, might be due to a basic conflict between the experiences of the thinking ego and those of the willing ego” (p. 4). And “[a]lthough it is always the same mind that thinks and wills”, says Arendt, “it is by no means a matter of course that the thinking ego’s evaluation can be trusted to remain unbiased and “objective” when it comes to other mental activities” (p. 4). In the last section (“The abyss of freedom and the *novus ordo seclorum*”) of her “Conclusions” of *Willing*, she once more insists that “every philosophy of the Will is conceived and articulated not by men of action but by philosophers, Kant’s “professional thinkers”, who in one way or another are committed to the *bios theoretikos*” (p. 195). We cannot, then, expect from “professional thinkers” a fair estimate of the willing faculty.

¹³ That is, Hannah Arendt announces, in this *Postscriptum*, that she will analyze, in the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, the faculty of the Will in terms of its history.

The experiences of the thinking ego are not the starting point of Arendt's dismantling of the faculty of the Will: according to her, the "internal evidence of an I-will" has to be taken as "sufficient testimony to the reality of the phenomenon", and since she agrees with Gilbert Ryle (and many others) that this faculty was unknown to Greek antiquity, she must then accept what Ryle, in *The Concept of Mind* [1949], rejects, namely, that the faculty of the Will "was indeed "discovered" and can be dated" (*Willing*, p. 5). In other words, and she had already said this in the Postscriptum to *Thinking*, Arendt analyses here the Will in terms of its history.

Thinking and willing make present to our mind what is actually absent, but differently from thinking, which draws into its enduring present not only what is but also what at least has been, willing, turned to the future¹⁴, deals with things that have never existed at all, and "moves in a region where no such certainties exist" (*Willing*, p. 35). There is, therefore, a clash between these two mental activities: the Will's tonality is the very opposite of serenity (the predominant mood of the thinking ego), and since the activity of willing is not, like our thinking faculty, closely connected with remembrance¹⁵, it does not incline to melancholy ("the mood characteristic of the philosopher"). The predominant mood of the Will is tenseness, a kind of disquiet, easily bordering on turmoil, a tension that can be overcome only by doing (*Willing*, p. 38). What Arendt in fact questions is the solution that was given by "professional thinkers" to the fundamental conflict between thinking and willing - to deny the Will, and to reduce it to a mere illusion of consciousness, or to atrophy the Will, and to limit it to a mere free choice between things equally possible and given to us.

The Will as such, insists Arendt, in the last section of Chapter II of *Willing*, cannot escape the intrinsic conflict which crosses its freedom: "the Will's redemption (...) comes from the act which (...) interrupts the conflict between velle and nolle" - between the capacity of willing and nilling - or in other words, "the Will is redeemed by ceasing to will and starting to act, and the cessation cannot originate in an act of the will-not-to-will because this would be but another volition" (*Willing*, pp. 101-102). The Will's redemption cannot be mental, and it is in this context of the notion of a redemption of the Will through action that the theme of the beginning is mentioned. Augustine introduces a supplementary element, when he confronts the temporality of the human faculties with the eternity of God, in the last of his great treatises, *De Civitate Dei* [413-426], and Arendt resumes here the scope of this confrontation for the phenomenology of the Will: God, "himself eternal", and therefore "without beginning", not only created time and the world ("the world was made not in time, but simultaneously with time"), but He created man as essentially temporal, and not only as a creature who just lives "in time". The creation of the world does not coincide with the creation of man, and to mark this difference Augustine uses the word *initium* for the creation of man, and the word *principium* for the creation of the heaven and earth (*De Civitate Dei*, bk. XI, chap. xxxii). God created man as

¹⁴ The moment we turn our mind to the future, says Arendt, we are concerned with *projects*, and "just as the past always presents itself to the mind in the guise of certainty, the future's main characteristic is its basic uncertainty... . In other words, we are dealing with matters that never were, that are not yet, and that may well never be" (*Willing*, p. 14).

¹⁵ *Remembrance*, as Arendt had already said in the first volume of *The Life of the Mind*, has a natural affinity to thought: *all* thoughts are strictly speaking *after-thoughts* (*Thinking*, p. 78, and p. 87).

a new beginning in order that there may be novelty. This power to take initiative in the singular cannot be dissociated from Man's character of individuality which manifests itself in the Will: with man, writes Arendt, "a being came into the world that (...) could be endowed with the capacity of willing and nilling" (*Willing*, pp. 108-109). And she can, then, conclude: "if Augustine had drawn the consequences of these speculations, he would have defined men, not, like the Greeks, as mortals, but as "natales", and he would have defined the freedom of the Will not as the *liberum arbitrium* (...) but as the freedom of which Kant speaks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (*Willing*, p. 109), that is, the faculty of spontaneously beginning a series of successive things or states (*Critique of Pure Reason*, B 474).

It is not Augustine's notion of freedom as *liberum arbitrium*, but an entirely differently conceived notion of freedom (freedom equated now with the human capacity of beginning something new and unpredictable) which appears in his political treatise, *De Civitate Dei*, that Arendt wants to retake: "Because he is a beginning, man can begin; to be human and to be free are one and the same"¹⁶. In the last section of the "Conclusions" of *Willing*, Arendt turns from the willing faculty to political liberty and the realm of action. She had hoped to find in men of action a notion of freedom purged of the difficulties or perplexities caused by the reflexive character of the Will insofar as it is a mental faculty, but to her disappointment only arrived at the conclusion that wherever men of action, men who wanted to change the world, began to prepare in earnest for an entirely new beginning, they looked for a precedent. The two great foundation legends of Western civilization, the Hebrew and the Roman, that have acted as guides for Western political thought, point to the problem - the abyss of freedom - without solving it: "The abyss of pure spontaneity (...) was covered by the device, typical of the Occidental tradition (the only tradition where freedom has always been the *raison d'être* of all politics) of understanding the new as an improved re-statement of the old" (*Willing*, p. 216). Hannah Arendt concludes the second volume of *The Life of the Mind* by returning to the only one tentative alternative she knows, in our entire history of political thought, to such a frustrating conclusion, that is, she retakes Augustine's notion of freedom as a character of human existence in the world. In *De Civitate Dei*, when Augustine rooted the very capacity for beginning in natality, he mentioned, says Arendt, but did not explicate, "what could have become the ontological underpinning for a truly Roman (...) philosophy of politics" (*Willing*, pp. 216-217).

My work on the theme of the redemption of the modalities of the *vita activa* in Arendt, and, to be more specific, on the redemption of action in the last two sections ("Irreversibility and the Power To Forgive", and "Unpredictability and the Power of Promise") of Chapter V (Action) of *The Human Condition*, aims at retaking Arendt's analysis of the chief character of action - its frailty - and to expound its relation to moral activity in the two last sections on forgiving and binding oneself through promises of her chapter on action.

The description of the activity that *The Human Condition* introduces as "the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter",

16 .H. Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight exercises in political thought*, New York, Viking Press, 1968, p. 167.

and as an activity which “corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world” (HC, p. 9), heightens two outstanding characters of action - its inherent boundlessness, and its inherent unpredictability, but also its futility, its frailty, and the irreversibility of the process started by acting (HC, pp.171, 174, 208-209). In Arendt’s analysis, action itself, the spontaneous beginning of something new, appears altogether ambiguous and paradoxical:

“the human capacity for freedom (...), by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done. Nowhere, in other words, neither in labor, subject to the necessity of life, nor in fabrication, dependent upon given material, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities whose very essence is freedom and in that realm which owes its existence to nobody and nothing but man” (HC, pp. 209-210).

To act is both to exercise freedom and to lose it. Not only men of action, but also men of thought have always searched a substitute for this paradoxical character of action. For Arendt, the attempts to escape from the frailty of strictly human affairs amount to the abolition of the public realm itself. In her view, the hallmark of all these various attempts to retreat from politics altogether, or to destroy the web of human relationships altogether, is the concept of rule, that is, “the notion that men can lawfully and politically live together only when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey” (HC, p. 198). We find, already in Plato, such an escape, says Arendt, and also an interpretation of action in terms of fabrication. The vocabulary of political theory and political thought testifies the persistence and success of this transformation of action into fabrication. But this is not the object of my present work.

Arendt did not look upon freedom with the eyes of the tradition, and she did not identify freedom with sovereignty¹⁷. In her view, the capacity for action or the initiative of action is always accompanied with calamities, or with what she calls the “disabilities of non-sovereignty”. It is then, in this context of her analysis of action, that the question “whether the capacity for action does not harbor within itself certain potentialities which enable it to survive the disabilities of non-sovereignty” arises, and that the theme of the redemption of action is introduced (HC, p. 211).

In contrast to labor and work, action owes its redemption not to a different and “possibly higher” faculty, but to potentialities of action itself. The first - forgiving - relates to the past and serves to undo its deeds: “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 know what he was doing¹⁸ – is the faculty of forgiving”. The second -

17 “If it were true that sovereignty and freedom are the same, then indeed no man could be free, *because sovereignty*, the ideal of uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership, *is contradictory to the very condition of plurality*. No man can be sovereign because not one man, but *men*, inhabit the earth” (HC, p. 210; my emphasis).

18 .Not only “he who acts never quite knows what he is doing,” and “always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw”, but “no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it” (HC, p. 209).

binding oneself through promises - relates to the future and serves to set up in that ocean of uncertainty islands of security: “The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises” (HC, pp. 212-213).

For Arendt, these two forms of redemption are inherent in action itself, and depend on plurality:

“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 (...). 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 (...) – 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 (...); forgiving and promising enacted in solitude or isolation remain without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one’s self” (HC, p. 213; my emphasis).

Since these two faculties correspond so closely to the fact that to live always means to live among men, in other words, among those who are my equals¹⁹, their role in politics establishes a set of guiding principles, which is “diametrically different (...) from the “moral” standards inherent in the Platonic notion of rule” (HC, p. 213). For Arendt, this diametrically different “moral code”, inferred from the faculties of forgiving and of making promises, rests on experiences which are entirely based on the presence of others, that is, on experiences which nobody could ever have in solitude or in isolation.

These two intrinsic modes of redemption were unknown to the Greeks. It was Jesus of Nazareth who discovered “the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs”. The fact that this discovery was made in a religious context, argues Arendt, “is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense”. According to Arendt this discovery sprang from an authentic political experience whose first germ may be seen in the Roman principle *parcere subjectis*: “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 subjectis*) – a wisdom entirely unknown to the Greeks – or in the right to commute the death sentence, probably also of Roman origin (...)” (HC, p. 215).

Forgiveness releases the agent from the consequences of an act, and it is only through this liberation that the agent remains a free agent: “Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents” (HC, p. 216). In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which bounds the agent to the chain of consequences of the first misdeed. Forgiveness, in contradistinction to revenge, retains the unpredictability so characteristic of action: “Forgiving (...) is the only reaction which

¹⁹ According to Arendt, human plurality “is specifically *the* condition – not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* – of all political life” (HC, p. 10).

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” (HC, p. 216). Forgiving is thus closely connected with action, and since we only forgive what was done for the sake of who did it, the undoing of what was done, insists Arendt, “seems to show the same revelatory character as the deed itself” (HC, p. 217)²⁰. On the other hand, there is a parallel between punishment and forgiveness: “both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly” (HC, p.p. 216-217)²¹.

The faculty to make and keep promises, as one of the remedies inherent in action, was also unknown to the Greeks. We may trace it back, according to Arendt, “to the Roman legal system, the inviolability of agreements and treaties (*pacta sunt servanda*)”, but we could also consider Abraham, “the man from Ur”, the discoverer of the power of covenant or mutual promise. At any rate, argues Arendt, “the great variety of contract theories since the Romans attests to the fact that the power of making promises has occupied the center of political thought over the centuries” (HC, p. 219). The act of making promises redeems action from the predicament of unpredictability that this activity owes not only to “the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow”, which is the price they pay for freedom, but also to “the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act”, which is the price men pay for plurality and reality (HC, p. 219). Or, in other words, the faculty of promising “corresponds exactly to the existence of a freedom which was given under the condition of non-sovereignty” (HC, p. 220). In Arendt’s view, the force of mutual promise or contract is the force that keeps together or binds all those that interact, by setting up “isolated island of certainty”, that is, “certain islands of predictability” and “certain guideposts of reliability” in what remains an “ocean of uncertainty” (HC, p. 220). According to Arendt, sovereignty “assumes, in the case of many men mutually bound by promises, a certain limited reality. The sovereignty resides in the resulting, limited independence from the incalculability of the future, and its limits are the same as those inherent in the faculty itself of making and keeping promises” (HC, p. 220). Nietzsche, “in his extraordinary sensibility to moral phenomena”, recalls here Arendt, not only “saw in the faculty of promises (the “memory of the will”, as he called it) the very distinction which marks off human from animal life”, but “saw with unequalled clarity the connection between human sovereignty and the faculty of making promises”, in the second treatise of his work *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (HC, p. 221).

Arendt seeks then, with forgiving and making promises, “moral” norms that do not rest on a possibly higher faculty than action or on experiences exterior to its realm. To be valid politically, morality can only support itself on remedies inherent in action, that is, on remedies that “arise directly out of the will to live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking”; as moral precepts, therefore, “readiness to forgive and to be

20. “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” (HC, p. 218).

21 “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” (HC, p. 217).

forgiven, to make promises and to keep them (...) are like control mechanisms built into the very faculty to start new and unending processes” (HC, p. 221). The fact of natality, in which the very capacity for beginning or the capacity for action is rooted, is then what “saves” the realm of human affairs.

The foregoing remarks have been intended as a mere outline of the research project I am writing. They indicate that a finer analysis of the text of *The Human Condition* reveals authentic political experiences that bestow upon human affairs faith and hope, “two essential characteristics of human existence which Greek antiquity ignored altogether “ (HC, p. 222), and a variety of political experiences that our tradition of political thought has eliminated or excluded from articulate conceptualization.