

How did she Forgive Heidegger? Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Forgiveness

In the book *Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954, Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, a short piece from Hannah Arendt's personal thought journal writes:

Once upon a time there was a fox who was so lacking in slyness that he not only kept getting caught in traps but couldn't even tell the difference between a trap and a non-trap (1994a: 361).

She continues, “obviously... this trap did not reveal itself clearly enough as the trap it was!” (1994a: 362). This piece, entitled ‘Heidegger the Fox’, arguably makes metaphoric reference to Martin Heidegger’s stint with National Socialism. His ‘flirtation’ with National Socialism has been the topic of keen scholarly interest for over fifty years. This controversy has been debated, hotly contested and some details refuted (e.g. Chytry, 1993; Collins, 2000; Farías, 1989; Pavel, 1988; Rockmore, 1997; Thomson, 2008). Revelations of Arendt and Heidegger’s love affair – she, as a young German-Jewess, and he, a later proponent of Nazism – certainly added kindle to this flame of interest (Arendt and Heidegger, 2004; Ettinger, 1995; B. Maier-Katkin and Maier-Katkin, 2007; D. Maier-Katkin, 2010; Young-Bruehl, 2004). Heidegger did not apologise for his actions, yet Arendt seemed to maintain a level of respect and admiration for both the man and his philosophies after their ‘reunion’ of sorts in 1949 (Canovan, 1995: 255; Young-Bruehl, 2004: 246). How can we make sense of this? In some senses, Heidegger is presented as a “legendary founder of philosophy who, in a much publicized incident, fell into a well while looking at the stars” (Farías, 1989: x); devoted to the university and his ideas, naïve to the consequences, and representative of the tension between withdrawn philosophical thinking and the active life of politics (Arendt, 1998 [1958], 2005; Canovan, 1995). However, Arendt’s own theoretical work may reveal the kernel of reasoning behind her forgiveness. Her work espouses a ‘remedy’ for the

unpredictability and irreversibility of action, namely in the power of promise and forgiveness. This is further associated with her understanding of the relationship between oneself and others whom share in the public world, that of ‘political friendship’. With these concepts, we may begin to comprehend Arendt’s seeming forgiveness of Heidegger’s actions. In light of Arendt’s theoretical work, this paper debates the question: how did she forgive Heidegger?

The paper begins with a brief biographical sketch of Arendt and Heidegger’s relationship, and what has been labelled ‘the Heidegger Controversy’ in his allegiance with National Socialism. After placing this discussion within its biographical context, Arendt’s theories of action, forgiveness, and ‘political friendship’ are detailed, to frame the discussion of the central question of the paper. Moreover, this attempts to provide conceptual ground for understanding Arendt’s motivations. Later, Heidegger’s actions are contrasted with Arendt’s critique of Adolf Eichmann – the Nazi *SS-Obersturmbannführer*, lieutenant colonel, who was the subject of Arendt’s analysis in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (2006a [1963]), and the embodiment of the ‘banality of evil’. The contrast between Arendt’s positions toward Heidegger and Eichmann highlights a spectrum of actions that – respectively – may and may not be forgiven. The paper concludes with a reflective discussion of the central question, in light of the theoretical framework debated throughout, to shed light on the potential motivations behind Arendt’s forgiveness of Heidegger.

To appreciate the motivations behind Arendt’s forgiveness, we must place the event and their relationship within its biographical context. Arendt was a university student between the years of 1924-1929, beginning at the University of Marburg, Germany in the eighteenth year of her life. There, she attended philosophy courses taught by Martin Heidegger, who at the time was working through the ideas that would later develop into his magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1996 [1927]). “When Hannah Arendt encountered Martin Heidegger everything changed”, yet their love affair remained secret for much of their lives

(Young-Bruehl, 2004: 49; their letters were published posthumously: Arendt and Heidegger, 2004). Her love for him “had been isolated and restrained”, kept a close secret because of his marriage and position in the university. Heidegger later remarked of 1923-1928 as his “most stimulating, composed, eventful period”, and privately professed to Arendt that she was the “impetus to his passionate thinking” (Young-Bruehl, 2004: 50). Until Arendt finished her dissertation and moved to Berlin in 1929, she would leave her work, friends, and all obligations to meet with him. But, “by the early 1930s, Heidegger’s fascination with National Socialism became decisively between them” (Young-Bruehl, 2004: 69).

The crux of the ‘Heidegger controversy’ is as follows. Heidegger grew up in an agricultural village and remained committed to pre-industrial, pastoral values across his life. Similarly against modernization and for the ‘renewal’ of conservative German culture, Heidegger joined the National Socialist party in 1933, which coincided with his election to Rector of the University of Freiburg (Farías, 1989: 84). He publically endorsed the movement in his inaugural address, ‘The Self-Determination of the German University’, seemingly aligning his philosophies to that of the political party (Farías, 1989; Thomson, 2008). In this, he cryptically discusses the ‘will’ of the ‘historical-spiritual’ people of Germany, and cited the ‘inner truth and greatness’ of National Socialism (Collins, 2000; Farías, 1989; Heidegger, 2011). Heidegger left his position as Rector in April of 1934 and ceased attending party meetings, yet remained a member of the National Socialist party until it was dissolved after the close of the War. Heidegger did not actively or publically justify his actions in his lifetime. Rather, he addressed these questions in an interview with *Der Spiegel* magazine in 1966, which he ‘diligently’ edited and permitted to be published only after his demise (Collins, 2000; Farías, 1989; Heidegger, 2011 [1976]; Lang, 1996).

Arendt terminated her association with Heidegger upon his enrolment in the Nazi Party in 1933. In the same year, Arendt was exiled from Germany, seeking refuge in France.

There, Arendt was captured and interned in a camp to be deported back to Germany as an ‘illegal alien’ after her German citizenship was revoked in 1937 (Young-Bruehl, 2004). She escaped the camp and sought refuge in the United States of America in 1941. She later remarked of the period, that “the problem... was not what our enemies might be doing, but what our friends were doing” (Arendt, 1994c: 10–11). The two reignited their friendship fifteen years later in 1949, and remained in contact this way throughout their lives.

How may we conceptualise Arendt’s forgiveness of Heidegger? Traces of her reasons may indeed lie within her own theoretical work. Namely, in her theories of action, forgiveness, promise, and political friendship. Action is “the aspect of the human condition out of which politics arises” (Canovan, 1995: 130). More specifically, action is the dynamic and spontaneous capacity of human beings to initiate something new in the world (Arendt, 1961, 1998, 2006b [1963], 2007a). Action is a manifold concept in Arendt’s work, much of which extends beyond the purposes of this paper. Significant here is the self-disclosing or self-forming aspects of action, its unpredictability and irreversibility.

‘Action’ as a concept comprises both speech and acts, as the doing of ‘words and deeds’ (Arendt, 1998). Through speech and action, actors reveal the “unique distinctness” of their selves to others, to realise plurality (Arendt, 1998: 176). Plurality is the human condition that facilitates both politics and action; that one lives among others in the world who are different in opinion and individuality, yet are all nonetheless equal. Action and speech are possible because of the differences between people. In this sheer difference of everyone ever born into the world, an infinite potential of new actions is made possible. In this way, the world is “daily renewed through birth and is constantly dragged into what is unpredictably new by the spontaneity of each arrival” (Arendt, 2007a: 127). In speech and action, actors engage in self- and world-disclosure. People simultaneously disclose their unique personality, their ideas, and the ‘who’ of their being to others in the world, whilst disclosing their view of

the world to others in speech. This 'who' is typified in one's qualities, talents, gifts and shortcomings; though often unnoticed by the person themselves, these qualities shine forth through action, "implicit in everything somebody says and does" (Arendt, 1998: 179). In revealing one's personal and worldly narrative to others, one's qualities of self and identity are formed and shaped.

Action in concert is the basis of political life and change, but Arendt warns that action is inherently unpredictable and potentially boundless. It marks the initiation of something new by forging into appearance a chain of processes and potential re-actions by others in the world. Action, in this way, has "an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries" (Arendt, 1998: 190). Radically unpredictable, the impacts and effects of the act cannot be controlled by the actor after the deed. The acts become entangled in others' responses and reactions afterward, which in turn flow on to other actors which continue further responses and actions, in a "chain reaction where every process is the cause of new processes" (Arendt, 1998: 190). Even "the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation" (Arendt, 1998: 190).

The mode of being with others in the world that facilitates action is that of 'political friendship', in contradistinction to love or passionate nationalism. Derived from Aristotle and the theology of Saint Augustine, friendship in the political sense refers to "an orientation between citizens who, even without intimate or personal knowledge, still treat each other as equals", and "are willing to act on the basis of their mutual regard" (Mallory, 2012: 24). Passionate love, on the contrary, is *not* the basis for public or political community in Arendt's view. Rather, love is inherently anti-political: "love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that is it not only apolitical but antipolitical" (1998: 242). Empathy, passion and sympathy are not of the world but of the heart. The interest beneath

them is not one of the shared public world that lies between them, but of subjective and private cares of the heart and soul. Contrariwise, political friendship is a kind of care as the basis of community; actions are judged and decisions made for the best interest of one's neighbours and the community writ large, rather than interests of the heart. This consideration of friendship "manifests itself in a readiness to share the world with other men" (Arendt, 1968: 25). This mode of equality acknowledges and appreciates, rather than represses, plurality and difference. Moreover, such a relationship between members of the public emphasises respect instead of compassion.

Arendt's conception of 'promise' is drawn from the ancient Roman legal system. Promises stabilise the otherwise unpredictable world of human affairs. The Roman notion of contract exemplified a community in which its people were bound together, based on reciprocity, equality and an alliance founded on associational promises, or laws (Arendt, 2006b: 161–163). All of socio-political life "is, and always has been, transacted within an elaborate framework of ties and bonds for the future", which include laws, constitutions, alliances and treaties. Each of these are derived "from the faculty to promise and to keep promises in the face of the essential uncertainties of the future" (Arendt, 2006b: 162). While the socio-political world is a constant across history, it is nonetheless prone to significant change, as a result of the human capacity of action. The spontaneity inherent in this capacity for action means that as others act, the re-actions of others have a manifold potential for initiating additional series of actions; in contradistinction to procedural rationality, there is no expectable 'end' of human actions (Arendt, 1998, 2006c, 2007a). The power of the promise combats the volatility and fragility of the world, and regulates the unpredictability of action. In this way, it stabilises the "basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow" (Arendt, 1998: 244).

In turn, forgiveness acts as “one of the remedies for the vagaries of human action” (La Caze, 2011: 152). Much of Arendt’s own words have been used here to emphasize her significance toward forgiveness and, from this, consider her potential reasoning toward Heidegger vis-à-vis the intentions of this paper. Arendt asserts that in action, we are largely unaware of the multifarious potential consequences of our actions, the impacts upon others, and reactions by others. Hence the ‘power of the promise’, in stabilising this potential unpredictability. Furthermore, once an act is performed or spoken in the world and to others, it cannot be taken back; action in this way is irreversible. She writes,

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 known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving... forgiving serves to undo the deeds of the past (Arendt, 1998: 237).

In Arendt’s opinion, Jesus of Nazareth unveiled the potential of forgiveness. Jesus’s insights demonstrated that “in action we never know what we are doing (Luke 23:34)”, and moreover, “that, since we cannot stop acting as long as we live, we must never stop forgiving either (Luke 17:3-4)” (Arendt, 2007b: 57). Mistakes, unavoidable errors and unintended actions do happen across our lives. Without forgiveness, “our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we would never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever” (Arendt, 1998: 237).

The undoing of what was done via forgiveness similarly reinforces the self-revelatory and self-shaping quality of the act itself. Put another way, in forgiveness a relationship is engendered between the actors “in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it” (Arendt, 1998: 241; emphasis in original). Returning to the aforementioned view of political friendship as the form of relationship in the world, in contrast to love in the private sphere, forgiveness entails a regard and respect for the person. This is for Arendt enough to

warrant the forgiveness of action, “for the sake of the person” (1998: 243). While promises attempt to regulate human actions, forgiveness of unintended actions in this way “releases us and others from the chain and pattern of consequences that all action engenders” (Arendt, 2007b: 59). The act of forgiveness, in contrast to vengeance, simultaneously halts this chain of reactions, whilst succeeding to enable a new beginning as a result of this end (La Caze, 2011).

From the above, we can evince in Arendt’s theory an appreciation of the freeing aspects of forgiveness. Whereas promises normalize action, the spontaneity inherent in the human capacity for action means action and potential reactions are also inherently unpredictable. Once a deed is done, it cannot be taken back; hence the power of forgiveness in reversing this irreversibility for the actor and those whom surround them in the community.

However, in Arendt’s thought we may witness a scale of sorts for the ‘forgivability’ or ‘unforgivability’ of action. At one end of the spectrum are arguably miscalculated or erroneous acts, such as that of Heidegger. Arendt remarked in an interview in 1964 that the citizens of Germany at the beginning of the Third Reich were generally “only people who were committed to Nazism for a few months, at the worst for a few years; neither murderers nor informers. People, as I said, who ‘made up ideas’ about Hitler” (1994c: 14).¹ On the other end, as a lieutenant colonel of the *Schutzstaffel*, Eichmann’s actions were deemed by Arendt as more significant, deliberate and unforgivable (Arendt, 2006a). Eichmann maintained that he was merely ‘following orders’, as he claimed “the responsibility and the guilt lay with the political leadership: his flaw was unflinching obedience... what he had done was normal... he had never killed anyone” (Cesarani, 2005: 313). His role was, in Arendt’s view, akin to a bureaucrat, seeking efficiency and the achievement of projected ends. This is what made his evil so particularly banal. In his obedience of orders, Eichmann demonstrated a sheer

incapacity to think, and a “failure to understand himself as a responsible political agent” (Norberg, 2010: 75). While he was found not guilty of killing anyone personally, he was judged as responsible for the obtainment and deportation of Jews and other groups to the death camps (Arendt, 2006a; Benhabib, 2000; Cesarani, 2005). His thoughtlessness as an actor, despite awareness of the events of the Holocaust, deemed his actions – or rather his *in-action* – utterly unforgivable (Arendt, 2006a).

Where does this leave us in relation to Heidegger’s actions? Arendt stated in the same interview noted above, that “they [the German citizens] were not all murderers. They were people who fell into their own trap” (Arendt, 1994c: 14); much like the fox described by Arendt at the opening of this paper. Thoughtlessness aside, there is a fundamental difference between the actions of Heidegger and Eichmann which grounds the act of forgiveness. Eichmann and those like him were intentionally aware of their actions and their consequences, whether he literally slayed anyone or not. In his bureaucratic role, the ends of Eichmann’s actions were determined; he fulfilled them without thought to the depth of the consequences. In reading Arendt’s position on his actions, Heidegger lacked the common sense necessary for political life and action because of his withdrawnness from the world in thought as a philosopher (Arendt, 1971; Canovan, 1995). His actions were not procedural, but occurred more spontaneously, with unpredictable and irreversible outcomes. In essence, his acts were erroneous, but their consequences were of limited depth in contrast to those unforgivable acts committed by Eichmann. Following Arendt’s conceptualization of action and forgiveness, we can appreciate her motivations toward Heidegger’s arguably thoughtless actions in his entrance into political life. Care in the form of political friendship, not love, potentially motivated Arendt’s actions, to return Heidegger to the community and release him from his irreversible and mistaken deeds.

However, further questions are raised vis-à-vis Arendt's theory of forgiveness and the lack of an explicit account on the part of Heidegger during his lifetime. His interview with *Der Spiegel* does address the charges against his actions. However, more recent publications have raised further questions as to the authenticity of his account (see Löwith, 1993; Oltermann, 2014; Schuessler, 2014; Wolin, 1993), and further, the fact of the interview's posthumous publication and his apparent avoidance of these issues during his lifetime complicate our understanding of his deeds. The specifics of Heidegger aside, we are left to ponder whether a lack of acknowledgement by an actor of their deeds is required for forgiveness. Put another way, without acknowledgement of the deed by the actor, can one be wholly forgiven? Arendt argues that forgiveness is undertaken by others for the sake of the 'who' of the actor. Yet forgiveness commonly implies an acknowledgement of mistakes or wrong-doing by the actor themselves. This, in turn, raises further questions in regards to responsibility, an awareness of our actions, and our relationships with others in the world. While we may be able to understand the motivations behind Arendt's forgiveness toward Heidegger via her own theoretical work, questions may forever remain as to the personal reasons behind her act of forgiveness, and, moreover, of the depth of Heidegger's controversial flirtations.

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¹ The intent behind Heidegger's 'flirtations' with Nazism have been hotly debated in the literature, with some avidly defending Heidegger's innocence, and others condemning his actions. While Heidegger maintained in the *Der Spiegel* interview that the allegations against him were slanderous, the recent publication of his personal 'black notebooks' in Germany (English publication has not, as yet, taken place) have raised fresh questions of the depth of his anti-Semitism. See Oltermann (2014) and Schuessler (2014) for discussion of the reception of the publication of the Notebooks in Germany.