

No Freedom without Forgiveness? The Problem of Beginning in Concepts of Break and Postponement

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1. Forgiveness as Commencement or Recommencement

In the philosophical consideration of forgiveness a specific phenomenon plays a salient role: *commencement* – or *recommencement*, as will be discussed below. Dealing with forgiveness as commencement or recommencement means dealing with the time structure of forgiveness and with the possibility of freedom, since commencement seems to release the future from the guilt of a misdeed.

The time structures of commencement and recommencement show up, for example, in the works of Hannah Arendt, Paul Ricœur and Emmanuel Lévinas. Despite the differences among these authors, mainly two contrasting views towards the time structure of forgiveness can be discerned. The first stresses a break putting an end to vengeance and enabling a new commencement. The second stresses a postponement of vengeance in a messianic order of time, enabling recommencement.

2. Forgiveness as Commencement. Breaking the Logic of Revenge

For Hannah Arendt and Paul Ricœur, an essential aspect of forgiveness seems to be the opportunity for a new commencement, as a break with the logic of revenge and retaliation. This break, relieving the future from the burden of guilt, is an act of freedom that would be impossible without the faculty of forgiving. Without this faculty, all future actions following a certain misconduct would remain dependent on it. This does not only concern the future of the „culprit“ but, as Arendt in particular points out, also that of the „victim“, who is released from the automatism of revenge by forgiving. In contrast to the re-actions of revenge and retaliation, the act of forgiving is, according to Arendt, a genuinely new one, and therefore free.

While the concept of commencement through forgiveness as a break is similar in Ricœur's text "La marque du passé", he adds another aspect. Commencement, which concerns the future, is not thinkable without the time dimension of the past, which is linked to the present by remembering and

forgetting, and thus by memory. The significance of forgiveness as commencement is thus seen from a perspective of time – between past and future, but discerned from forgetting.

Both Arendt and Ricœur elaborate on a fundamental question: How can human relationships be maintained without recourse to a logic of revenge and retaliation?¹

To discuss Arendt first, in *Vita activa* she describes forgiveness in relation to promise. Forgiveness and promise are seen as remedies for the fundamental predicaments of action: irreversibility and unpredictability. The possibility to remedy an action's predicament of irreversibility lies in the faculty, or more precisely, the action of forgiveness. It is directed to the past, in relieving an irreversible misdeed from the burden of guilt. With respect to the future, it enables the actor to act without always being dependent on the consequences of the deed.

On the other hand, there is the ability to make the chaotic and unknown future more controllable through promises. Promises are directed to the future and ensure a degree of predictability: "islands of security" in an "ocean of uncertainty"². The faculty to make and keep promises is, according to Arendt, constitutive for identity, because promises are made in relation to others who in return define one's identity in reference to one's promises. At the same time, forgiveness releases the pressure on identity that comes from the other, by avoiding that identity is forever linked to a former misconduct. This is why forgiveness is not only a relief for the fallible identity, but a constitutive force for identity, providing the freedom to independent actions free from the logic of revenge and retaliation. In other words, for Arendt the commencement that lies in forgiveness provides the freedom to *break* with the dependence of the individual on its fault, and is therefore a prerequisite for identity. So forgiveness becomes a necessity:

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 (...). (HC 237)

The point is that forgiveness is not only a break with revenge, but at the same time a commencement, which is seen as a completely independent action, not an element of the former chain of action and re-action in the logic of revenge. Thus forgiveness as commencement is contingent, as it is itself unpredictable,

1 A new beginning can only be conceived as an act of freedom by considering the dependence on the *other*, who gives this freedom by forgiving. The uneconomic gift of commencement through forgiveness is therefore considered in Ricœur's work.

2 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 1958, p. 237. In the following all references to this text are marked by the abbreviation HC, with the page number in brackets.

and therefore the only possibility to start a new chain of actions by a genuine action. As the act of forgiveness is seen as a completely new beginning, it is related to the phenomenon of natality in "The Human Condition", where one of Arendt's central insights into the faculty of action is that "the new (...) always appears in the guise of a miracle" (HC 178), and moreover: "The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is originally rooted." (HC 247) Arendt's emphasis on the phenomenon of natality shows a paradox in her conception of forgiveness as a genuinely new and therefore free action. This has been pointed out by Susannah Gottlieb, who considers Arendt's concept of natality a "weak messianic force" in "The Human Condition". This "messianic force" is the "precise opposite of sovereignty: it is self-exposure not self-assertion".³ The paradox of forgiveness that is on the one hand seen as something unexpectable, and on the other hand as a sovereign and free act, as commencement, will be taken up again below in the context of Emmanuel Lévinas' consideration of forgiveness and the messianic time.

As indicated in the introduction, Arendt is not the only author who links forgiveness to a new commencement by action. Paul Ricœur seems to have a very similar way of seeing forgiveness in a close relation to the time structure of commencement. In his monograph "La marque du passé" ("Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern – Vergessen – Verzeihen")⁴ he puts great emphasis on looking at the phenomenon of forgiveness from a perspective of time. While seeing, similar to Arendt, a direct orientation of forgiveness to the time dimension of the past, he also connects it to the future, under the presumption that every event in the past has an influence on the future. Ricœur gives an account of the connection between forgetting and forgiving, which are often not distinguished in everyday understanding.⁵

Although the relation to the past, according to Ricœur, refers to an original question of truth, the sense of history is not based on direct and adequate remembering, but on "being bodily affected", which is prior to any historical insight. In other words, the past *befalls* before it becomes an object of historical insight. This kind of "befalling" is not primarily expressed in an objective representation of history, but in the form of a narration. So memory, as the place of a non-selective collection of remembrances, always needs "memory hermeneutics" to ensure the truth that memory owes to the past. There is an essential relation to the problem of forgiveness here, which can be used as a guideline for the following investigation: For Ricœur, forgetting is

3 Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow. Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*, Stanford 2003, p. 139.

4 Cf. Paul Ricœur, *La marque du passé*, in: *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, no. 1, 1998; German translation: *Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern – Vergessen – Verzeihen*, translation by A. Breitling u. H. R. Lesaar, Göttingen 1998, p. 131-156.

5 Compare the frequently used German phrase "vergeben und vergessen" or the corresponding English phrase: "forgive and forget".

only due to a "just" Memory, which does not try to get rid of the guilt of the past, but which is linked to a forgiveness that can never be demanded. The unattonable guilt towards the past contrasts with a concept of a pure history that is available by recognition, which seems to offer an objective and holistic availability of history. Memory, remembering and forgetting are not to be taken apart, insofar as memory means a lasting inventory of remembrances. These remembrances are re-called by a memory which remembers or forgets them. To start a narration of history and to create a coherent narration, forgetting is necessary. Therefore the narration of history is always based on the active selection of memories/remembrances, which means: on active forgetting. Narrating or interpreting history means selecting parts of history in favour of a non-narrated rest. In this play of appearance and disappearance lies an unattonable guilt towards a never completely narrated history.

This background can shed more light on the function of forgiveness. Ricœur takes forgiveness to be one kind of selective, read: active, memory. What is actively forgotten in the act of forgiveness is not the action that is to be forgiven, but the guilt that arises from it. With respect to the aforementioned just memory, the point is not to get rid of the memory of the action through forgetting, but to keep the action in memory without being crushed by guilt, since being constantly reminded of the guilt would prevent a beginning (commencement) with a look to the future.

Ricœur emphasises that only the victim of a misdeed has the right to forgive, while the person who caused the injustice may but ask for forgiveness. So forgiveness does not serve to re-establish the moral integrity of the guilty individual; instead it origins from the victim, who may relieve his „hurt memory“, and thus his narration of his own history, from the burden of the past, enabling a new approach to the future. The problem of commencement is thus seen by Ricœur as well; he says "difficult forgiveness", which aims at the source of the conflicts and faults, is a "break with the infernal logic of a revenge, by generation after generation, for non-redeemable actions". Forgiveness here is clearly linked to the sphere of action and the subject's ability to prevent guilt from determining a chain of revengeful actions.

As said above, dealing with forgiveness means dealing with the problem of time. The time structure of forgiveness, seen especially by Arendt as a new commencement through a break, is based on the concept of the individual's autonomy of a free and therefore genuine action. Considering this concept of a break, it would be an interesting question from which perspective the phenomenon of forgiveness is seen: from the perspective of the person who forgives, or from the perspective of the person whom is forgiven. In Arendt's case the perspective towards forgiveness as a break appears to be clear. She speaks about the actor who forgives, although the relation to others is included, since forgiveness is based on plurality. Ricœur stresses another perspective: he includes the problem of the I who receives forgiveness as a gift from the other, thereby pointing out that forgiveness cannot be enforced.

In spite of this his perspective changes as he defines forgiving as active forgetting.

Considering the commencement of forgiveness as a break means trusting in the autonomy of a reasonable subject, able to break with the seemably natural logic of revenge and to begin a new order of actions free from a former guilt. Commencement in this context means being able to act freely. This freedom of action is – as Arendt herself points out in "The Human Condition" – thinkable in the field of everyday actions, where forgiveness that enables commencement is necessary to enable free actions.

However, perhaps the problem of guilt ought to be treated in a more fundamental way. What if the original fault is not caused by the wrong or right behaviour of the individual, but by its mere existence, by its being I in a relation to the other? If it were not possible to forgive a guilt by a new act, the concept of forgiveness as commencement could be obsolete in regard of the fundamental problem of forgiveness: the unforgivable guilt. Although commencement through forgiveness is necessary in the realm of everyday actions, it should be considered that man's ability to act can be *suspended* in confrontation with the *unforgivable*. In this light, the problem is how forgiveness can be thought *without* locating it in the field of actions, but *with* the possibility of re-commencement.

The time structure of forgiveness can give an important hint to this problem, as soon as it is no longer understood as commencement enabled by the subject's sovereignty to act, but as recommencement. Recommencement does not mean to break an infinite regress of revenge by action, but to postpone revenge with respect to the impossibility of action in confrontation with the unforgivable. Emmanuel Lévinas' concept of the infinite time at the end of "Totality and Infinity", where his remarks on forgiveness lead the thinking beyond the idea of forgiveness as the free act of an autonomous subject, could be an approach to this problem.

3. Forgiveness as Recommencement. Postponing the Re-action of Revenge

Emmanuel Lévinas also links forgiveness to the problem of beginning but – in contrast to Arendt or Ricœur – not to commencement, but to recommencement. This recommencement is not seen as a relief from a former guilt of an I that breaks with a logic of revenge in its free will. Lévinas sees the fundamental fault that is to be forgiven in the problem of being I in the first place, because being I means to take away opportunities from the other by realizing them for myself. Being I means also to be distinguished and distanced from the other who, in spite of this, constitutes the I. As the I is dependent on and subjected to the other, it is burdened by the guilt of its mere existence as being discerned from the other. In one of his early writings from 1947, "Existence and Existents", Lévinas points out the theme of pardon in

relation to the fault of being I explicitly:

Reaching the other (...) is, on the ontological level, the event of the most radical rupture of the very categories of the I, for it is for me to be somewhere else than my self; it is to be pardoned, not to be a definite existence.⁶

Where guilt appears no longer as the guilt of a misdeed by a fallible individual, but as a guilt of the I's mere existence, guilt is no longer primarily located in the realm of sovereign action. Therefore it may not surprise, that forgiveness itself is not primarily seen as a faculty to act and to begin anew. Lévinas links the problem of forgiveness to an *infinite time*, emphasizing that forgiveness is to be seen as a rupture in the time between the I and the other. But, and this distinguishes forgiveness from a new commencement and links it to re-commencement: as "a rupture of continuity, and continuation across this rupture".⁷ This continuation across the rupture is connected in a remarkable way to the problem of recommencement, as it is determined by the other, who stays absent in his absolute strangeness, in other words: whose arrival is postponed forever. The function of forgiveness as recommencement is therefore not to break with an infinite regress of revenge, but to postpone forever the revenge for a former guilt. This postponement is allowed by the messianism of the other who does not fulfill the automatism of revenge. "Messianic triumph is the pure triumph; it is secured against the revenge of evil whose return the infinite time does not prohibit."⁸

Here, forgiveness appears not to be characterized as a new act, breaking with the infinite regress of revenge and retaliation, but as an infinite postponement of revenge. It is remarkable that forgiveness is seen in its specific structure of time: the time in the relation between the I and the other who does not arrive. Forgiveness is not a question of action but one of the absence of action, moreover, the absence of the other. In other words, forgiveness is settled in the time between the I and the other – it is time itself. The freedom which is constituted by this type of forgiveness is not a pure freedom of action, but a *postponed freedom*, dependent on the *other* who stays absent. Robert Bernasconi has given an important hint to the meaning of forgiveness in the face of the unforgivable guilt in his article "Hegel and Lévinas: The Possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation". He stresses that the guilt towards the other must not be forgotten, although a recommencement is

6 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague 1978, p. 85; orig.: *De l'existence à l'existant*, Paris 1947, p.144.

7 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye 1961, p. 261; English translation: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translation by A. Lingis, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 284.

8 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye 1961, p. 261; English translation: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translation by A. Lingis, Pittsburgh 1969, p.284.

necessary: "Forgiveness does not ignore history, but frees us from some of its burdens."⁹ As the guilt of the I is infinite and nonredeemable, the problem of forgiveness moves from the realm of sovereign actions to the realm of time, more precisely, the time between the I and the other.

4. Résumé. The Unforgivable

There seems to have been a change in Arendt's view towards forgiveness that also alludes to messianism. Except from her remarks in "The Origins of Totalitarianism" and "The Human Condition", she rarely mentions forgiveness; but in a letter to the british poet Wystan Auden from 1960 Arendt considers the unforgivable. She discusses the problem of the unatonable guilt, from which a subject cannot relieve itself neither by a new beginning through forgiveness nor by punishment (in "The Human Condition" she considered punishment to be the necessary alternative for forgiveness).

You are entirely right (and I was entirely wrong) in that punishment is a necessary alternative only to judicial pardon. I was thinking of the absurd position of the judges during the Nuremberg trials who were confronted with crimes of such a magnitude that they transcend all possible punishment.¹⁰

In view of the unforgivable, Arendt also gives hints to the time structure of forgiveness that were mentioned above in the context of the "messianic force" in "The Human Condition". She links human temporality not primarily to mortality, as Lévinas does in his concept of an infinite time, but to the ability to begin anew:

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. (HC 246)

The problem that the realm of action is transcended by a phenomenon like the unforgivable, leads – even when considering Arendt's work – to the conclusion that forgiveness is not rooted in the faculty of sovereign action. Maybe Lévinas' attempt of linking forgiveness to a concept of infinite, i.e. messianic time, a postponement rather than a renunciation of the atonement, could be an approach to this problem.

⁹ Robert Bernasconi, *Hegel and Lévinas: The possibility of Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, in: *Archivio di Filosofia*, N. 1-3, 1986, p. 346.

¹⁰ This letter from Arendt to W.H. Auden from 1960 is accessible in the Collection of the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

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