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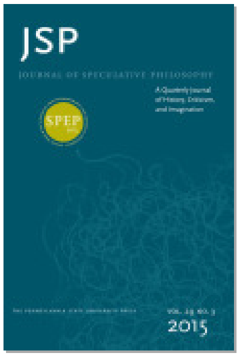

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Arendt on Resentment: Articulating Intersubjectivity

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ABSTRACT: This article develops an Arendtian conception of resentment and shows that resentment as a response to injustice is in fact only possible within a community of persons engaged in moral and recognitive relations. While Arendt is better known for her work on forgiveness—characterized as a creative rather than vindictive response to injury—this article suggests that Arendt provides a unique way of thinking about resentment as essentially a response to another human's subjectivity. But when injury is massive, so beyond the pale that the possibility of face-to-face human interaction is annihilated, the space for resentment is thereby destroyed. Ironically, while the absence of resentment might at first seem to be an unproblematically good thing, Arendt shows us that the loss of resentment actually signals the loss of the properly human realm.

KEYWORDS: forgiveness, moral emotions, resentment, Eichmann, Arendt

In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt explains how, given the unpredictability of action and the irreversibility of time, people inevitably become burdened by their choices and mistakes. Arendt suggests that the antidote for the irreversibility of such trespasses is forgiveness, which "serves to undo the deeds of the past" by releasing actors from the consequences of their actions.[1] She says, "Trespassing is an everyday

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occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new" (240). Forgiveness, as Arendt understands it, releases the actor from the deed and thereby interrupts cyclical reactions to insult and injury. She explains, "Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly" (241). Released from my own vengeful reactions, I can act in ways that are not predetermined or compelled by another's trespasses against me. In this sense, forgiveness is an unanticipated, uncaused, and undetermined act; it is truly spontaneous. Arendtian forgiveness seems to take on a metaphysical stature; it appears to be able to change the nature of reality, undoing the irreversible. It acts against necessity, undoing what was done by releasing the doer from the deed.

In the last sixty years, notably in tribunals and reconciliation commissions characteristic of programs of transitional justice, forgiveness has become a political and legal ideal in cases where massive moral injury threatens to extinguish human plurality and dignity. Seen as a willingness to continually participate in an imperfect world with civility, those willing to forgive demonstrate the ability to begin again not only despite the social facts of moral injury and misrecognition but also, as Arendt teaches, despite ontological facts of irreversibility, contingency, and unpredictability. Forgiving victims who are able to respond creatively rather than vindictively are said to escape the vicious cycle of violence and exemplify their moral agency.

But as a political tool, what does forgiveness really *do*? Arendtian forgiveness responds creatively to the fact of injury, although what I would like to suggest is that unlike many contemporary political views of forgiveness as an act of compassion in response to *atrocity*, Arendt understands forgiveness as a cure for the irreversibility of *action*, not violence.

Because linear time shapes human experience, irreversibility is unavoidable. Taking aim at what cannot be undone, forgiveness is about creatively transforming the effects of irreversibility. Forgiveness releases actors from what would otherwise become a mechanistic or routinized cycle of retaliation. Arendt describes forgiveness as the act of constantly *releasing the wrongdoer*. Quoting Luke 17:3–4, she says, "And if he trespass against thee . . . and . . . turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt *release* him" (240). If the wrongdoer shows signs of contrition or transformation, he or she should be *released* from the trespass.

And I would like us to pay attention to the language here of *release*. Arendt adopts the language of release or dismiss (similar to Nietzsche's understanding of forgetting) in order to characterize the action of forgiveness, a move that greatly limits the scope or reach of forgiveness. Arendt notes that the Greek word for forgiveness is *aphienai*, which means to "release" or "let go" rather than "forgive."[2] People can release one another, but the capacity as denoted by the original Greek amounts to dismissal rather than pardon or exoneration.

Contrary to vengeance's tendency toward cyclical violence through repetitious reactions, for Arendt, forgiveness *and* punishment both interrupt the cycle of revenge (241). Julia Kristeva explains that "punishment, to the extent that it is different from vengeance, does not contradict the suspended logic of forgiveness. Like forgiveness, punishment puts an end to something that, without it, could return ad infinitum."[3] In this sense, for Arendt, forgiveness and punishment are alternatives that share the same goal.

Although punishment interrupts the cycle of vengeance, it lacks the especially creative capacity of forgiveness because it is a proportional response to the wrong. It weighs the damage and attempts to attain justice through balancing the wrong. The proportional requirement renders punishing inexpiable wrongs impossible.

Referring to this very problem, Arendt says that "men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable" (241). Anticipating her analysis of Eichmann's crimes against humanity, Arendt announces in the *Human Condition* the limits not only of law but of forgiveness: when a crime becomes incommensurable with punishment, it is also incommensurate with forgiveness. What is unpunishable is also unforgivable.[4]

Whereas forgiveness releases, its opposite, vengeance, *binds* people to the past crime and to the process of reaction. Vengeance, unlike forgiveness, is not creative of new possibilities for action. Instead, it "acts in the form of re-acting against an original trespassing, whereby far from putting an end to the consequences of the first misdeed, everybody remains bound to the process" (240–41). But note that it is the deterministic character that threatens the sphere of action and which morphs a trespass into an unforgiveable crime. The magnitude of the crime is a necessary but not sufficient condition for crimes against plurality.

Let us turn away from the structural limits of forgiveness and punishment developed in *The Human Condition* and turn to the legal peculiarities of the Eichmann trial. Arendt knew that Eichmann was not guilty of violating the law. Instead, he was guilty of following laws that never should have been made.[5] This new category of crimes against humanity rendered both punishment and forgiveness inadequate and impotent because Eichmann did not meet the mens rea requirement. He acted as a law-abiding citizen.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt explains that, unlike the common imperialist tactic of legalized discrimination, war crimes committed by totalitarianism gave rise to the unprecedented; they signaled a break from tradition, with ramifications that appeared outside of the law. In fact, Arendt explains that the evils perpetuated by Eichmann differ politically and legally from more prevalent "war crimes" not only in degree *but in essence*.[6] That is, it is not because more than five million Jews were exterminated throughout World War II that the Holocaust has been so difficult to reckon with in both politics and law. This empirical reality, although haunting in its own right, is secondary to what Arendt saw as the underlying difficulty of the evils of totalitarianism. These offenses introduced the world to a government-sanctioned and bureaucratically orchestrated program of torture that amounted to a crime "against the human status": "It was when the Nazi regime declared that the German people not only were unwilling to have any Jews in Germany but wished to make the entire Jewish people disappear from the face of the earth that the new crime, the crime against humanity—in the sense of a crime 'against human status,' or against the very nature of mankind—appeared."[7] She continues, "Expulsion and genocide must remain distinct; the former is an offense against fellow-nations, whereas the latter is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the 'human status' without which the very words 'mankind' or 'humanity' would be devoid of meaning."[8] Arendt describes such actions as those that "transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance" (241). Eichmann's actions destroyed human potentiality. Arendt cannot forgive such crimes.

This is our first clue that the offenses to which forgiveness responds are within the reach of dismissal, whereas crimes against the human status are not. Moreover, forgiveness releases those who “unknowingly” transgressed. The predicament of action is that people cannot know the consequences of their actions (action is unpredictable). When the act is intended to harm, the law calls for punishment. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that Arendtian forgiveness is intended to cure anything outside the realm of action.

It is a striking absence that Arendt does not refer to the concept of forgiveness as it is developed in the *Human Condition* in her decision in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. And yet Arendt was not attempting to create a complete system of concepts across her work. As her views changed, her concepts also shifted. But having the limits of Arendt’s forgiveness in mind can, I think, nonetheless help us understand her judgment against Eichmann. Because Eichmann’s decisions and rule-following annihilated spontaneity and plurality, he cannot be released from his deeds.

What, then, does Arendt have to say about resentment—an attitude typically defined as the refusal to forgive? Short of diagnosing Arendt’s own resentments toward Eichmann, I suggest that Arendt maintains an ironically forgiving (or at least charitable) attitude toward resentment despite what she says about vengeance in the *Human Condition*. Let us first begin with a helpful passage from *Origins of Totalitarianism*:

> Until now the totalitarian belief that everything is possible seems to have proved only that everything can be destroyed. Yet, in their effort to prove that everything is possible, totalitarian regimes have discovered without knowing it that there are crimes which men can neither punish nor forgive. When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive. Just as the victims in the death factories or the holes of oblivion are no longer “human” in the eyes of their executioners, so this newest species of criminals is beyond the pale even of solidarity in human sinfulness.[9]

Although Hannah Arendt never dedicated an entire chapter or essay to the emotion, she was nonetheless well aware of the insidious pull of resentment. Resentment is mentioned a total of sixteen times in *Origins*.

Early in the text, Arendt writes, "The social resentment of the lower middle classes against the Jews turned into a highly explosive political element, because these bitterly hated Jews were thought to be well on their way to political power."[10] Here resentment refers to the mobilization of mass anti-Semitism and the driving force behind the scapegoating of Jews.

By the end of *Origins*, in the lengthy passage quoted above, Arendt refers to resentment as one of many "evil motives" that had in the past made crimes understandable. With the advent of the radical evil typical of the Third Reich, however, crimes against human plurality that could be neither punished nor forgiven could also not be explained away by unsavory human emotions and intentions. Here we can see a shift in meaning: in the beginning stages of Nazi occupation, resentment is an emotion that helps to make sense of anti-Semitic attitudes. With the advent of the death factories we find that evil human motives of self-interest, lust for power, and resentment are no longer able to make sense of the world.

I find the ambiguity of the meaning of resentment in Arendt's work fascinating. *Origins* begins with a fairly common understanding of the emotion as a kind of envious grudge that seeks revenge. But it would be a mistake to understand resentment as the psychological essence of totalitarian rule. For although Arendt acknowledges the role resentment played in the mobilization of social attitudes of anti-Semitism, she also reveals the limits of human emotions within the Nazi program of destruction. Resentment is not the cause of human destruction. Rather, she says, "Propaganda and organization no longer suffice to assert that the impossible is possible, that the incredible is true, that an insane consistency rules the world; the chief psychological support of totalitarian fiction—the active resentment of the status quo, which the masses refused to accept as the only possible world—is no longer there."[11] But where does resentment go, and what replaces it? Ironically, Arendt saw resentment as the last remnant of *humanly recognizable relations*—relations that were quashed as a requirement of totalitarian destruction.

To illustrate this point, near the end of the book, Arendt makes a distinction in the torture practices first performed by the Nazi Party's "Brown Shirts," the Sturmabteilung (SA), and later by Hitler's paramilitary, the Schutzstaffel (SS). Whereas torture for the SA officer was provoked by a heated resentment against all those he perceived to be better than himself, torture of the magnitude required for the annihilation of a people—the kind that was effectively able to exterminate people long before they became biologically dead—was not the result of any human emotion. It was precisely the total *lack* of human emotion that enabled this atrocity. Arendt contrasts the irrational, sadistic type of torture driven by resentment and carried out by the SA to the rational calculations of the SS:

> Behind the blind bestiality of the SA, there often lay a deep hatred and resentment against all those who were socially, intellectually, or physically better off than themselves, and who now, as if in fulfillment of their wildest dreams, were in their power. This resentment, which never died out entirely in the camps, strikes us as *a last remnant of humanly understandable feeling*. The real horror began, however, when the SS took over the administration of the camps. The old spontaneous bestiality gave way to an absolutely cold and systematic destruction of human bodies, calculated to destroy human dignity; death was avoided or postponed indefinitely. The camps were no longer amusement parks for beasts in human form, that is, for men who really belonged in mental institutions and prisons; the reverse became true: they were turned into "drill grounds," on which perfectly normal men were trained to be full-fledged members of the SS.[12]

I glean two points from this passage. First, Arendt believed that the human destruction perpetrated by the Third Reich was an exemplification of what she called the "banality of evil." This is to say that it was *not* pathologically sadistic, neurotically resentful, and self-interested men but, rather, "perfectly normal men" who, by following the rules, fulfilled the brutal logic of the Third Reich. Second, the annihilation of the Jews required cold calculation that in effect destroyed the very condition of possibility for resentment: human intersubjectivity. This is to say that when we resent, we are responding with emotion and cognition to another subjectivity. The intersubjective structure of resentment is such that it can only be expressed subject to subject, not subject to object.[13] And this is where the irony of Arendt's thinking shines through: resentment disappeared in the camps because understandable human sinfulness disappeared. Through this irony Arendt exposes her readers to a provocative ambiguity: resentment appears in *Origins* as both the provocation of criminality and a vague remnant of human community.

NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 237; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

2. Roger Berkowitz, "The Power of Non-reconciliation—Arendt's Judgment of Adolf Eichmann," *HannahArendt.net* 1–2, no. 6 (November 2011), http://www.hannaharendt.net/index.php/han/article/view/11/8.

3. Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 233.

4. Paul Ricoeur arrives at the same conclusion in "Epilogue," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 457–506.

5. Berkowitz, "Power of Non-reconciliation."

6. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), 272.

7. Ibid., 268. For an insightful summary and critique of Arendt's view that totalitarianism was essentially distinct from past colonial and imperialist genocides, please see Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 77–92.

8. Ibid., 268–69.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1951), 459.

10. Ibid., 37.

11. Ibid., 392.

12. Ibid., 453; my emphasis.

13. Stephen Darwall draws on P. F. Strawson's point when he articulates resentment as an irreducibly *second-personal* attitude. See Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).