Secularization and Sacralization, Normalization and Rupture: Kristeva and Arendt on Forgiveness

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SINCE JULIA KRISTEVA'S CONCEPT OF FORgiveness refers to Hannah Arendt and yet undertakes a far-reaching, ethical reinterpretation of Arendt's political theory of forgiveness, I will first discuss the differences between their conceptions. The contrast between their notions corresponds to the incompatibilities that have become visible in post-Shoah history and in the current politics of restitution. The desire for reconciliation and the demands for forgiveness and reparations that have recently been voiced link the political and ethical meanings of forgiveness, locating its problems precisely in the gap between Arendt's and Kristeva's concepts. In the interview, Kristeva—following the final chapter in her book on Arendt—shifts forgiveness into the private sphere, of which the analytic cure represents the ideal case. Thus, forgiveness becomes a phenomenon of atemporality, a "moment outside time." In addition, by referring to the history of religion in Arendt's theory, Kristeva charges the psychoanalytic scene with religious meaning as a place where listening, interpretation, recognition, forgiveness, and the possibility of a new beginning, even of rebirth, are granted. This tendency results in Kristeva's statement that psychoanalysis is "a colored Judeo-Christianity." Finally, the fact that she is speaking about trauma throughout (as though any analytic cure were motivated by trauma) amplifies the singularity ascribed to the analytic situation. In all these aspects, central to Kristeva's concept of forgiveness, she departs far from Arendt's theory of forgiveness.

Hannah Arendt's *Vita Activa*

In the context of her theory of action, in *The Human Condition* (1958; trans. into German as *Vita Activa*), Arendt derives forgiveness both from genealogy, the relationship between generations, and from "being in the presence of others" (*Miteinander*)[1]—the communal space she defines as the public realm. The necessity of forgiveness thus concerns the position of subjects in time, their position, that is, when they are confronted with the (mainly unintentional) consequences of earlier deeds. In this respect, Arendt conceives forgiveness as a structural, necessary precondition for survival and ongoing life. As a "remedy against irreversibility" and as an "undoing of what one has done," forgiveness is directed toward the past and occurs in what Arendt calls "the common world" (*Mitwelt* [*Human Condition* 236, 241, 52]). This sense can be illuminated by the significance of space in Arendt's notions of politics and of the public sphere (a view that differs radically from Jürgen Habermas's). In Arendt's thinking, no politics is possible until there is space. Only with the in-between, the space between human beings, can politics exist, as Arendt observed in fragments collected posthumously in *Was ist Politik?*: "*The* human being is apolitical. Politics comes into being in *the in-between*, and that is to say *outside* the human being" (11). For her, the public realm, characterized by generality and visibility, contrasts with the private, which provides "sheltered existence" and "guarantee[s] the darkness of what needs to be hidden against the light of publicity" (*Human Condition* 51, 71). Against the background of

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this notion, forgiveness brings into play not a *private* but a *personal* element—in Arendt's words, "eminently personal," "though not necessarily individual or private" (241). This element is personal not because it relates to a specific sphere of life but because "[f]orgiveness is directed to a person, not the act" (361).

In this respect, the concept of forgiveness originates from a theory of the political that does not define different realms. Instead, this theory is interested in the position of the subject in the space of action and has been developed from that perspective. And Jesus of Nazareth, whom Arendt acknowledges as the inventor of forgiveness, is introduced as a historical figure rather than a religious one. When Arendt refers to Jesus and to "the small and closely knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel," she is neither bestowing religious attributes on forgiveness nor proposing a political theology (as defined by Carl Schmitt), according to which all terms of the political are eminent religious terms. Rather, the reference is part of a historical theory of the political that draws on the history of religion, among other sources, like the ancient world, in its inquiry into the origins and traces of "an awareness that forgiveness may be the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action" (239). Unlike a religious connotation of forgiveness, Arendt's idea is concerned with its anchoring in everyday action, resulting in the secularization of forgiveness as part of a political theory. "Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive" (243). Here we have Arendt's sense of a mutuality in togetherness, as well as a reciprocity of forgiveness and pardon. The secularization of forgiveness in Arendt's theory is thus linked to a normalization, and so evil is excluded from this concept, both the kind of action that intentionally causes harm (i.e., crime) and "radical evil" in Kant's sense.

Arendt and Kristeva: Secularization versus Sacralization

Julia Kristeva's and Hannah Arendt's theories of forgiveness are diametrically opposed: one is strictly ethical, the other political. Whereas Kristeva refers to traumatic or catastrophic experiences, Arendt is concerned with the normalization and structural necessity of forgiveness. Whereas Kristeva situates forgiveness outside time or, rather, considers it a rupture in historical time, in Arendt's theory forgiveness is precisely what ensures continuity. And whereas Arendt's concept is based on mutuality and togetherness, for Kristeva forgiveness can only take place in a relation to an Other, a notion that recalls Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other. In contrast to Levinas's emphasis on subjection to the Other, however, Kristeva tends to stress giving. Particularly striking here is the asymmetry, inasmuch as only the analyst is deemed capable of granting forgiveness. The analyst thus tends to a godlike authority, and the analytic scene takes on a religious coloring. The contrast between Kristeva's and Arendt's theories could hardly be greater: singularity and sacralization versus normalization and secularization. Furthermore, the differences between Christian and Jewish tradition, so important in Arendt's references to the *history* of religion, are lost in Kristeva's term "Judeo-Christianity." However, in contrast to a Christian origin of forgiveness, Arendt derives the concept of promise, as a complement to forgiveness in her theory of action, from Abraham and from the culture of contract he embodies. Since the act of making a promise, which is aimed at "the unpredictability" of the future, works in Arendt's thinking along the lines of contractual alliance, she considers the "faculty of promising" a central political ability (*Human Condition* 244). Thus, whereas Arendt introduces the history of religion simply as a source for her political categories, Kristeva reverses that emphasis, turning the scene of forgiveness into a quasi-religious situation.

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On the Historical Index of a Theory of Forgiveness

Kristeva's notion and Arendt's theory (of 1958) obviously form an opposition. Between its two poles are located the problems that we have to address today in connection with the demands for forgiveness and their enactments, together with the desires for reconciliation or hopes of restitution that are bound up with forgiveness. In post-Shoah history, as well as in the international politics of restitution, the issue of forgiveness is located at diverse transitions between the political and the private or analytic. The discrepancy between, on the one hand, the harm done to individuals and the crimes committed by individuals in the past and, on the other, the political, legal, and economic procedures to achieve restitution has shifted the practices of forgiveness into a sphere in which the threshold between public discourse and hiddenness, silence, and the unspoken is constantly transgressed. The gesture of apology especially has become a ritual in the politics of restitution that no longer refers to any specific person (Arendt) and where no criterion for "the authenticity of the request" (Kristeva) is available any longer (see Barkan). Additionally, the relation between guilt and debts has brought into play a new set of problems and issues (Weigel, "Shylocks Wiederkehr" and "Konvertierung"). And whereas the provenance of forgiveness in religion is seldom reflected on, at the same time political discourses permanently use religious symbols and are constantly loaded with desires for redemption or atonement. Also, the last fifty years of history have shown that the events of World War II and of the Shoah will not let themselves be absorbed into the established forms of legal, political, literary, and historiographic treatment, so that a normalization is neither possible nor desirable (Weigel, "Zeugnis"). Especially the handing over of crimes to courts, which Arendt and Kristeva assume, has proved to be a limited means of doing justice to the victims, as Arendt considered at length in her book on Eichmann. Five years after *The Human Condition*, Arendt not only revised her notion of evil but also reflected on the incompatibilities of law and justice. This is the most far-reaching issue in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, although it has been overshadowed by the scandal around Arendt's formula "the banality of evil," which has clouded the book's reception to the present day.

The political theory that Arendt conceived in *The Human Condition* in 1958 has thus reached the limits of a history in which an abyss has opened between the usual forgiveness in the presence of others and the responsibility of the judiciary to address the crimes of history. In the wake of this abyss, the notion of forgiveness acquires a significance that Derrida brought into play, since in post-Shoah history we in fact are confronted with a desire for forgiveness that concerns the unforgivable. In this constellation, we can follow on from a point that Kristeva emphasizes in her interview: the interruption of continuity. However, while Kristeva bases her concept of forgiveness on that interruption and assigns forgiveness to its own, singular sphere, that of privacy, of psychoanalysis, and, at most, of aesthetics, she turns abnormality and atemporality into an absolute state, similarly to the way in which trauma has been universalized in a concept of history devoid of references (as in Cathy Caruth [Weigel, "Symptomatology"]). In the face of the abyss mentioned above, it seems to me that what is called for is a theory of forgiveness in which both meanings, Arendt's and Kristeva's, are not committed to separate political and private spheres but denote a dialectics of unsimultaneity: the forgiving of the unforgivable as an interruption of the usual, historical necessary forgiveness—that is, an interruption of action in terms of *vita activa*.

Ingeborg Bachmann on Failed and False Forgiveness

Such a rupture, in the discourse of the political-judiciary as it comes to terms with Auschwitz,

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occurs in a scene that Ingeborg Bachmann composed in the mid-1960s for her unfinished novel *Franza*. The scene has to do with the relation between inappropriate forgiveness and missing forgiveness.[2] During a journey through the desert, visiting a doctor who had taken part in medical experiments on concentration camp prisoners and who now lives under cover in Egypt, Franza confronts him with his role as a perpetrator, and she is startled by words she addresses to him: "Forgive me." Frightened by these words, she recalls her reading of the Nuremberg trials of Nazi doctors and remembers her repeated and equivocal interruption. While reading the trial reports, she began to catch her breath "when witness B was called"—that is, when court proceedings were interrupted, and a silence fell. This moment felt to her "as if the survivor had been swallowed up all of a sudden by the paper and ink on the page":

> And then witness B, after the earth had gone round once, so that this page could be written on: Forgive me for crying . . .
>
> No other instance of these words, "Forgive me," had occurred in the entire records. From the doctors nothing but sentences and decrees and what must appear legally foolproof, thus: I was in no position to judge that. And: I don't know. And: I had no knowledge of that. And: if you ask me, that cannot be judged in this way. There was constant talk of views and opinions; no silence ever fell, and never did anything come to a halt. (458)

With this interruption by a silence triggered by an inappropriate apology, together with the missing rupture, the lack of any suspension of the rhetoric of legitimation during the Nuremberg trials, Bachmann raises the issue of forgiveness in a way that is limited neither to pure ethics nor to a pure politics of normalcy. Rather, it situates forgiveness as a rupture in political discourse.

Translated by Mark Kyburz

Notes

[1] In the German version the references to Heidegger's language are more obvious.

[2] For a more detailed reading, including a reconstruction of a dialogue between Bachmann and Gershom Scholem on forgiveness, reconciliation, and messianism after 1945, see Weigel, *Ingeborg Bachmann*.

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