

ON MESSIANIC STRAINS IN ARENDT'S THEORY OF POLITICAL ACTION

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Abstract

In this paper I examine the “messianic schema” (Susannah Gottlieb) that structures Hannah Arendt’s account of the *Vita Activa*. Focusing on the “internal remedies” by which action is said to redeem itself from the structural frustrations that mark its activity—namely, promising and forgiving—I claim that Arendt’s own emphasis on their *extraordinariness*, or their interruptive and inaugural dimensions, threatens to conceal their miraculous character. I suggest that Arendt’s description of political action as miraculous (and specifically, her description of forgiveness as man’s “miracle-working faculty”) takes for granted a politico-theological conception of miracle that finds its chief spokesman not in Carl Schmitt but in Franz Rosenzweig.

Keywords: Arendt, Gottlieb, Rosenzweig, action, forgiveness, miracle, performative utterance, promising, irreducible remainder.

Introduction

In an illuminating and potentially paradigm-shifting study,¹ Susannah Gottlieb has recently raised anew the complicated question concerning Hannah Arendt’s historical sources. Leaving behind the polemical alternatives that have structured much of the contemporary Arendt scholarship: Is she a nostalgic Graecophile, a reluctant modernist, or an agonistic post-modernist? Is she conservative or utopian, liberal or communitarian? Is her celebrated theory of action best grasped as an exercise in renewal, critique, or dismantling? Gottlieb suggests that Arendt’s political theory makes a surprising and almost entirely overlooked² contribution to the tradition of Jewish messianic thought.

¹ Susannah Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W.H. Auden* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

² As Gottlieb observes, “Arendt’s messianism has been inconspicuous enough to avoid almost all critical commentary, even among those who discuss her relation to the ‘Jewish question’.” Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 249, n.17.

To be sure, the messianic strains in Arendt's work are not immediately evident. As Gottlieb acknowledges, she "nowhere calls on a supreme being to abrogate the conditionality of human beings, does not use the term *messiah*, and makes no explicit reference to any figure that might be associated with messianic Judaism."³ Even more ostensibly damning than these omissions is the fact of Arendt's express *partisanship* for this world, her celebrated attempt to restore to worldly action a dignity that has long been concealed by an allergic philosophical (and indeed, theological) tradition. In light of this emphatic worldliness, this well-documented "love of the world"⁴ which finds expression in her careful articulation of the limits, conditions, and potentialities of shared action, is there not something violent, indeed even perverse, in seeking to find messianic tendencies or aspirations in Arendt's thought?

In this paper, I offer a critical examination of Gottlieb's thesis in order to retrieve Arendt's theory of action for the tradition of Jewish messianic thought. The argument unfolds in two stages.

In the first stage I summarize Gottlieb's powerful reading, which hinges on what she describes as the "messianic schema" that informs Arendt's treatment of the *Vita Activa*. According to Arendt, while each of the activities that together constitute the active life of human beings (labor, work, and action) stands in need of redemption, action alone possesses "internal remedies" for the constitutive frailties to which it is subject. It is by way of these remedies—specifically, the faculties of promising and of forgiving—that man as a political actor redeems action itself from its structural limitations (albeit never definitively, each time anew) and simultaneously redeems the world of the human artifice from its inherent meaninglessness. Emphasizing the singular temporal structure of Arendtian forgiveness—which interrupts the potentially endless chain of consequences that follow upon every deed and makes possible a "miraculous" new beginning—Gottlieb helps us to understand Arendt's claim that the miracle of action consists in its power to interrupt the "natural, normal" course of the world with the possibility of something new and unprecedented.⁵

In the second stage I suggest that while Gottlieb's foregrounding of the miraculous character of action is a promising and necessary first step in rethinking

³ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 139.

⁴ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's definitive biography of Arendt is titled *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* and it is not an exaggeration to suggest that Arendt's overarching concern over the entire span of her writings is to recall and affirm the worldliness of human beings, a worldliness which is actualized above all in public action.

⁵ Arendt repeatedly declared that the "natural" course of things, if left uninterrupted, led toward ruin. "It is in the nature of the automatic processes to which man is subject, but within and against which he can assert himself through action, that they can only spell ruin to human life". See Hannah Arendt 'What is Freedom?' from *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 247.

the neglected Jewish inheritance of Arendt's theory, her emphasis on the exceptional and interruptive character of action's miracle is potentially misleading. For while action does indeed constitute a break with both the eternal cyclicity of labor and the pre-emptive ends-directed temporality of the fabrication process, the rupture it effects must be grasped not so much as an *exception* to everyday life (as Arendt herself often seems to suggest, with vaguely Schmittian overtones) but as an *intensification* of it. That is, the "miracle" of action does not refer, in the first place, to the rare or exceptional deed itself, to its interruption and illumination of an otherwise grey and sterile environment, but to the receptivity and interpretation which the deed invites and upon which its meaning depends. To make this case, I follow Bonnie Honig's lead and consider the redemptive actions of promising and forgiving in Arendt's account as "performative utterances," as speech acts that do not merely *refer* to some existing state of affairs (like the classical constative assertion), but rather *enact* a state of affairs, bringing something new into the world in the very act of being spoken.⁶ While all performative utterances, including promising and forgiving, finally rest on a combination of performative and constative dimensions, Arendt tends to stress the performative dimension of these activities at *the expense* of their constative dimensions. Moreover, their saving power is made to hinge precisely on their framing as pure performance, an extraordinary performance that radically transcends its context and is unconditioned by the established linguistic and discursive practices that welcome its emergence and register its effects. In emphasizing the chasm that separates the novel event from the established relationships and routine practices of everyday life, Arendt (and Gottlieb, in her faithful commentary) foregrounds the exceptionality of the deed, but in a way that risks overlooking its irreducible embeddedness in an existing discursive and political order. Thus we find a tension between Arendt's salutary insistence upon the plurality and contingency of shared action (and her consequent affirmation of the constitutive role played by the interpreter in determining its meaning) and her tendency to grasp the deed as a purely performative act marking an extraordinary rupture with what comes before and after, and separable in principle from the ordinary discursive practices that register its effects. In the balance hangs the extremely provocative and promising conception of "miraculous action" described in *The Human Condition*. In my closing remarks I suggest that a possible theoretical solution to the tension might be found in Franz Rosenzweig's seminal work, *The Star of Redemption*. Of particular significance is Rosenzweig's doctrine of revelation, for reasons that should be immediately clear. Like Arendt's miraculous action, Rosenzweig's revelation occurs in a moment outside of the parameters of prior experience. The

⁶ Honig's strong reading of Arendt can be found in chapter 4 of her book *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) titled "Arendt's Accounts of Action and Authority" (pp. 76-125).

command, “Love me!” fleeting and ephemeral, immediately flows off into an immemorial past. And it falls to the community of faith, the community that has come together around the instantaneous revelation, to “verify” (both testifying to and confirming) the miracle by acts of situated interpretation. The doctrine thus offers an exemplary instance of a temporal scheme that combines the extraordinary and the ordinary, or more specifically, a doctrine that thinks together the radical exteriority of revelation to propositional language and the unavoidable discursive appropriation of revelation in concrete acts of interpretation.

1. The Frustrations of Action and Its Internal Remedies

As I suggested above, Susannah Gottlieb’s provocative analysis of the theory of action places at its centre the “messianic schema” that structures Arendt’s account of the active life. The first point to note about this schema is that it hinges not on the positive potentialities and capabilities of each activity—labor, work, and action—but on their constitutive limitations. These are constitutive or structural limitations in the sense that they are not a product of historical vagaries (i.e., the increasingly closed off spaces for action in the public world) or traditional prejudices (i.e., the deeply entrenched prejudice that identifies politics as a form of work or production), but are rather bound up with the temporal structures of the activities themselves. As Gottlieb points out,

Arendt refuses to correlate labor, work, and action with the past, present, and future—or any other ordering of these modes. Instead each of the temporal structures makes for a certain easiness, the escape from which requires another activity, with a temporal structure of its own.⁷

To each activity corresponds a distinct temporal structure, and to each of these corresponds a particular “unease” from which there is no escape—at least not so long as the agent remains engaged in the activity in question. The laborer (*animal laborans*), producer (*homo faber*), and actor are all in need of “redemption” or “salvation” (Arendt’s analysis is peppered with this explicitly theological language), and it appears that in each case such redemption requires an escape from (and transcending of) the offending activity itself. But before we turn to the three distinct experiences of time, I must introduce an important caveat.

It is not quite accurate to suggest that it is man (either as laborer, worker, or actor) who must be redeemed from the frustrations of his worldly condition. Rather, as we shall see, Arendt’s originality lies in her grasping not souls but the world itself as standing in need of redemption from the inherent ruination that characterizes the “normal, natural” course of affairs. It is not man, made in the

⁷ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 143.

image of God, who must be saved from this world and its fallenness. On the contrary, it is the world itself that is dangerously imperiled by the very activities on which it is dependent for its construction and illumination, and it is the world itself (and so man too, not as soul, or as an incorporeal spiritual entity, but *as a worldly being*) that must be saved from its “inherent ruination.” This means that redemption or salvation, for Arendt, can have nothing to do with transcending worldly conditions. Rather, as we shall see (and here we see the first of many points of coincidence with Rosenzweig), it affirms these limiting conditions as the promise of “more life.” In this connection, Gottlieb cites Gershom Scholem’s well-known and highly polemical distinction between Jewish and Christian messianic traditions, a distinction that turns precisely on the *worldliness* of the former. As Scholem wrote:

Judaism, in all its forms and manifestations, has always maintained a concept of redemption as an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community... In contrast, Christianity conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual, and which effects an inner transformation which need not correspond to anything outside.⁸

While Arendt’s messianism is undoubtedly an extreme instance of this worldly inflection—as Gottlieb acknowledges, Arendt’s explicit affirmation of the world, and not God, as the proper object of both hope and faith “stretches the tradition of Jewish messianic thought to the breaking point”⁹—her unwavering insistence on the world as both the site and the object of redemption does not disprove, but rather confirms, the theory’s construction “according to models of thought developed within the parameters of Jewish messianic traditions.”¹⁰

If we now consider the distinct temporal structures corresponding to the activities of labor, work, and action, we find that the laboring activity, which is wholly taken up with the preservation and reproduction of life, is marked by a simultaneous immediacy and eternity. On the one hand, the “objects” of labor, chiefly food, are characterized by their transience or by their immediate return to and incorporation in the process that gives rise to them: “The least durable of

⁸ Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, trans. Michael A. Meyer and Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 1.

⁹ Arendt’s “faith in the world” is not to be confused with a faith in the power of human construction—i.e., with those secular utopianisms that substitute work for action and seek to construct a new Babel. Her dissection and denunciation of such ideological projects in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provides the historical backdrop for her later denunciation, on the theoretical plane, of the powerful traditional tendency to see history as the object of making and to treat human beings as raw material to be molded in the service of this end.

¹⁰ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 139.

tangible things are those needed for the life process itself. Their consumption barely survives their production.”¹¹ This movement through which production and consumption follow one another in immediate and endless succession characterizes the “life process,” that process of incorporation, elimination, elaboration, and destruction, to which every living being finally belongs and succumbs. This cycle, as Arendt explains, “is the overall gigantic circle of nature herself, where no beginning and no end exists and where all natural things swing into changeless, deathless repetition.”¹² Although the two moments here singled out—immediacy and eternity—may appear on the surface to be at odds with each other, Arendt cites Karl Marx’s famous definition of the laboring process as “man’s metabolism of nature” to indicate the degree to which the labor process is finally integrated or incorporated into the cyclical character of nature herself. Citing the French labor theorist Pierre Naville, Arendt argues that the very day of the laborer, with its particular rhythms, pauses, and repetitions, mirrors the cycle of nature.¹³

The activity of work, through which man produces “an ‘artificial’ world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings,” is informed by a very different experience of time. In sharp contrast to labor, whose products are characterized by impermanence, the products of work are distinguished by their durability. As Arendt observes, “they give the human artifice the stability and solidity without which it could not be relied upon to house the unstable and mortal creature which is man.”¹⁴ Relatedly, whereas labor never comes to an end, moving in an endless circle, work is entirely absorbed in its end. Indeed, as Arendt notes, “the fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it (the process disappears in the product, as Marx said), and that it is only a means to produce this end.”¹⁵ But the crucial point, for our purposes, is that work and labor are not simply opposed. Rather, work saves or redeems “animal *laborans*” from both immediacy and eternity by constructing an objective and durable world, a world in which an individual life can first appear out of the life of the species. It is essential to Arendt’s argument that no irreplaceable singularity, no unique life story, can emerge from a cyclical process regulated by the repetition of the same. Individual life supposes a rupture with the cycles of natural life; indeed, it is first made possible when individuals are wrested

¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Naville writes that: “the principal trait [of the laboring activity] is its cyclical or rhythmic character. This character is bound up both with the natural spirit and the cosmology of the day...and with the character of the physiological functions of the human being, which it has in common with the other superior animal species... It is clear that labor must be principally bound up with natural rhythms and functions.” Cited by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, p. 98.

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

from the natural environment and enter the world of the human artifice. Arendt repeatedly emphasizes this saving power of work with respect to natural life. Even birth and death, in her account, as the beginning and end of individual lives, depend on a relatively permanent world, a world which is not in constant movement and which provides a relatively permanent backdrop against which beings can appear and disappear. Indeed, it is the durability of the products of work that first allows for the recognition of change and thus the comprehension of time itself. But if the activity of work, with its production of an artificial world, saves laboring man from the endless cyclicity and anonymity that characterize his activity, work itself is beset by certain structural limitations that are attached to its temporal structure, and man as worker or producer needs to be saved from these. As described above, its end determines the beginning of any work, and the activity is governed throughout by the categories of means and ends. Here Arendt introduces a distinction between the immediate purpose and the ultimate meaning of an activity, and she claims that the “in order to,” as the expression of the *purpose* or end of any work, so thoroughly determines the process of fabrication from start to finish that no room is left for the *meaningfulness* expressed by “for the sake of.” Man as producer (*homo faber*) cannot overcome the meaninglessness of a world determined entirely by the means-ends schema. He must therefore be saved by another activity, namely, by action. For all its durability, the world fabricated in work leaves no room for anything new. It presents everything in terms of the instrumental schema of means-ends, absorbing everything into the temporal dimension of the end. Only the possibility of action, which interrupts the natural course of ruin and introduces something new and unexpected into the world, saves the human artifice from the ultimate meaninglessness of productive activity.

These, then, are the first two moments of the redemptive schema. Work saves laboring man from the recurrence and anonymity of the life-process, and action saves working man from the meaninglessness of strictly productive activity. Like labor and work, action is also characterized by certain structural limitations or inherent frustrations. Arendt emphasizes two above all: unpredictability and irreversibility. Action is unpredictable on account of the essential unreliability of human beings “who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow.”¹⁶ And action is also irreversible. Because action is never possible in isolation, it always takes for granted a “web of relations.” Acting within this web sets 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. But it is here that action shows itself to be essentially different from the activities of labor and work. While neither labor nor work contain the means for their own salvation, action alone possesses “internal remedies” through which it can respond to—

¹⁶ Ibid., 244.

without finally overcoming—the predicaments that condition its activity. 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 mitigate (without denying or annulling) its radical contingency, its inherent unpredictability and irreversibility. To be sure, Arendt is hardly allergic to uncertainty or contingency (she defines contingency as “the price human beings pay for freedom”).¹⁷ In stark opposition to traditional political philosophy (as she diagnoses it), she seeks to affirm and celebrate the contingency and plurality of political life. But she knows that human beings cannot sustain a sphere of public action without some stabilizing measures, and it is by introducing a limited stability into this sphere that action can be said to save itself (each time anew) from the structural deficiencies that threaten to destroy it.

According to Arendt, the activity of promising 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.”¹⁸ It is important to insist on the *limited* or *relative* stability that promising makes possible. In contrast with traditional strategies of self-mastery or autonomy, which take for granted an escape from the pluralism characteristic of political life, promising creates finite and isolated areas of stability (“islands of security”) in the unpredictable and often stormy sphere of public action. Whereas both self-mastery and autonomy involve certain disciplines of the self, such as the cultivation of a certain identity, promising is not primarily directed at the production of a self. Although it does provide a crucial *condition* for identity by drawing human beings out of their isolation and giving concrete direction to their endeavors, its primary achievement is the stabilization of the public world itself rather than the establishment or fixing of the promising subject. As we have seen, Arendt insists upon man’s essential “inability to rely upon himself or to have complete faith in himself (which is the same thing)” and the positing of a promising subject who would underpin and anchor the promise would not so much correspond to this fundamental human condition as annul it. Such an annulment would strike at the heart of Arendt’s doctrine, which embraces both “the danger and the advantage” of a merely relative stability, a stability that “leaves the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are.”¹⁹ In sum, the stabilizing function of promising and its saving power consists in its directing the self outside itself and into relation (“without being bound to the fulfillment of promises... we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

¹⁹ Ibid., 244.

man's lonely heart"²⁰), but without going further and grounding this relation in the figure of a promising subject. The second redemptive faculty, corresponding to action's essential irreversibility, is forgiveness. Let us recall that irreversibility refers to the potentially endless chain of events set off (albeit unknowingly) by any deed inserted into the "web of relations" that constitute the public sphere. As Arendt explains, "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 victim of its consequences forever."²¹ As this passage suggests, it is only if we can be released from the consequences of our actions that new action can be released into the world; or in Gottlieb's formulation, "only under the condition that action be able to come to an end can it begin."²²

We will return in what follows to the remarkable temporal structure of Arendtian forgiveness, the end of which is a beginning, but a beginning informed by an intimate experience of the end. For the moment I want to draw attention to an important strain in Gottlieb's interpretation. Having recalled the "messianic schema" that informs Arendt's account of the human condition, and having considered the internal remedies by which action saves itself (each time anew) from its inherent frustrations, Gottlieb argues that the chain of redemptive recourses finally arrives at an abyss. This is so for the simple reason that forgiveness—by which action would save itself from the irreversibility to which it is bound—is itself an action, and thus stands in need of forgiveness, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Having uncovered this abyssal state of affairs, wherein the end that is the condition of beginning is itself a beginning in need of an end, Gottlieb straightaway announces the impossibility of resolving the paradox that here comes to light:

For Arendt, there is no worldly resolution to the abyssal structure that arises from the fact that the power of action is redeemed by one of action's own potentialities...this structure is constitutively incapable of resolution—so much so that not even divine forgiveness can resolve it, since forgiveness is primarily a human faculty.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 237.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 155.

²³ Ibid., 156, 160. That action can redeem itself without reference to a higher power; indeed, that forgiveness is, in the first place, a human (and not a divine) prerogative is the surprising discovery that Arendt attributes to Jesus of Nazareth. According to Arendt, "Jesus maintains against the 'scribes and pharisees' 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

For Gottlieb, the impossibility of resolving the paradox testifies to the “fundamental helplessness” of action: the redemptive resumption by which forgiveness enables man to begin anew is at the same time a “continual and continually interruptive re-ignition of helplessness”²⁴ for which there is no solution. But according to Gottlieb, this state of affairs is not a cause for resignation. On the contrary, it is precisely action’s helplessness, its inability to finally solve or resolve the paradox that besets it, that sets it apart from all “saving solutions” (including the final solution of totalitarian domination) and constitutes its singular dignity. The temptation to resolve the paradox and to overcome once and for all the irreversibility and uncertainty inherent in plurality, a temptation that finds repeated expression in the traditional substitution of making for acting, is precisely the danger that action must avoid at all costs. Thus, according to Gottlieb, the dignity of action lies precisely in embracing, indeed in “praising” its conditionality without seeking to escape, annul, or deny the various risks (uncertainty, contingency, irreversibility) that action amidst a plurality always involves. And it is finally the celebration of this capacity to praise, to be grateful for what is given as it is given, that is the end result of Gottlieb’s foregrounding of the neglected “messianic schema” of *The Human Condition*.²⁵

2. Action as Performance and its Irreducible Other

Let us now ask: is this humble achievement, the praising of its own contingency and conditionality, the final expression of action’s messianic vocation? If this vocation consists, in its Arendtian inflection, not in the redemption of individual souls from the world but rather in the redemption of the world itself from the “automatic processes” (whether natural or historical) that threaten it, and if it achieves this redemption by interrupting those processes and introducing something new and unforeseeable, each time anew, but without ever finally escaping the contingency and plurality that mark all public life, then it would seem that there is no more fitting articulation of this achievement than the form of praise described by Gottlieb, a praise which “does not commend individuals for their

men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also.” From *The Human Condition*, 239.

²⁴ Gottlieb *Regions of Sorrow*, 186.

²⁵ Gottlieb suggests that praise, grasped as the affirmation of the conditionality and plurality of action, might be understood along with promising and forgiveness as an internal resource by which action responds to its structural frustrations. As she puts it, “Praise is an additional potentiality internal to action: it does not remedy or redeem action’s predicaments...it is an activity that does nothing except bring into view the sheer conditionality of action” (187).

actions but embraces the condition of action such that there can be individuals.”²⁶ Although Gottlieb does not mention it here, the posture she describes, the embrace and affirmation of what is given *as* it is given, is the very same practical posture that Arendt herself invokes in describing her relation to her own Jewishness:

I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as a basic gratitude for everything that is as it is...²⁷

But does this affirmation finally capture the messianic impulse in Arendt’s theorizing? Does the miraculous character of action finally lie in its affirmation of its own interruptive power, its power to break through the repetitive rhythms of natural life and the telic order of productive work, without pretending to have thereby overcome the contingency, plurality, and freedom that mark its emergence? Certainly Gottlieb is right to insist upon the ultimate “helplessness” and “irresponsibility” of action,²⁸ to insist that this irresponsibility is not something that can ever be overcome without violating the plurality and contingency that Arendt values so dearly.²⁹ But while the irresponsibility of action is something that must be defended and affirmed in the face of saving solutions, I want to suggest that this affirmation points toward an attitude and a practice that cannot be captured in the language of praise. Since, as I shall presently suggest (in opposition to Arendt’s explicit teaching, but with considerable support from her text), the finitude and conditionality of action can never be wholly purged of violence, the

²⁶ Ibid., 187.

²⁷ These lines come from Arendt’s oft-cited letter to Gershom Scholem (written shortly after the publication of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*) in response to Scholem’s charge that his old friend’s “trial report” betrayed a distinct lack of love for the Jewish people. The letter has been published under the title “A Daughter of Our People” in *The Portable Hannah Arendt* ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 392.

²⁸ Arendt attacks the longstanding desire of traditional political thought “to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 220).

²⁹ In this regard, Gottlieb’s final position would appear to stand at a considerable distance from those (largely Kantian) readings of Arendt’s theory which seek to discover in its implicit normative standards, standards which might be universalized in the construction of a democratic public sphere. Although she does not enter into the various polemical alternatives that have structured contemporary scholarship, Gottlieb would appear to be much closer in spirit to those interpreters who emphasize the irreducible contestation and agony that characterize political life—although she does not, obviously, share the still popular view (among agonistically-inclined interpreters) that this tendency expresses a deep nostalgia for Greek political forms.

attitude of praise risks confirming, or at least insulating from critical attention, a state of affairs that is never simply praiseworthy.

What do I mean by speaking of a necessary or structural violence attaching to action? Let us recall Arendt's treatment of those privileged faculties by which action redeems itself from its inherent limitations, the acts of promising and forgiving. Although she establishes that these actions are essentially situated and non-sovereign (the former establishes "islands of freedom" in an "ocean of uncertainty," and the latter owes its prominence to the fact that active man "does not, and cannot, have known what he is doing"³⁰), the overwhelming focus of her account is on the inaugural and interruptive power of the actions in question: their power to bring to an end the consequences of the first deed and to bring something new into being that did not exist before. She pays almost no attention to the fact that promising and forgiving are themselves political practices with conditions and consequences of their own, that they take place within a set of pre-established relations and that these cannot be left to one side when considering their redemptive power. It is in terms of this unfortunate tendency (to abstract from the concrete situation of these actions) that we may understand Arendt's remark that forgiveness always "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.*"³¹ As Bonnie Honig points out, there is a certain naïveté or optimism expressed in Arendt's suggestion that the act of forgiveness "frees" both parties from consequences. On the contrary, "the parties involved become enmeshed in a relationship of inequality that is inconsistent with Arendt's account of action, a relationship in which one party is the generous 'one who forgives' and the other, the indebted and grateful 'one who is forgiven.'"³² Honig refers here to Nietzsche's well-known diagnosis of forgiveness as a symptom of the will to vengeance, a "moral practice" which leaves neither party unscathed. To be sure, Honig goes on to suggest that the difference between Nietzsche and Arendt is not as great as may appear, and that Arendtian forgiveness is closer in spirit to Nietzsche's "lordly dismissal" of trespasses than to the moral practice that he condemns. But while one may entertain serious reservations about this supposed proximity,³³ Honig is surely correct to point out the optimistic and abstract

³⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 241. Italics mine.

³² Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 85.

³³ Gottlieb emphasizes the distance that separates Arendt's doctrine from Nietzsche's: "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 [contrary to Nietzsche's tracing of forgiveness back to the spirit of self-affliction born of promising] the stabilizing power of promising is predicated on the interruptive faculty of forgiveness" (Gottlieb, 153). Of course, since both Gottlieb and Honig are ultimately concerned to distinguish Arendt's

character of Arendt's conception. Her emphasis on the extraordinariness of action intends to draw into sharp relief the risk, insecurity, and heroism that characterize performance in the public sphere. This heroism is, of course, the flipside of the irreversibility, uncertainty, and unpredictability of action. Promising and forgiving require courage for they always occur in a sphere where the outcome of deeds is unknown, where actions set off unforeseeable reactions. We can see why Arendt describes this sphere in such a way that actions are not domesticated by the context into which they are "inserted." Just as she grasps the singular freedom of the act as a freedom from motives and intentions, on the one hand, and from worldly consequences, on the other, so too she understands the act to transcend both the concrete conditions and circumstances of its emergence and the particular effects (of consciousness and of language) that it creates. The problem, of course, is that this one-sided emphasis on the extraordinariness of action, which seems to emerge *ex nihilo*, leaves Arendt unable to speak in concrete terms about what might be called the *real* contingency of action, that is, not its rather abstract situatedness vis-à-vis the structural limitations of its own activity, but its situatedness within particular legal, political, and discursive practices, the effects of which cannot be denied without distortion.

I suggested in my opening remarks that this point might be articulated (following Honig) in the language of "speech acts" introduced by J.L. Austin. Austin distinguishes between constative and performative utterances. The former refer to classical assertions or acts of reference, in which the speaker refers to some existing state of affairs, and the latter refer to those utterances that do not simply refer to something outside of them but create new relations and realities in the very act of being spoken (as with Austin's well-known example of the "I do" at a wedding ceremony). It is clear that Arendt wishes to understand properly political actions (including promising and forgiving) as performative utterances, which bring certain identities and relationships into being. But as I suggested above, her emphasis on the extraordinary character of action, which preserves the performative force of the action from all contaminating constative dimensions, introduces certain tensions into her account. Honig takes as an example Arendt's examination (in *On Revolution*) of the preamble to the American Declaration of Independence, where she focuses on the highly "incongruous" line, "We hold these truths to be self-evident." On the one hand, according to Arendt, the appeal to self-evident truths is inherently anti-political, since all self-evident truths stand outside the plurality and contingency that define the public realm. Indeed, as Arendt explains, the attempt to introduce self-evidence into politics is an attempt to find an absolute ground for action, a "law of laws" that might serve as a foundation for the

own expressly political doctrine of forgiveness from the moral practice sponsored by the metaphysical tradition, their positions cannot simply be opposed to one another.

always uncertain and unpredictable realm of human affairs. An absolute, Arendt says,

...is a truth that needs no agreement since, because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion. By virtue of being self-evident, these truths are pre-rational...and since their self-evidence puts them beyond disclosure and argument, they are in a sense no less compelling than 'despotic power' and no less absolute than the revealed truths of religion or the axiomatic verities of mathematics.³⁴

In the face of such truths, which do not stand in need of agreement, discussion, or deliberation, but rather demand an isolated acquiescence to necessity, the plurality of men is silenced and the integrity of politics is violated. It should be clear that the illicit or illegitimate character of such an appeal to absolutes in politics is a function of their constative character (i.e., their reference to a state of affairs that pre-exists and transcends the act of speaking). By contrast, "We hold" is the performative part of the phrase; it is a promise that necessarily takes place amidst a plurality (it constitutes a "free coming together") and it brings something new into existence (giving "public expression to an agreement to abide by certain rules in the community's subsequent being-together"³⁵). According to Arendt, as Honig reads her, the preservation and success of the American republic hinged on the fact that the performative part of the phrase ("We hold") won out over the constative part, the reference to self-evident truths. Since it rests on "mutuality and reciprocity," the "We hold" constitutes and announces the only sort of power that is real (and is irreducible to sheer force or strength). It is a power that comes into being only "when men join themselves together for the purpose of action...by binding themselves through promises, covenants and mutual pledges."³⁶

The problem with this sharp division, and with Arendt's evident identification of the redemptive power of promising with its strictly performative character, is that all promises, including that expressed in the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, necessarily combine performative and constative elements. In the case of the Preamble, as Honig observes, not only do we find an appeal to self-evident truths but also an appeal to "nature's god," in whose name, and by whose authority, the signers first come together to constitute themselves as a people (that is, as the "We" that is both taken for granted and constituted by the signing itself).³⁷ For Arendt, this appeal can only testify to a weakness on the part of the signers. They could not finally rest content with

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1965), 192.

³⁵ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 101.

³⁶ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

...their own power, granted and confirmed by no one and as yet unsupported by any means of violence...[a power] to combine themselves together into a 'civil Body Politick' which, held together solely by the strength of mutual promises...supposedly was powerful enough to 'enact, constitute, and frame' all necessary laws and instruments of government.³⁸

This passage testifies to Arendt's conviction, expressed in various essays, that although traditional sources of stability and authority are no longer viable, political action itself—in this case, the practice of constitution-making—can be the guarantor of its own authority. It is in the very act of “joining themselves together for the purpose of action,” by “binding “themselves through promises, covenants, and mutual pledges,” that the men of the revolution created a post-traditional source of authority that ought to have been enough to bestow validity and legitimacy upon the new republic. In short, the act of promising itself, without reference to conditions or effects, intentions or consequences, is the source of its own authority. On this understanding, appeals to extra-political sources of authority—whether it be the self-evidence of certain truths, unchanging natural laws, or God, grasped as the creator of these laws—can only testify either to a lack of nerve or a failure to grasp the power inherent in the performance itself. But as I suggested earlier, this optimistic sense that promising can provide its own authorization fails to take seriously the vicious circle that attaches to all such inaugural and foundational promises. Namely, the people lack the authority to sign until they have already signed; prior to the signing, they are not yet a people, not yet the “We” in whose name the document claims its authority. The “We” of the Declaration does not, and cannot, yet exist at the point of its invocation, since it is only the Declaration itself that first constitutes the multitude (of private selves) as a people. Thus, as Jacques Derrida has argued, “the signer can only authorize him or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end, if one can say this, of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity.”³⁹ For Derrida, who Honig cites as a corrective to Arendt's one-sided position, it is precisely this circle, where those promising lack the authority to promise until they have promised, that underlies and necessitates the appeal to a (constative) ground that transcends the promising activity. As Honig explains:

...the American founders' invocation of the name of the laws of nature and the name of God manifests this predicament. They appealed to a constative, according to Derrida, not, as Arendt would have it, because of a failure of nerve or because, as Arendt would have it, because they underestimated the power of their own performative but because they did not overestimate its power. To guarantee that

³⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 167.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” *New Political Science* 15 (1986): 10.

power and secure their innovation, they had to combine their performative with a constative utterance.⁴⁰

Or as Derrida puts the point:

‘God’ comes, in effect, to guarantee the rectitude of popular intentions, the unity and goodness of the people. He founds natural laws and thus the whole game which tends to present performative utterances as constative utterances.⁴¹

The upshot of Honig’s intervention is to qualify Arendt’s own emphasis on the ‘extraordinary’ character of action, and more specifically, in this case, the (redemptive) actions of promising and forgiving. She suggests that if the argument for action’s redemptive power hinges on an overly optimistic claim for action’s radical interruption and transcendence, or for what might be called its performative purity, then this redemption will always fall short of the mark. This is because, as shown in the case of the Declaration of Independence, even those promises that take note of the power potential invested in the very act of promising (“We hold”) have no alternative—if they wish to be effective, if they are to work—but to introduce a source beyond the promise, an “ultimate signature,” to close the circle introduced above. God

...is the name, the best one, for this last instance and this ultimate signature; that is, ‘God’ is the name Derrida gives to whatever is used to hold the place of this last instance, the place that is the inevitable aporia of founding (or signing or promising).⁴²

To be sure, we must not overemphasize the difference that has emerged between Arendt’s position (as presented by Gottlieb) and Derrida’s (as presented by Honig). Both thinkers are very aware of the aporia that attaches to foundation and to every attempt to found or authorize action by reference to its own activity (Arendt treats the aporia at length in her illuminating discussion of Sieyes in *On Revolution*⁴³). The difference, as Honig herself recognizes, lies in Arendt’s belief that this aporia, this “gap that marks all performatives,”⁴⁴ *can and should remain open*. Indeed, it is the preservation of such an openness, the refusal to have recourse to constative solutions, to inarguable last instances (whether it be God, language, subjectivity, tradition, etc.), that is the correlate of what Gottlieb called “praise.” What was praised was precisely the radical conditionality of action, and more specifically, the

⁴⁰ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politic*, 105.

⁴¹ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 12. (Cited by Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politic*, 105).

⁴² Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politic*, 105-6.

⁴³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 183-84.

⁴⁴ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politic*, 106.

refusal to foreclose this conditionality by reference to “saving solutions.” For Derrida, by contrast, the gap or circle that characterizes all performative utterances, including promising and forgiving, is in every case closed (whether we acknowledge it or not) by reference to some constative utterance, some transcendent (i.e., non-negotiable) truth. Contrary to Arendt’s supposition, no promise possesses resources adequate to guarantee itself, to authorize itself; it always stands in need of some external illegitimate guarantee in order to work, in order to inscribe itself in the system of effects that pre-exists and survives the promise. This means, again contrary to Arendt’s view, that there is a necessary violence attached to all performative utterances, since they must have recourse to an external guarantor (a signification beyond the act of speaking) to establish their authority and secure their effects. This violence is a risk that cannot be avoided (the alternative would be to avoid entering into covenants at all) and it goes hand in hand with what Derrida will describe as the ultimate undecidability between the performative and constative dimensions of language (in the case of a performative utterance like the “We hold” of the Declaration, it is finally impossible to decide whether the ‘we’ is supposed or produced by the utterance).

For our purposes, it is not necessary to enter further into the implications of the undecidability that has come to light. What matters is the skeptical note introduced in relation to action’s aporia. If Honig and Derrida are correct and action cannot fulfill its redemptive vocation (to introduce something new and unprecedented) without illicit recourse to an external anchor or guarantee—that is to say, without violence—then Gottlieb’s “transcendental praise” or “praise for the conditions of the possibility of action”⁴⁵ might inadvertently amount to a praise of violence. But is there some more appropriate posture that one might adopt vis-à-vis the messianic strains in Arendt’s theory? More specifically, does action possess internal resources to respond not only to the irreversibility and unpredictability singled out in *The Human Condition*, but to the still more radical contingency that finds expression in action’s *undecidability*?⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, 187.

⁴⁶ While irreversibility and unpredictability are functions of the “web of relations” into which all action is inserted, the undecidability of action belongs to the performance itself, with its unavoidable combination of performative and constative dimensions. In the section titled “The Frailty of Human Affairs” from *The Human Condition*, Arendt does focus almost exclusively on the two privileged “frustrations” or “deficiencies” of action, but she nowhere claims that the contingency of action is exhausted by reference to them, and the discussion of the aporia of foundation in *On Revolution* clearly carries implications for all performative utterances, for all promises, and not only for explicitly foundational covenants.

3. Rosenzweig's Miracle and the Afterlife of Action

In these concluding remarks, I can only point towards a possible direction for future thinking in this area. In my introductory remarks, I suggested that we might find an unexpected precursor to Arendt's theory in the work of the great Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig. Interestingly, Gottlieb remarks on this same possibility. In a footnote to her chapter titled 'Arendt's Messianism', she observes:

...although it has never been recognized, the structure of this work [*The Human Condition*] resembles nothing so much as Franz Rosenzweig's *Der Stern der Erlösung*...Rosenzweig develops an account of creation (world), revelation (God) and redemption (human being) that bears a striking, and as yet completely unexplored, resemblance to Arendt's account of labor, work, and action.⁴⁷

In my view, Gottlieb has rightly identified an important structural similarity, but it is precisely Arendt's identification of the miracle of action with its radical interruption of the natural order (a decision that Gottlieb leaves unproblematic) that has prevented this structural affinity from coming to light. For Rosenzweig, it is not revelation's interruption or contravention of the natural order that constitutes it as a miracle; rather, what is miraculous is the fact that revelation is *predicted* or *promised*, and that it is now *fulfilling* that promise, thereby serving as a sign of divine providence. As Rosenzweig writes:

[F]or us today, miracle seems to need the backdrop of natural laws, for it is only against this that it stands out as it were as a miracle...but for human consciousness at that time [prior to the rise of historicism and its radical challenge to the transmissibility of witnessed truths] the miraculous character of miracle rested on a completely different context: not on its divergence as regards the course of nature predetermined by laws, but on the fact that it was predicted.⁴⁸

Without entering into Rosenzweig's complex confrontation with historicism and his larger attempt to rethink the possibility of miracles for an explicitly post-Enlightenment theology, it is clear that for him it is not as a manifestation of divine power, but as a sign of divine providence (and thus a point of future orientation for the community of faithful interpreters) that revelation can be called miraculous. Commentators have regularly remarked on this semiotic sense of the miracle in Rosenzweig, its character as a sign that invites interpretation and whose meaning is never simply given, but is verified, each time anew, in the interpretive efforts of those who receive it. Here we should distinguish three important and related

⁴⁷ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 254, n. 35.

⁴⁸ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 104.

features of revelation, as grasped by Rosenzweig: its non-givenness (the absence of propositional content), its ephemerality or fleetingness (it immediately runs off into an immemorial past), and its constitutive remainder (its irreducibility to law). All three features find resonances in Arendt's thought of action as a redemptive activity.

First, according to Rosenzweig, revelation, by which God reveals His own self to man, must be qualitatively different from anything and everything in our world and in our experience. For this reason, revelation cannot be given in the form of positive propositions (or constative utterances). A recent commentator has nicely summarized the point: "If revelation were a propositional dispensation of factual information, God's nature would become part of the body of propositional knowledge that makes up human knowledge about the world. God would become part of the created order and not distinct from it. *In shifting from an understanding of revelation as fact to an understanding of revelation as act, the transcendence of God is protected.*"⁴⁹ Grasped as "act" and not as "fact," revelation occurs not in the indicative but in the imperative mood, and the only content is the command: "Love me!" But if the radical transcendence of revelation is protected by insisting upon its strictly performative character, this transcendence finds its worldly correlate in the reception, translation, and iteration of the command—not only in the traditional halakhic form of testimony (i.e., positive laws), but in extra-halakhic forms as well. Turning to Arendt, we recall that the meaning of action is never given with the act itself; rather, it awaits its subsequent narration (in stories or histories) and reification (in literary and non-literary monuments). It is true that for Rosenzweig divine love expresses itself in the form of an imperative, whereas for Arendt the miraculous deed takes the form of a promise. But although the performativity of an imperative is importantly different from that of a promise, the parallel remains in force at the level that concerns us. For both Arendt and Rosenzweig the meaning of the revelatory act is not given. It awaits its translation and verification into law or story, and it depends on the latter for its reality and continued existence.

Second, if revelation depends on an interpretive practice for its articulation and endurance, this is because it does not share the same temporality as everyday events. The declaration of love is always ephemeral and fleeting. Rosenzweig makes this point with reference to the experience of the recipient of revelation. The experience of God's loving command is described as "a feeling of...taking refuge in the arms of eternity." But crucially, this is not a feeling that can be reproduced by its recipient. To conceive of revelation as something susceptible to the work of memory is to subjectivize and naturalize it. It is to deny once again the radical alterity and transcendence that distinguishes the command from all positive laws. The recipient of revelation has no option but to testify to his

⁴⁹ Martin Kavka and Randi Rashkover, "A Jewish Modified Divine Command Theory," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 32.2, (June 2004): 397. Italics mine.

experience and await future moments of divine love. Only at the time of the final redemption will this ephemerality of love be definitively overcome. The correlate to this moment in Arendt is her insistence on the radical impermanence of action—whose products are “even less durable and more futile than what we produce for consumption.”⁵⁰ Arendt registers the fleeting character of action in the bilateral relation that obtains between action and work. In her perceptive analysis of this point, Gottlieb points out that while action saves productive man by interrupting the suffocating instrumentalist mentality that constitutes his experience, work can also be said to “save” action: “Without work to transform the fleeting and intangible products of action into ‘the tangibility of things,’ actions would ‘lose their reality and disappear as though they had never been.’”⁵¹ Arendt is referring here to those works—poems, memorials, and histories—that preserve the products of action by transforming them into tangible things. It is only by way of these things—the “objective” order of things subject to petrification, stagnation, and decline—that the deed is actually registered and felt by living human beings. Like Rosenzweig, Arendt takes pains to insist on the fragile and instantaneous character of the revelatory deed, the cost of which is an unavoidable exposure to the transforming violence of work. Invoking the Pauline figure of the “dead letter,” she insists that neither thought nor deed can remain insulated from the process of passage and decay that marks all things, however “spiritual,” of this world:

Reification and materialization, without which no thought can become a tangible thing, is always paid for, and... the price is life itself: it is always the ‘dead letter’ in which the ‘living spirit’ must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again.⁵²

The third trait of Rosenzweig’s revelation is the irreducibility of command (*Gebot*) to positive law (*Gesetz*) and its consequent production, each time anew, of an indissoluble remainder. This feature overlaps with the first two and makes explicit their consequences. In a famous letter written to Martin Buber, Rosenzweig articulates this important distinction:

Thus revelation is certainly not law-giving. It is only this: revelation. The primary content of revelation is revelation itself. ‘He came down’ [on Sinai, cf. Ex. 19:18]—this already concludes the revelation; ‘He spoke’ [Ex. 20:1] is the beginning of interpretation, and certainly ‘I am’ [Ex. 20:2]. But where does this interpretation

⁵⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 95.

⁵¹ Gottlieb, *Regions of Sorrow*, 145.

⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 169.

stop being legitimate? I would never dare to state this in a general sentence; here commences the right of experience to give testimony, positive and negative.⁵³

Rosenzweig's insistence that revelation can only be expressed in the form of a loving command, and that this commandment, while given in the imperative mood, is strictly irreducible to law, implies, as we have seen, that revelation requires interpretation. It is the human community "who changes the commandments into law, a legal system with paragraphs."⁵⁴ The passage from commandment to law, from poetry (the Word) to prose (paragraphs), involves, for Rosenzweig, a testimony and "translation" that is publicized and enacted through ordinary and everyday acts of "neighbor-love." It is by way of such acts that the stranger first becomes neighbor, and it is in terms of these discrete worldly enactments that the extraordinary is implicated in the everyday, and the future is constituted as a mode of (ethical) response. If we now consider possible echoes in Arendt's work, what matters is not the doctrine of neighbor-love (Arendt would likely see here the same eclipsing of politics by ethics, of plurality by the I-Thou relation, that she came to criticize in the work of her friend and teacher, Karl Jaspers).⁵⁵ Rather, it is the manner in which Rosenzweig cuts across the distinction between extraordinary and ordinary, between the absolutely transcendent command and its worldly enactment as law that can be brought to bear on Arendt's theory of action. Unlike the first two features, this feature of Rosenzweig's doctrine of revelation does not find a strict correlate in Arendt's theory of action. Rather, it may serve as an urgent reminder to readers of Arendt's work that her own periodic emphasis on the extraordinary, interruptive, and inaugural character of action must be tempered by her own, equally important, insistence on the afterlife of the deed, on its "resurrection" in the commemorative works of storytellers, poets, and historians. Just as importantly—since the distinction between extraordinary and ordinary is here lodged within action itself and is not relieved by reference to works—it may remind readers of Arendt's later work (*On Revolution*) that the inaugural power of the great deed, its establishment and authorization of a "We," must always give rise to a remainder: "We" are never as unified or as symbolically secure as we take ourselves to be. "We" remains a promise, an open possibility, precisely because it cannot help but generate a remainder (in this case, the multitude whose transformation into the people—or in Rosenzweig's language, the "stranger" whose transformation into the "neighbor"—cannot be accomplished without reference to an extra-political anchor: God). And this, finally, is how we ought to

⁵³ Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2002), 118.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁵ See her 1954 essay, "Concern with Politics in Recent European Thought" in *Hannah Arendt: Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn, especially 431-446 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, 1994).

understand the co-existence, in Arendt's work, of promising and forgiving. Promising can never be wholly independent; it can never authorize itself, if only because it always supposes a prior act of forgiveness. It is not only the accidental and unpredictable effects of promising that call forth an act of forgiveness. Just as importantly (and perhaps this is why, as Gottlieb notes, forgiving precedes promising in Arendt's text), it is the undecidability of action itself and the violence and arbitrariness by which this latter is concretely resolved in political life that must be forgiven. Only thereby are we freed by action for further action, and only thereby can the miracle of action become an ordinary occurrence in our everyday lives.

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