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Bearing Logs on Our Shoulders:

Reconciliation, Non-Reconciliation, and the Building of a Common World

Roger Berkowitz

Abstract

On her first return visit to Germany in 1950, Hannah Arendt went walking in the Black Forest with Martin Heidegger. They discussed revenge, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Upon her return to New York, Arendt began her diary of thoughts, her *Denktagebuch*. The first seven pages of Arendt's *Denktagebuch* argue that reconciliation—and not revenge or forgiveness—is an essential example of political judgment. The connection between reconciliation and judgment means that only reconciliation, and not revenge or forgiveness, can respond to wrongs in a way that fosters the political project of building and preserving a common world. This essay argues that the question—"Ought I to reconcile myself to the world?"—is, for Arendt, the pressing political question of our age.

1. In June of 1950, Hannah Arendt put pen to paper and—in the middle of a notebook strewn with poems, stories, and notes from her last 8 years—began what would become the deliberate, daily record of her thoughts, her *Denktagebuch*. This diary, which she would continue writing for the next quarter century until the end of her life, begins:

"Das *Unrechte*, das man getan hat, ist die Last auf den Schultern, etwas, was man trägt, weil man es sich aufgeladen hat."

(Arendt, *Denktagebuch*, 3)

The wrong that one has done is the burden on one's shoulders, something that one bears because he has laden it upon himself.

That Arendt would initiate her book of thoughts with a meditation on the burden of past wrongs is not surprising. After all, she had recently finished the manuscript for *The Origins of Totalitarianism*—originally entitled *The Burden of Our Times*—which explored not simply the elements of totalitarianism, but more importantly the burden that such a past, a recent past, places on people in the present day: to comprehend and come to terms with what men had done as well as to acknowledge what any of us is capable of doing again. It is this burden that we bear on our shoulders.

The question of how to respond to the burden of wrongful deeds is woven through Arendt's writing. In *The Human Condition*, she argues that forgiveness is the only reaction to wrongs that can free both "the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven" from the burdens of a wrongful act. By freeing persons from the responsibility for what they have done, forgiveness is one essential

precondition for politics and a necessary part of any response to the problem of wrongdoing. (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241)

Later, in her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Arendt refuses to forgive Eichmann his wrongs. In her judgment she turns, at times, to the language of revenge, invoking the ancient idea of a metaphysical balance that must be restored. Modern jurisprudence rejects revenge as a justification for punishment. And yet, Arendt writes: "I think it is undeniable that it was precisely on the ground of these long-forgotten propositions [namely, that great crimes offend nature and demand vengeance] that Eichmann was brought to justice to begin with, and that they were, in fact, the supreme justification for the death penalty." (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 277)

Above all in her discussion of Eichmann, Arendt asks whether one should or should not reconcile with past wrongs. Judgment demands not a verdict on Eichmann's essential goodness or badness, but rather a determination whether or not to reconcile oneself to the world as it is with Eichmann in it. Famously, Arendt judges that such a world is irreconcilable with human plurality and human dignity. Thus, she decides, Eichmann must disappear from the world.

Arendt's imagined judgment of Adolf Eichmann and his wrongs as irreconcilable focuses the diverse strands of her political thought on the specific problem of judgment. Arendt understood judging as the core human faculty for making sense of the world. Judgments, she writes building upon Kant, "'woo the consent of everyone else' in the hope of coming to an agreement with him eventually." (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 222) Since judging acts to form common stories and meanings in the public world, judging is the core of political action. As George Kateb characterizes it, "judging is essential to comprehending political events when they are novel, whether atrocious or creative, and in need of unfamiliar conceptualization." (Kateb, *Fiction as Poison*, 34) It is in judgment that we make sense of what is new, challenging, and horrible in our world. In judging, we act to make and remake our understanding of our world. The act of judging, therefore, creates our common world.

2. Arendt's judgment not to reconcile with Eichmann rests on her conviction that judging Eichmann's deeds to be irreconcilable was necessary to affirm our common sense belief in judgment itself. As she argued in the wake of the controversy following *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, our world suffers from a crisis of judgment rooted in a "widespread fear of judging." (Arendt, *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*, 19) Reflecting upon the anger caused by her own judgment of the *Judenräte*, Arendt was struck by the fear and anger that judging others provoked. She worried about the fear of judgment underlying the uproar against Rolf Hochhuth's play, *The Deputy*, which accused Pope Pius XII of silence in the face of the Holocaust. And she chafed at the outpouring of angry letters accusing scholar Hans Morgenthau of un-Christian hubris for pointing out in *The New York Times Magazine* that Charles Van Doren was wrong to cheat on the quiz show "Twenty One." In each case, Arendt was struck by the "huge outcry the moment anyone fixes specific blame on some particular person instead of blaming all deeds or events on historical trends or dialectical movements." (*Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*, 19-20) Instead of judging the wrongdoers, the people judged those who had the temerity to judge.

We see this fear of judging in social issues like euthanasia, where what was once considered deeply wrong is now often justified as a lesser evil to the pain of a slow death. (Lavi, *Modern Art of Dying*.) We see the fear of judging in mandatory sentence legislation that takes from judges their power to judge. The failure to judge is also evident in our unwillingness to prosecute those who have broken the law prohibiting torture. And those of us in the academic world are witness to the fear of judging in the rampant inflation of grades, a reflection of the increasing unwillingness of professors to evaluate student work honestly. (Berkowitz, *Why We Must Judge*)

It is in response to the fearful loss of judgment that Arendt offers her imagined judgment of Eichmann in the final pages of her epilogue. At a time when religion and tradition no longer buttress universal or public claims to truth, acts of judgment claim that we all must agree that this bad thing was wrong and it must be punished. It is in judgment that we singularly and together make sense of what is new, challenging, and horrible in our world. As just such an act of judgment, Arendt's own singular, unprecedented, and illegal act of non-reconciliation confronts and resists Eichmann's acts, thereby denying them even the normalcy of recognition and precedent accorded by legal punishment.

3. The foundations for Arendt's judgment of Eichmann as well as her thinking about judgment more broadly are laid out, in gestational form, in her engagement with the question of reconciliation in her *Denktagebuch*. The judgment of a wrong, as Arendt presents it there, in 1950, involves neither revenge on the wrongdoer's sinful nature nor forgiveness of that sinful nature. Both revenge and forgiveness are wrapped up in the moral universe of human sinfulness and are, Arendt writes, incapable of judgment. Instead, she counsels reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the only response to a wrong that makes a space for human judgment and human action. As an act of political judgment, only "reconciliation posits a new concept of solidarity" in response to the act that has sundered the body politic. (*Denktagebuch*, 6) While revenge and forgiveness "can surely punish," they both "cannot properly judge." Only reconciliation, she writes, "presupposes judgment." (*Denktagebuch*, 7) The connection between reconciliation and judgment means that reconciliation, and not revenge or forgiveness, can respond to wrongs in a way that fosters the political project of building and preserving a common world.

At the same time as she explores the power of judgment in the act of reconciliation, Arendt also recognizes the power of non-reconciliation. Non-reconciliation too is a political judgment that promises to build the kind of solidarity that might fashion a common world that is the prerequisite for human life. In the judgment of non-reconciliation there is the claim that "This *ought* never to have happened." What is radically evil, she writes, is what "one cannot reconcile himself to and that about which one ought also to neither be silent about or to pass by." (*Denktagebuch*, 7) Since such acts cannot be forgiven and are beyond any meaningful punishment, they are simply beyond reconciliation. The judgment of non-reconciliation rejects the world that harbors such acts and calls for a new world through the denial of the first.

Only the judgment to reconcile or not to reconcile oneself to the world has the power to either confirm a common world or to bring about a revolutionary—and thus new—common world. "The Solidarity of reconciliation"—the new common world brought about by an act of reconciliation—is "not the foundation of reconciliation..., but rather the product [of reconciliation.]" (*Denktagebuch*, 6) It is this power of reconciliation to confirm and to inaugurate a common world that defines its central political importance in Arendt's thought.

4. Surprisingly little attention has been given to Arendt's thematization of reconciliation. Elizabeth Young-Bruehl notes briefly that Arendt spoke of "reconciliation as one of thinking's gifts." She cites an answer Arendt offered in Toronto at a 1972 conference on her work in which Arendt said: "reconciliation of man as a thinking and reasonable being, this is what actually happens in the world." (Young-Bruehl, *For Love of the World*, 440) But Young-Bruehl does not continue this train of thought and it has been largely neglected by Arendt scholars.¹

The one exception remains George Kateb, who saw that reconciliation was at the very heart of Arendt's thinking about political action. "One measure of the greatness of politics," Kateb writes, is that politics is, "far more than any other human activity, implicated in the hope that each person can be reconciled to his own life." (Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*, 165) In Kateb's brief albeit powerful account, reconciliation is Arendt's necessary political response to the alienation and resentment that mark our

times. The grave danger of the modern world is that we humans will resent our finitude—our moral, political, and personal limitations and weaknesses—and strive to cure ourselves of human weakness with the aid of science and technology. The dream to perfect the earth and ourselves is, as Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*, "the wish to escape the human condition." The dream is a "rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking)." (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2-3) For Arendt, such a dream is the "origin" of totalitarianism. In seeking to flee our finite fragility we yearn for the certainty, consistency, and perfection that denies the very plurality and contingency that make us human. Against the nightmarish dream of human perfection, Arendt counsels reconciliation to the world as it is. What reconciliation offers is the acceptance of contingency, limitation, and plurality and thus an escape from the alienation and resentment that are the driving forces of the totalitarian solution for homelessness, worldlessness, and rootlessness. Reconciliation to the world as it is given, Kateb argues, is the quasi-religious aspiration of Arendtian politics.

In this essay, I build upon Kateb's insight and argue that reconciliation and also non-reconciliation—both conceived as political judgments—are the great and necessary political acts of our times. Through a reading of Arendt's almost fully overlooked discussion of reconciliation in her recently published *Denktagebuch*, I suggest that reconciliation is, as Kateb suggested, at the very center of Arendt's political thinking. On the one hand, because reconciliation accepts our limited humanity and our imperfect world as our common home, it can, in the judgment to accept the world, constitute and re-constitute the common world in which a plurality of men can be together. On the other hand, because non-reconciliation rejects the existing world as a common world, it makes a claim to constitute and re-constitute a common world that has been lost.

By focusing on Arendt's discussion of *acts* of reconciliation and also of non-reconciliation—her response to her reunion with Martin Heidegger in 1950, her judgment of the impossibility of reconciling oneself to Adolf Eichmann, her account of Jesus' forgiving and not-forgiving of petty and colossal crimes in the Gospel of Luke, and her reconciliation to life after the death of her husband, Heinrich Blücher—I show how Arendt places the judgment for or against reconciliation at the center of political action. Above all, I argue that the question—"Ought I to reconcile myself to the world?"—is, for Arendt, the pressing political question in our age.

5. To enter Arendt's embrace of reconciliation we must ask: Why does Arendt begin her *Denktagebuch* with a seven-page inquiry into the nature of reconciliation? The origin of the *Denktagebuch* dates to July, 1950, just three months after Arendt returned from her first trip to Germany since fleeing the Nazis. On her trip, she stopped in Freiburg and reinitiated contact with Martin Heidegger—her former teacher and lover. Arendt and Heidegger found time for some walks in the woods. We know something about their discussions from the surviving letters that Heidegger sent Arendt shortly after she returned to New York (he destroyed most of her personal correspondence, honoring a mutual pledge that she reneged upon). Their conversations appear to have revolved around two topics. First, they touched upon the question of language. "But you remember: on a walk in the valley, we talked about Language." (Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters*, 88) Second, and more important for present purposes, they explored the sense of reconciliation.

That Arendt must have spoken to Heidegger about her thoughts on reconciliation is suggested by references in Heidegger's letters, which are replete with memories and descriptions of their walk in the valley. On May 6, 1950, Heidegger writes of the lingering impression of her visit and their talks. Along with a series of love poems, he writes a letter in which he observes: "Hannah, reconciliation is rich, but apparently we must wait for a turning point, when the world changes and overcomes the spirit of revenge." (Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters*, 85) Invoking Nietzsche's reflections on revenge and reconciliation in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Heidegger offers wariness about reconciliation, suggesting that redemption from revenge would be very nearly super-human or, as Nietzsche

expressed it, "the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms." (Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 128).

One week later, Heidegger returns to the theme of reconciliation in another letter, one that begins: "Oh you! Most trusted one." He continues: "But you remember: on a walk in a valley, we talked about language. You are right about reconciliation and revenge. I have been thinking about that a great deal. In all this thinking, you are so near." (Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters*, 88) Whether the occasion was political or personal, Arendt's ideas touched Heidegger. Heidegger, in fact, took up the question of revenge a few years later in *What is Called Thinking?* It would not be surprising, therefore, that Arendt would set down her thoughts shortly after her return.

6. After her return to the United States in March, Arendt's *Denktagebuch* does not begin until June. One explanation for that three-month delay may be found in Heidegger's May 6th letter to Arendt, where he writes: "I am happy for you that you are surrounded by your books again. The line with 'the burden of the logs' is in 'Ripe and dipped in Fire'—around the same time you probably wrote it [presumably a lost letter], I had been thinking about the burden of logs." (Arendt and Heidegger, *Letters*, 85) The reference is to a poem "Reif Sind"—"*The Fruits are Ripe*"—by Friedrich Hölderlin. It seems that Arendt and Heidegger had discussed Hölderlin's poem as they strolled the valleys of the Black Forest. And this poem, with its image of the burden of logs that sits upon one's shoulders, appears to have weighed upon Arendt's thoughts. Arendt's opening image of the "Burden on one's shoulders" is clearly indebted to Hölderlin's poem.²

The poetic fragment, "Reif Sind," begins with the image of ripe fruit, dipped and cooked in fire. It is a law, the poet writes, that all earthly beings spoil, and ripe fruits too will pass on to the hills of heaven—all that is will disappear, just as snakes disappear into the crevices of the earth. The opening of the poem evokes disappearance and raises the question of memory. Hölderlin continues:

Und vieles
Wie auf den Schultern eine
Last von Scheitern ist
Zu behalten.

And as
A load of logs upon
The shoulders, there is much
To bear in mind.
(Hölderlin, *Hyperion and Selected Poems*, 274-75)

What, Hölderlin asks, is it to remember, to bear in mind what has gone? The ripe fruits of history will pass; and they, too, like logs loaded on one's shoulders, have a history, of which there is "much/To bear in mind." We must, the poet counsels, bear the burden of remembering the past. Even so, we must also know that in the future, all things pass away.

Hölderlin concludes, however, that we cannot dwell too long on either memory of the past or prophecies of the future: both the paths into the future and into the past "are evil." These paths can fill us with the longing to lose ourselves in other times and other worlds. While there is much to be retained—*Vieles aber ist/Zu behalten*—we must, Hölderlin tells us, move neither forward nor backward, but remain in the cradle of the now.

Vorwärts aber und rückwärts wollen wir
Nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie
Auf schwankem Kahne der See.

But we shall not look forward
Or back. Let ourselves rock, as
On a boat, lapped by the waves.

We must attend to the now and eat the fruit when it is ripe. Yes the fruit grows from the past and yes we must remember the seed and the soil from which the fruit springs. It is also true that the fruit will one day spoil. And yet, ripeness is not to be overlooked in the now. *Reif Sind* stands as one of the great poetic testaments to the tense liveliness of memory for and in life itself.

7. *Reif sind* later became the opening stanza to the third edition of Hölderlin's poetic song "Mnemosyne," a lyrical ode to the Greek Goddess of memory. Memory, Hölderlin writes, weighs on us as logs on our shoulders; we buckle under the pressure of regrets over past deeds and promises made. And yet, a certain fidelity to the past is necessary. Not only is there "much to bear in mind," but also, as Hölderlin writes, "fidelity is necessary" (*Und Noth die Treue*). However dangerous, memory is a goddess that must not be denied.

How, then, ought one remember? At issue in the longer poem is the question of how and what to remember. The second and third verses of *Reif Sind* suggest an answer.

The question of memory is pursued first through its accord with love. "How, however, is love? [*Wie, aber, Liebes?*]" How, in other words, does love come true?³ Love, Hölderlin tells us, happens or does not. When it happens, love is "From far intimating/ The other [*Fernahnend mit/ Dem andern*]." It inaugurates a unity of a plurality, holding together what must also remain distinct. Like memory—which ties the past to the present and the future—love marries discrete things, holds a plurality in its encompassing truth, and binds two into one.

Hölderlin analogizes the unifying powers of love and memory to the wrath of Achilles—invoked in the first line of the third and final verse. As Jochem Schmitt has observed, wrath is one example for Hölderlin of the "moment of identification in tragedy that, as a 'limitless unification' of God and man, inner and outer nature, is to be purified by 'limitless separation.'"⁴ (Schmitt, *Begriff des Zorns*, 157) "Love" in the second verse of "Mnemosyne", "wrath" in the final verse, and "loyalty" in the opening verse, all stand under a "compulsion to achieve such a limitless unification, yet [are] simultaneously characterized by the futility of such striving." (Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning*, 51) Thus love, wrath, and loyalty name the futile striving for the unification of separates, the collecting and bringing together of what otherwise is apart, that is the essential activity of memory.

If Hölderlin points toward the power of memory to gather a plurality into a unity, Martin Heidegger responds that memory is, at least for us today, always fragmentary and incomplete. (Heidegger, *Was Heißt Denken*, 12) It is meaningless; Hölderlin himself saw this, which is why he can write that man is, today, a symbol without meaning, "*Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos.*" Man, as the being who thinks and in thinking gathers together what he recalls, is meaningless when our memories have lost their power of making whole what is split.

What are we symbolically empty men to do in the face of the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the past, the future, and the present? How are we to remember? Hölderlin's answer, given in the poem's final lines, is as dark as it is difficult. He writes:

Himmlische nemlich sind
Unwillig, wenn einer nicht die Seele schonend sich
Zusammengenommen, aber er muß doch; dem
Gleich fehlet die Trauer.

For the gods grow

Indignant if a man
 Will not gather himself to save
 His soul, yet he has no choice; likewise,
 Mourning is in error.

Anselm Haverkamp has offered a compelling reading of these difficult lines. The first image—the gods' anger when man not gather himself in remembrance—refers to one of Hölderlin's touchstones, Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his fifth Reverie, Rousseau writes: "But it is a state where the soul finds a place firm enough for complete repose and can assemble its entire being without having need of recalling the past or glancing to the future." (Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning*, 47) We must, Hölderlin writes, gather ourselves in memory. Indeed, we have no choice. Without memory, without the past (and also without our future), we are lost.

And yet, the poet concludes, much mournful remembering is undertaken in error. These final words have been controversial. Most Hölderlin scholars—both German and English—have read the final line of the poem, "*Gleich fehlet die Trauer*" to say: "mourning is in error." (Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning*, 40-41) The sense, it would seem, is that mourning, and memory, need to be overcome and the past, like the future, must be seen for the false paths that they are. Instead, we are to live in the present.

But in what way, Haverkamp asks, is mourning in error? Only insofar as it is absent. Namely, mourning is in error in the sense that mourning is impossible. Amidst the fragments of modern life, the unifying power of wrath, love, and memory is rendered helpless. We must remember, and yet we cannot, since memory is absent; what we do remember, when we must, will inevitably be in error.

On the one hand, we must remember. Out of loyalty, in love, and with wrath, we need to honor the past. "When friends or heroes die, we need to pull ourselves together and conquer sorrow by creating a record of what happened." (Mitchell, *Poems of Hölderlin*) Yet, at the same time, mourning is erroneous, incomplete, and fragmentary. True memorializing is as absent as Rimbaud's true life (*La vraie vie est ailleurs*). Thus must we reconcile ourselves to the present in our present. We shall not look forward. Nor shall we look back. Instead: "Let ourselves rock, as/ On a boat, lapped by the waves."

Hölderlin's admonition to let ourselves rock like a baby in a cradle on the waves of fate intensifies the poetic image of the load of logs that one must bear upon one's shoulders—the image that opens Arendt's reflections on reconciliation, revenge, and forgiveness. To remember wrongs and carry that burden even as one floats lightly upon the tides of time: in other words, to reconcile oneself to the weight of fate, neither rebelling nor resisting that fate—that is what Hölderlin here counsels in his song of memory.

8. Arendt begins her reflections on reconciliation by equating Hölderlin's "*Last auf den Schultern*" with the wrong one has done: "The wrong that one has done is the burden on one's shoulders, something that one bears because he has laden it upon himself." She opposes the wrong, the "burden on one's shoulders," to the Christian idea of sin, "according to which the wrong arises out of the person." (*Denktagebuch*, 3) The logs—or failings⁵—that, in Hölderlin's rendering the wrongdoer carries upon his shoulders, say nothing about the goodness or evil of his soul. This is the essential first step of Arendt's argument: The wrong is not something internal to the person and thus it does not poison the inner and moral quality of the person. Instead, the burden on one's shoulders is one's fate, what has been given. The acceptance of that fate is what she names reconciliation.⁶

Arendt develops her idea of reconciliation in opposition to forgiveness and revenge. She offers a two-part critique of forgiveness. First, she argues forgiveness is not humanly possible. The

impossibility of forgiveness lies in its claim of absolute superiority. Forgiveness elevates the forgiver above the forgiven and destroys the equality between them so completely that "after such an act no further relationship ought to be possible." (*Denktagebuch*, 3) The superiority that forgiveness demands requires an absolute distinction that is absent in human relations—even the forgiveness of a child by a parent (this despite the "absolute superiority" of the parent) is merely the appearance of forgiveness.⁷ Only God, Arendt writes, can ease your burden. Because I am not a God, I cannot, by forgiving you, ease the burden you carry.

There is, however, a more humanly accessible idea of forgiveness, one predicated on the foundation of original sin. When the forgiver recognizes that "we are all sinners" he claims that everyone, including himself, could have done the wrong done by the wrongdoer. His act of forgiveness, then, is not an assumption of superiority but rather is a claim of equality. If forgiveness is classically an act of divine distinction, modern forgiveness entails a leveling down of all humanity to the level of the most degraded criminal.

As a leveling to a common criminality, forgiveness is like revenge. Just as the forgiver acts out of the recognition that he too could have been guilty, so does the avenger act because he recognizes that he can do to the wrongdoer the same that the wrongdoer has done to him. The avenger and forgiver both, in other words, act on the basis of a claimed equality with the wrongdoer. Revenge can punish a wrongdoer insofar as it imposes the rule that you shall suffer what you have done. But neither the avenger nor the forgiver can "judge." The only decision for a Christian judge is whether to take revenge (to restore equality by giving back a wrong for a wrong) or to forgive (to admit that the judge too is a sinner).

Both revenge and forgiveness eliminate the distance between the judge and the wrongdoer. As a result, they lack the moral distance that permits one to judge another. Judgment, Arendt writes, presupposes self-confidence and pride: "what former times called the dignity or the honor of man." (Arendt, *Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship*, 48) Only one who believes oneself right can judge another; thus, judgment presupposes a certain authority and superiority. The judge must have a feeling of distinction, what Nietzsche calls a "pathos of difference," in order to arrogate to himself or herself the right to judge. There is, Arendt recognizes, a necessary arrogance to judging that is denied by the presumptive equality of both revenge and forgiveness.

The importance of reconciliation for politics rests upon Arendt's conviction that political judgment is only possible on the foundation of a common world, a judgment that must be absent in all legal and ethical systems built upon the Christian presumption that all persons are equally guilty. Against revenge and forgiveness that originate in admissions of equal sinfulness, reconciliation accepts the world as it is—with the wrongdoer and his wrong—and in doing so works to bring about a new solidarity that does not require the lowering of the judge to the level of the wrongdoer. In an act of reconciliation, the reconciler asserts his solidarity with the wrongdoer and the world in which such wrongs can happen, but does so without equating himself with the wrongdoer. In so doing, the reconciler reconfirms the solidarity and unity of the political world.

The key advantage of reconciliation lies in its potential to inaugurate human judgment. The foundation of reconciliation is a worldly thankfulness for all that is: "Reconciliation with what is fated is only possible on the foundation of thankfulness for the given." (*Denktagebuch*, 4) On the ground of such thankfulness, it is possible to accept the wrong and the wrongdoer without identifying oneself with him. In doing so, reconciliation leaves the wrongdoer with the burden on his shoulders (unlike forgiveness that promises to release the wrongdoer) and also rejects the vengeful need to return the wrong with another wrong. Instead, the reconciling party accepts that one is also part of a world in which wrongs are fated to happen and affirms one's solidarity with such a world. The "solidarity of reconciliation is firstly not the foundation of reconciliation (as the solidarity of being

sinful is the foundation of forgiveness), but rather the product [of reconciliation.]" (*Denktagebuch*, 6) Arendt turns to reconciliation as a more properly political response to wrongdoing, one that might help to build "a new concept of solidarity." (*Denktagebuch*, 6)

9. Arendt's embrace of reconciliation with the wrongs of the world is not absolute. Not every wrong and not every wrongdoer can be reconciled. And some wrongs, while not irreconcilable, are bad enough that they don't merit reconciliation. For these wrongs, Arendt complements her discussion of reconciliation with its "corresponding opposite," namely "silence and passing by." (*Denktagebuch*, 6) While Arendt says little about "passing by" in this short text, it is clearly—as the editors of the *Denktagebuch* rightly see—a reference to Nietzsche's "On Passing By" from Book Three of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

In Nietzsche's telling, Zarathustra comes "unexpectedly" upon the gate of a "great city" where he is surprised by a "foaming fool." This fool warns Zarathustra away from city and advises him to spit upon it. All the vices and lusts of advanced civilized man are at home in this city and Zarathustra's ape curses the city-dwellers for their licentious lawlessness.

By everything in you that is bright and strong and good, O Zarathustra, the fool intones, 'spit on this city of shopkeepers and turn back! Here all blood flows putrid and lukewarm and spumy through all veins; spit on the great city which is the great swill room where all swill spumes together ... spit on the great city and turn back!

(Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 224)⁸

Zarathustra does not contest the fool's characterization of the city. He too cries "Woe unto this great city! And I wish I already saw the pillar of fire in which it will be burned. For such pillars of fire must precede the great noon. But this has its own time and destiny." And yet, to the fool's surprise, Zarathustra puts his hand over the fool's mouth to shut him up. The fool, Zarathustra says, nauseates him: "I despise your despising," he says. Hating and despising, Zarathustra explains, result from "revenge. For all your foaming is revenge, you vain fool."

Instead of revenge, Zarathustra offers a different response to decadence and wrong: "This doctrine, however, I give you fool, as a parting present: where one can no longer love, there one should pass by."

What is best, Zarathustra says, is that one love even what he most despises. To unlearn the spirit of revenge—the gnashing of teeth at the "it was" of the past—is to learn "reconciliation with time and something higher than reconciliation." (Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, 181)⁹ To reconcile oneself with time and with the stone of the past is to learn to affirm what is. That is man's redemption, to "recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it.'" The highest will of the overman, the eternal return of the same, is what Nietzsche names reconciliation with time. For Nietzsche, the love of what is requires us to "see as beautiful what is necessary in things," and thus to elevate the natural to the beautiful. (Nietzsche, *Fröhliches Wissenschaft*, §276, 523)¹⁰ Where loving affirmation of what is remains impossible—when one is not yet strong enough to be merciful to oneself or to others—then one should pass by. The path to the overman entails the overcoming of revenge and its replacement with love, the gift-giving virtue. For those who cannot yet give affirmation to others, we can, at least, be thankful for what he have, and pass by.

Following Nietzsche, Arendt understands reconciliation and "passing by" to be closely connected. As she writes: "In reconciliation or passing by [*Versöhnung oder dem Vorübergehen*] what another has done is made into what is fated to me, that which I can either accept or that I can, as with everything that is sent to me, move out of its way." (*Denktagebuch*, 6) Faced with a wrong, Arendt suggests that we have the choice of either reconciliation—affirming one's acceptance of the existence

of a world that includes such a wrong—or at least passing by—silently allowing the wrong to exist. In either case, the judgment is made that reconciles oneself to the existence of the wrong and persistence of the wrongdoer.

A third choice is available as well: namely, in the face of that which is irreconcilable, to deny reconciliation. "Reconciliation has a merciless boundary, which forgiveness and revenge don't recognize—namely, at that about which one must say: This ought not to have happened."¹¹ (*Denktagebuch*, 7) Arendt explains what she means by reference to Kant's discussion of the rules of war, where Kant says that actions in war that might make a subsequent peace impossible are not permitted. Such acts, whether in war or peace, are examples of "radical evil;" they are "what ought not to have come to pass." Such acts are also those that cannot be reconciled, "what cannot be accepted under any circumstances as our fate." (*Denktagebuch*, 7) Nor can one simply silently pass by in the face of radical evil. Thus, Arendt's judgment to accept a fateful wrong will differ meaningfully from Nietzsche's fatalism. For both, reconciliation with what is—wrong or right—is to be affirmed or accepted. For Arendt, however, there is a limit to reconciliation that Nietzsche does not seem to recognize.

10. What is essential in the decision to enact reconciliation or to pass by is the judgment to affirm a common fatefulness with the wrongdoer and the wrong. The affirmation of a common fate is what makes reconciliation so important for Arendt's politics. One can only act in public when one knows how to be in the world. Such knowing one's way in the world is called understanding, the standing within and thus also the reconciling oneself to the world. As Arendt writes: "In understanding happens the reconciliation with the world that first makes possible all acting." (*Denktagebuch*, 331) Understanding, the way in which one comes to make sense of the world, is a way of rooting oneself in a world. In this sense, "Understanding creates depth." The political activity of making oneself a home in the world depends upon "understanding in the sense of reconciliation." Only someone who is reconciled with the world—someone who accepts the world as it is and comes to terms with the world—can politically act in that world. (*Denktagebuch*, 332)

In her essay "Understanding and Politics" published in *The Partisan Review* in 1954, Arendt turns to King Solomon's prayer asking God for the gift of an understanding heart to explore the inner unity of understanding, reconciliation, and political action. Solomon prayed for this gift, she writes, "because he was a king and knew that only an "understanding heart," and not mere reflection or mere feeling, makes it bearable for us to live with other people, strangers forever, in the same world, and makes it possible for them to bear with us." (Arendt, *Understanding and Politics*, 322) Understanding, this "strange enterprise," is not a scientific knowing. Rather, it is an "unending activity" by which we "come to terms with and reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world." (Arendt, *Understanding and Politics*, 308) In understanding and reconciliation, the thinking human being acts; he comes to terms with the world and thus, in the act of reconciliation, affirms the world and allows it to be.

It is here, in the decision to affirm one's participation in a shared world, that reconciliation serves to build a political solidarity free from the universal sinfulness of Christian and moral political theology. Because reconciliation "presupposes acting-and-potentially-wrongfully-acting men, but not men who are poisoned by sin," what is reconciled is neither an evil soul nor a sinful humanity, but rather the world containing the "actually existing wrong." (*Denktagebuch*, 6-7) In language likely reminiscent of her conversations with Heidegger, Arendt concludes: the reconciling man resolves himself (*sich entschliesst*) to be responsible-with (*mit-verantwortlich zu sein*), but in no circumstances guilty-with (*mit-schuldig*) the wrongdoer and his wrong. (*Denktagebuch*, 7) What reconciliation allows therefore, is the development of a common world. Thus, Arendt can say that no political action is possible without reconciliation.¹²

11. Arendt famously returns to the questions of reconciliation, revenge, and forgiveness in her report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann. As Arendt understands the Eichmann trial, the judges in Jerusalem had, at least partly as a result of their focus on the question of Eichmann's internal guilt, a choice of either revenge or forgiveness. They could punish Eichmann for his willful wrongs; however, to do so would not offer a judgment on Eichmann himself. As the many voices in the crowd and also the witnesses brought forth by the prosecution attest, Eichmann's legal punishment presented itself as revenge, the retributive act of victims who now sought to give as good as they had got. Or, the judges could forsake punishment and forgive Eichmann.

Arendt offers forgiveness as a key solution to what Arendt calls the predicament of action in *The Human Condition*. The predicament of action is that once done, an action sets in motion an irreversible series of events such that everything that happens is, to a certain extent, a product of that action. "That deeds possess such an enormous capacity for endurance," Arendt writes, lays an enormous burden on man. Since no man can know the distant and unpredictable consequences of his action, he is "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw." (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 233). Without the capacity to forgive and thus free man from the burden of the irreversibility and unpredictability of his actions, man would cease all action: "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." (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237)

Against her earlier insistence on the impossibility of human forgiveness, Arendt now defends the possibility of worldly forgiveness by turning to Jesus who maintains, "against the scribes and pharisees first that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, and second that this power does not derive from God...but on the contrary must be mobilized by men toward each other...." (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 239) She traces the reason for Jesus' insistence on human forgiveness to the insight that men "know not what they do." Since human action is irreversible and unpredictable, forgiveness is necessary to enable action. The human capacity to forgive becomes an ontological ground for action and politics.

Even as she insists on the need for forgiveness, Arendt limits the province of forgiveness. She does not extend the power of human forgiveness to the forgiving of crimes. Forgiveness, she writes, "does not apply to the extremity of crime and willed evil, for then it would not have been necessary to teach: 'And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.'" (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 239-40) This citation from the Gospel of Luke plays a two-fold role in Arendt's reading. First, it limits those wrongs that are to be forgiven to trespasses rather than crimes; if crimes are rare, "trespassing is an everyday occurrence." Trespass is simply part and parcel of action, the fact that every human act will create "new relationships within a web of relationships" that will inevitably lead to some wrongs. It is in this sense that forgiveness is necessary for action, and forgiveness is addressed not to intentional or willful wrongs, but simply to the human actions in the public realm.

Second, Arendt's citation of Luke allows her clarify what she means by forgiveness. The original Greek word in the Gospel that is traditionally translated as "forgiveness" is *aphienai*, which Arendt suggests means to "dismiss" and "release" rather than "forgive." (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 240). By forgiveness, then, Arendt does not mean the impossible and divine act of forgiving one his sins—what she had eight years prior in her *Denktagebuch* said was humanly impossible—but rather the "constant mutual release" that allows men to continue to act in the world. In talking about forgiveness of trespasses in 1958 in *The Human Condition*, Arendt speaks largely in the sense of reconciliation with great wrongs as she understands it in 1950. The point is that political action is only possible insofar as one judges whether or not to forgive minor trespasses and reconcile oneself to wrongs.

Why did Arendt emphasize the question of forgiveness over reconciliation in *The Human Condition*? In part, Arendt seems to have come to understand the act of reconciliation and the act of forgiveness as two sides of one coin. In a note in her *Denktagebuch* from 1953, she writes:

Deshalb ist kein Handeln möglich ohne gegenseitiges Verzeihen (das in der Politik Versöhnung heisst).

Therefore no action is possible without mutual forgiveness (what is called reconciliation in politics).

(*Denktagebuch*, 303)

Within the language of "action" in *The Human Condition*, forgiveness is what makes human action possible, but is largely insulated from politics.

Arendt's development of forgiveness is, as Dana Villa argues, one of two "moral qualities" necessary to address the "frailty" of action, namely that the irreversibility of action destines all action to unintended and thus guilt-ridden and paralyzing consequences. As such a moral quality, forgiving and being forgiven make action possible insofar as they "lighten the otherwise crushing sense of the ravages of action on oneself and on others." Outside of this limited moral function, forgiveness "does not figure very much in her political theory." (Villa, *Political Action*, 42) Forgiveness, as a spontaneous and mutual unburdening of persons for the unintended consequences of their actions, is an essential capacity in human acting; and yet, for this very reason, the scope and import of forgiveness is of limited value in the essential political activity of building a common world.

Reconciliation, as opposed to forgiveness, is activated precisely when the offending action is elevated from a mere transgression to a sin or a crime. Once the transgression inserts itself in the public realm and demands a response, forgiveness remains humanly impossible and thus politically impotent. In the face of crime, reconciliation makes politics possible by forging a new and common world. This is what Arendt means when she writes that, in politics, forgiveness is called reconciliation.

12. The close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation helps explain why Arendt does not return to forgiveness when she offers her judgment of Eichmann at the end of the epilogue to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Arendt suggests that Eichmann's death is just because he and his actions violated the appearance of a meaningful world. As Jennifer Culbert has shown, Arendt makes a distinction between public and private wrongs, honoring "the earth's cries for vengeance and not Eichmann's victims' calls for revenge." (Culbert, *Judging the Events*, 148) The key distinction is between a wrongdoer whose "act has disturbed the community as a whole," and one who is punished for "damage [that] has been done to individuals who are entitled to reparation." (Arendt, *Eichmann*, 261). As Culbert writes, "Arendt insists that criminals be punished for what they do and not for what they will or what others invisibly suffer."

What is public about legal judgment is not the punishment of a wrongdoer for his wrongful will, but the punishment of the wrong that appears in the world—its fact. Since Eichmann's wrongs appear as "a wrong in the world," they "call attention to the violation of an appearance, the authentic appearance of harmony provided by the diversity of sentient beings that inhabit the world." (Culbert, *Judging the Events*, 149) Arendt's focus on the appearance of the wrong shifts the traditional legal inquiry into the state of mind of the criminal to the apparent question of the visibility of the wrong. His internal mental state has no bearing on the judgment that his case calls for, since his internal state—like the internal suffering of his victims—has no public bearing and is a matter that properly belongs to the private sphere. What matters are his deeds, and those deeds call forth the earth's cry of vengeance.

Attending to the public visibility of Eichmann's crimes, Arendt's own verdict of Eichmann—the

one the Court should have offered—follows the maxim that "justice must not only be done but must be seen to be done." (Arendt, *Eichmann*, 277) Eichmann, she announces, admitted the crimes the Nazis committed and admitted his own role in it. His defense is that he "had never acted from base motives" and that he "never had any inclination to kill anybody," and that he "never hated Jews." Because of his lack of an evil will, Eichmann insists that he "did not feel guilty." (Arendt, *Eichmann*, 278) To these claims, Arendt responds first with doubt. "We find it difficult, though not altogether impossible, to believe; there is some, though not very much, evidence against you in this matter of motivation and conscience that could be proved beyond reasonable doubt." Here, in a sentence often ignored in the secondary literature on the controversy surrounding the banality of evil, Arendt tempers the claim that Eichmann was not willfully evil and was simply banal. At least on a factual basis, Arendt recognizes—as others have claimed she has not—that there is evidence that Eichmann was motivated by wrongful desires.

Beyond the question of motivation, Arendt contests Eichmann's claim that "almost anybody" could have done as he had done. As Arendt reframes his argument, Eichmann argues that "where all, or almost all, are guilty, nobody is." This conclusion, as common then as it remains today, is one that Arendt is "not willing to grant." The reason for Arendt's argument against the claim that "where all are guilty none are," is given in the next, and final, paragraph of her judgment and her book.

Eichmann confuses actuality and possibility, and he underestimates the importance of actuality. The court, Arendt argues, ought to focus on what has actually happened, Eichmann's participation in the Final Solution. The question of whether other people might possibly have done as he did is wholly separate to the judgment. For Arendt, "there is an abyss between the actuality of what you did and the potentiality of what others might have done. We are concerned here, only with what you did, and not with the possible noncriminal nature of your inner life and of your motives or with the criminal potentialities of those around you." (Arendt, *Eichmann*, 278)

These lines, written in the shadow of the Eichmann trial, hearken back to that first entry in the *Denktagebuch* in 1950, when Arendt writes: "Reconciliation reconciles itself with an *actuality*, independent of all *possibility*." (*Denktagebuch*, 6) The question Arendt poses in her judgment of Eichmann is that of reconciliation: Ought one reconcile himself to Eichmann and his wrongs? Or, barring such an active reconciliation, ought one pass by? Or, finally, ought one say that such crimes are irreconcilable, and that the world in which such crimes exist must be rejected?

Arendt chooses the latter option and condemns Eichmann to be banished from the Earth. He and his crimes are incapable of reconciliation. Such an act of non-reconciliation is—as is forgiveness in the private sphere—a spontaneous and unexpected act. Unlike a legal judgment grounded in precedent, an act of reconciliation or non-reconciliation has a revolutionary quality of a break, a crisis, a new beginning, one that makes a claim either to reaffirm a common world (reconciliation) or to re-imagine and re-form our common world (non-reconciliation). Just as politics might depend on reconciliation as a way of binding oneself to a common world, so too may politics at times demand that actions and persons be excluded from that world that it might remain a world we can share.

13. The political potential of reconciliation—its power to build a common world—is rooted in the way reconciliation both takes up and frees oneself from the past. Both senses of reconciliation are present in a letter Arendt writes to Mary McCarthy shortly after the death of her husband, Heinrich Blücher. At the beginning of the letter Arendt writes: "During the last months I have often thought of myself—free like a leaf in the wind. And all the time I also thought: Don't do anything against this, that it is the way it is, let no 'autocratic will interfere.'" (Arendt and McCarthy, *Between Friends*, 294-95) One hears in these deeply honest lines Arendt's feeling of freedom from her past, the lifting of the logs of remembrance from her shoulders.

We might hear in these lines written to her friend Arendt's continued meditation on the burden of the past. Recall Hölderlin's line from the fragment "*Reif Sind*:"

Vorwärts aber und rückwärts wollen wir
Nicht sehn. Uns wiegen lassen, wie
Auf schwankem Kahne der See.

But we shall not look forward
Or back. Let ourselves rock, as
On a boat, lapped by the waves.

The past, as Nietzsche so forcefully reminds us, is a stone that weighs upon us and reminds us of our inability to unburden ourselves. As wonderful as Arendt's marriage was—and all indications are of an extraordinary close and meaningful friendship and love between her and Blücher¹³—Arendt cannot help but feel emancipated from her past, free, like a leaf, dancing in the wind or a ship rocking on the waves.

But Arendt does not leave off her reflections on the burden of the past with the image of emancipation from memory. Instead, at the end of her letter to McCarthy, Arendt returns to the image of the leaf in the wind and revises it, this time explicitly turning back to Hölderlin's reflections in "*Mnemosyne*." She writes:

Let me come back once more to the 'leaf in the wind.' It is of course only half true. For there is, on the other hand, the whole weight of the past (*gravitas*). And what Hölderlin once said in a beautiful line: *Und vieles/ Wie auf den Schultern eine/ Last von Scheitern ist/ Zu behalten*--And much/ As on your shoulders a/ burden of logs/is to bear and keep.
—In short: remembrance.

(Arendt and McCarthy, *Between Friends*, 295)

It is not possible for Arendt to imagine herself cut off from her past. Nor is it possible for her not to remember. The burden of the past, the logs on our shoulders, are part of who we are and they are part of the world in which we live.

There is no political world, as Arendt emphasizes in *The Human Condition*, without memory and memorials that transcend a single human lifespan. Without memories that raise us above our finite lives to an immortal public realm, there is no common world. Reconciliation, the act of judging the past in a way that works to conserve and expand the plurality and yet oneness of the public world is, therefore, at the very heart of the work of building a world. Similarly, non-reconciliation, the act of judging the wrongs of the past to be incompatible with a common world and thereby calling forth a new common world, is one of the very highest examples of political action. The judgment of reconciliation or non-reconciliation when confronted with the burden of our past is, in other words, the essential political question by which we form and transform our common world.

Roger Berkowitz

Roger Berkowitz is Associate Professor of Political Thinking, Human Rights, and Philosophy at Bard College. He also directs the Hannah Arendt Center at Bard. His books include *The Gift of Science* (Harvard 2005; Fordham 2010) and *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics* (Fordham, 2010). Roger is also co-editor of the *Just Ideas* book series at Fordham University Press. His essays have appeared in *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas, Theory & Event*, *New Nietzsche Studies*, *Philosophy and Literature*, *the Journal of Law, Culture, & the Humanities*, and other publications. For more information see www.vernunft.org

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Notes

- 1.** Reconciliation is certainly not a major theme in discussions of Arendt's work, although it often garners brief mentions—usually in reference either to Kateb's discussion or to the question of Arendt's attitude to Heidegger and the Germans. For a few brief discussions of reconciliation in Arendt's work, see: Schaap, Andrew, *Political Reconciliation*, 74; Maier-Katkin, Daniel and Birgit Maier-Katkin, "Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger: Calumny and the Politics of Reconciliation"; Villa, Dana, "Hannah Arendt: Modernity, Alienation, and Critique," 187.
- 2.** See the notes to the *Denktagebuch*, v.2., 908. The notes by Ursula Ludz and Igeborg Nordmann point toward Hölderlin's "Mnemosyne," of which "Reif Sind" comprises the first stanza of the third revised edition. In most Hölderlin collections, "Reif Sind" is published as a separate fragment.
- 3.** For the convergence of truth and love in Hölderlin's poem, see Anselm Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning*, 50.

4. I first encountered this citation from Jochem Schmitt in Anselm Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning*, 50-51.

5. The word translated as "logs" is *Scheitern*, which in spoken German means "failings." It is derived, however, from the old German expression, *Der Scheiterhaufen*, the pile of logs piled under a crucifix upon which heretics were burned. According to the Brothers Grimm *Wörterbuch*, *Scheitern* is a derivative form for logs in the Schwäbisch dialect in which Hölderlin wrote. English translators of Hölderlin's poem have consistently rendered *Scheitern* as logs, and German commentators agree. I thank Antonia Grunenberg and Johann Kreuzer for their insights into the contested etymology and Hölderlin's use of *Scheitern*.

6. See also, her entry in the *Denktagebuch* from 1953: "*Versöhnen heisst: 'to come to terms with,' ich versöhne mich mit Realität als solcher und gehöre von nun an dieser Realität als Handelnder zu.*" XIV.16, at 331.

7. See also, *Denktagebuch*, XIV.14, at 330, where Arendt distinguishes "Superbia"—the inability to bear pity from another—from hubris and arrogance and argues that superbia itself is necessary for forgiveness. She also suggests that superbia, as it is based in the "*Intaktheit der Person*" is manly, since the body of a woman is by nature cut in the rip of their sex and birthing.

8. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. by Walter Kaufman, 177.

9. Id. 141.

10. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufman, §276, 223.

11. The text here says "*umbarmherzige*" which I read as a typographical error for "unbarmherzige."

12. What she says is: "*Deshalb ist kein Handeln möglich ohne gegenseitiges Verzeihen (das in der Politik Versöhnung heisst).*" Arendt, *Denktagebuch* XIII.17, at 303 (1953).

13. The closeness of their marriage was strained but not severed by Blücher's infidelities.

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