Arendt, Derrida, and the Inheritance of Forgiveness

In his published writings, Jacques Derrida rarely concerned himself with the work of Hannah Arendt. He discusses Arendt’s essays “Truth and Politics” and “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers” in “History of the Lie,” and interrogates her famous statements on the German language alongside comments made by Rosenzweig and Levinas in a long footnote in Monolingualism of the Other.¹ In addition to these readings, Derrida briefly evokes Arendt’s remarks on the decline of the nation-state and the rights of refugees in several analyses of hospitality and cosmopolitanism, and he speaks of her in discussions of Jankélévitch and forgiveness, as well as in remarks on the name of “democracy.”² On none of these occasions is Arendt’s work submitted to the kind of scrutiny and analysis that Derrida performs on so many other philosophers and writers. The citations, when they occur, are extremely limited in their scope, and Derrida makes no attempt to draw out any implications his claims might have for Arendt’s oeuvre as a whole. Arendt just is not an important figure in Derrida’s thinking.

One can only speculate about the reason for this lack of interest. What Derrida does say, brief as it is, suggests that he did not perceive Arendt’s writings to be a rich enough resource to warrant further attention. It is only in “History of a Lie” that any positive possibilities arising out of Arendt’s work are proposed, and even there it reads a little half-hearted. In the other discussions Derrida quickly passes from Arendt’s claims to those of others, or to broader tendencies in traditional thinking. Another explanation might be found in Derrida’s avoidance of
reading women, and in particular of reading women as philosophers.³ Or it could just be that
constraints of time, which work against all philosophers prevented any deeper engagement.

I do not want to overplay the significance of this absence of reading, claiming that it
demonstrates some deep or decisive point concerning Derrida’s writings as a whole, or that
Derrida committed some grave error in this omission. However, I would like to suggest that even
if Derrida himself did not engage extensively with Arendt’s writings, there are good reasons for
thinking that such an engagement would have proved more fruitful than his work might lead us
to believe. At the very least, Arendt and Derrida share much in their personal and intellectual
biographies. Both were Jewish with a distant relationship to their religion. Both emigrated, for
different reasons, from the countries of their upbringing. Both were educated in philosophy, but
had a greater influence outside of this discipline. Both enjoyed greater success and acceptance in
America than in the Europe that trained them. Both addressed political questions—Arendt at
every moment, Derrida more in his later writings—and in these investigations many of the same
issues are discussed, including sovereignty, human rights, violence, promising, and forgiveness.
And both constantly worked through an intense engagement with the philosophical tradition—
their respective writings always refer back to traditional texts, with a view to challenging and
transforming received interpretations.

It is this last point that provides the impetus for this essay. That the work of Arendt and
Derrida are marked by a continuous struggle with traditional texts is no doubt due to the thinker
who influenced them the strongest (another point in common), Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s
“destruction” of the history of being instituted a new way of reading the history of philosophy.
Both Arendt and Derrida took this seriously, and took it up, uniquely, in their inheritance of the
Heideggerian legacy. In this essay I will not investigate the relationship between Heidegger’s
thinking on the one hand, and the writings of Arendt and Derrida together on the other. Such a study would be fascinating, but it would need much more space than is permitted in an essay. Rather, I will examine Arendt’s and Derrida’s respective practices of reading the tradition, outlining some of their similarities and differences, by analyzing their particular engagements with the concept of forgiveness. My aim, through this comparison, is to bring into sharper relief some of the specific characteristics of each thinker’s pattern of inheritance. In order to achieve this, I will first examine Arendt’s remarks on Christian goodness, and Derrida’s on Christian giving, and from these concepts move to each thinker’s claims about forgiveness.

**Arendt and Christian Goodness**

In the second chapter of *The Human Condition* Arendt famously develops a distinction between the public and private spheres. Arendt argues that for the Greeks these two realms, which corresponded to the household and the *polis*, were opposed to one another. The household was driven by “life itself… which, for its individual maintenance and its survival as the life of the species needs the company of others.” The household was a space of inequality governed by violence, and was hidden from public view. The *polis*, by contrast “was the sphere of freedom” in which men appeared among their equals, and it was the plurality of perspectives among these equals that assured the reality of this common world.

Arendt does not advocate a return to Greek life, but it is clear that she values maintaining some difference between the public and the private. For against this distinction is cast a distinctly modern phenomenon of which she does not approve, the social. The social sphere, or society, comes about when the family provides the model for political organization, and the necessities of
life formerly confined to the household become political problems. For Arendt, the rise of society entails the destruction of the *polis*, and freedom disappears. It is thus paramount that the integrity of a private sphere be protected, in order to prevent what she sees as the dangerous spread of private concerns into the public gaze.

Arendt’s support of a public/private distinction is controversial, but this debate is not my immediate concern. Of more interest to me is a conclusion Arendt draws from the meaning of these terms, and the short discussion that follows. Towards the end of this chapter, she writes

> The most elementary meaning of the two realms indicates that there are things that need to be hidden and others that need to be displayed publicly if they are to exist at all. If we look at these things, regardless of where we find them in any given civilization, we shall see that each human activity points to its proper location in the world.  

One of the lessons that Arendt thus draws from the public/private distinction is that some things exist through their being hidden, while other things require public display. On the basis of this we can assign every activity a “proper location in the world.” Having made this claim, Arendt then illustrates it by analyzing Christian goodness. She argues that with the rise of Christianity, a new form of human action—the performing of good works—became prominent. Her thesis is that goodness is one of the things that must remain hidden in order for it to exist. Because of this, Arendt argues, the practice of doing good works encourages a retreat from the public world, and indeed is destructive of this world. Goodness is an anti-political force.
The argument Arendt gives in support of this striking claim can be broken down into two steps. First, she maintains that it is the hidden nature of goodness which makes its appearance impossible in the public world. She writes that
goodness obviously harbors a tendency to hide from being seen or heard… the moment a
good work becomes known and public, it loses its specific character of goodness, of
being done for nothing but goodness’ sake. When goodness appears openly, it is no
longer goodness, though it may still be useful as organized charity or an act of solidarity.9

The act of doing good works belongs in the realm of the hidden—the moment they are displayed
publicly these works lose their character of being good. Acting out of goodness must be done out
of sight. In further support of this claim, Arendt refers in passing to the Sermon on the Mount in
Matthew’s Gospel, where “Jesus warns against hypocrisy, against the open display of piety.”10 A
sample of this teaching is the following:

Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them.
Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in Heaven. Therefore, when you do a
charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues
and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have
their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what
your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who
sees in secret will himself reward you.11
The sermon continues in a similar vein warning against praying and fasting in public, twice repeating the claim that “your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”\textsuperscript{12} For Arendt, this Gospel passage testifies that only God can bear witness to an act of goodness. Before human eyes it can never appear.

This is the first step in Arendt’s argument, the claim that goodness is impossible in the public sphere. The second step extends this claim to argue that goodness is destructive of this realm. Arendt does this by discussing further the implications of the essential hiddenness of good works. As hidden, goodness inspires a love that is akin to a love of wisdom—to philosophy. For both the act of doing good works and that of philosophizing “have in common that they come to an immediate end, cancel themselves, so to speak, whenever it is assumed that man can \textit{be} wise or \textit{be} good.”\textsuperscript{13} Neither can be substantialized into a characteristic of an actor—goodness and wisdom are things one can try to \textit{do}, but which one can never \textit{be}.

But doing good works and doing philosophy are not completely similar on this point, since for Arendt, goodness is more extreme in its hiddenness than is wisdom. A philosopher must retreat from the public world into solitude, but remains in the company of herself. Thinking is never without interlocutors, if only because one will always have oneself as a partner in conversation. By contrast, the person in love with goodness leaves not only the company of others but also that of herself—the doer of good deeds is not “solitary,” but “lonely,” in Arendt’s terminology. This follows from Arendt’s claim that goodness will destroy itself in every appearance, even a merely internal one—“good deeds can never keep anybody company; they must be forgotten the moment they are done, because even memory will destroy their quality of being ‘good.’” While thoughts “can be transformed into tangible objects, which, like the written
page or the printed book, become part of the human artifice,” good works “can never become part of this world; they come and go, leaving no trace.”¹⁴

This extreme position regarding the loneliness produced by goodness is not without consequence. Most notably, it implies that the public world is not merely inappropriate for the appearance of good works, but that it is destroyed by them. Loneliness, Arendt writes

is so contradictory to the human condition of plurality that it is simply unbearable for any length of time and needs the company of God, the only imaginable witness of good works, if it is not to annihilate human existence altogether…. [The manifestation of goodness] is of an actively negative nature; fleeing the world and hiding from its inhabitants, it negates the space the world offers to men, and most of all that public part of it where everything and everybody are seen and heard by others.¹⁵

It is thus the fact that manifesting goodness leads one to be absolutely alone, not even in the company of oneself, which makes it such a threat to public life. This extreme loneliness negates the plurality essential to Arendt’s public sphere and the possibility of political action that might take place within this sphere. Good works cannot be seen, they cannot be shared so as to be performed in concert, nor witnessed so as to be remembered. They are thus antithetical to politics as Arendt understands it. This claim receives a vivid illustration in Arendt’s interpretation of the French Revolution. In On Revolution we read that it was because of a concern with goodness, and, related to this, compassion, that the French Revolution turned from being a properly political event to being a social one. This, for Arendt, turned it into a “tragic and self-defeating enterprise.”¹⁶ Seeking to solve the irresolvable problems of poverty and social injustice, the men
of the French Revolution turned away from the possibility of acting together in a plural public space. With this space negated and its plurality impossible, the Revolution inevitably turned violent, since Arendt argues that “goodness is strong, stronger perhaps even than wickedness, but that it shares with ‘elemental evil’ the elementary violence inherent in all strength and detrimental to all forms of political organization.” Goodness has a strength in the world, but it is a violent strength.

Arendt’s claim is thus that Christian goodness is impossible within and destructive of the public sphere, and so is a threat to politics. For this reason she advocates that in political action we follow Machiavelli’s teaching of “how not to be good.” This does not mean that we should learn how to be bad, for “the criminal act, though for other reasons, must also flee being seen and heard by others.” But we must divorce our politics from questions of goodness. We must seek a politics below the good.

**Derrida and Christian Giving**

Arendt’s analysis of Christian goodness is strongly marked by her inheritance of Heidegger, for it is precisely this kind of phenomenon—a thing that appears in the world only by disappearing—that the latter investigated in his writings on being. I now wish to consider an analogous structure that operates throughout the work of Heidegger’s other great heir.

At the end of *The Gift of Death*, Derrida gives his own reading of Matthew 6. This reading appears after a long meditation on Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, in which Derrida has focused on the question of sacrifice, interrogating the death to be given to Isaac as a gift from Abraham to God. For this reason, Derrida’s reading of Matthew 6 makes central the particular
“good deed” of Christian giving: “The sermon is organized around the question of poverty, begging, alms, and charity, of what it means to give for Christ, of what giving means to Christ.” The message of the sermon, on Derrida’s interpretation, is not quite the same as that determined by Arendt. It is not quite the case Christian goodness—here giving—is divorced totally from the world.

Derrida’s reading begins with the phrase that is repeated in Jesus’ warnings against public giving, praying, and fasting: “and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” This phrase suggests, in Derrida’s words, that “you can count on the economy of heaven if you sacrifice the earthly economy.” The Sermon thus demands that one renounce the earthly economy of giving, where gifts are seen and recognized in public, for a heavenly economy where only God knows that an act of giving has taken place. Up to this point the Derridean interpretation is consistent with that given by Arendt—Christian goodness, here giving, is a thing that would not be able to appear in a public world, manifesting itself only before the eyes of God in secret. This agreement is further strengthened when we examine what Derrida has written elsewhere on the gift. In *Given Time*, a book that is something of a companion piece to *The Gift of Death*, Derrida argues that a pure gift can never appear, for if it is recognized as such, it immediately effaces itself in an economy of exchange. He writes:

> For there to be a gift, it is necessary [il faut] that the donee not give back, amortize, reimburse, acquit himself, enter into a contract, and that he never have contracted a debt…. It is thus necessary, at the limit, that he not recognize the gift as gift. If he recognizes it as gift, if the gift appears to him as such, if the present is present to him as present, this simple recognition suffices to annul the gift…. At the limit, the gift as gift
ought not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift.\textsuperscript{22}

The role played here by appearance and recognition in the process of a gift’s self-destruction is very close to what was theorized by Arendt with respect to goodness. Further, similar to Arendt, Derrida extends this to the point where a gift cannot appear before consciousness, demanding an instantaneous forgetting. “For there to be gift, not only must the donor or donee not perceive or receive the gift as such, have no consciousness of it, no memory, no recognition; he or she must also forget it right away [à l’instant].”\textsuperscript{23}

However, even as they are close, the two interpretations of the Christian message differ on one important point. Where Arendt argues, as we have already heard, that good works “can never become part of this world; they come and go, leaving no trace,” on Derrida’s reading Christian giving always leaves a trace in the world. Consistent with his more extensive analyses of the gift, Derrida argues that even as the heavenly economy would place it beyond all earthly calculation, it remains that the Christian message opens itself up to precisely this kind of reckoning. The followers of Christ “are promised remuneration, a reward, a token (\textit{merces/misthos}), a good salary, a great reward \textit{(merces coposia/misthos polus), in heaven.} It is thus that the real heavenly treasure is constituted, on the basis of the salary or price paid for sacrifice or renunciation on earth.”\textsuperscript{24} The heavenly reward remains a reward, it remains promised to those who perform a worldly action, the action of renouncing the public world. It thus remains tied to the economy of the world, tied to the system of exchange in which giving takes place with the expectation of return. For Derrida, this paradox in Christ’s teaching thus prevents a total division between heaven and earth, between an infinite gift beyond all calculation and a giving
that would be merely an economic exchange. He does not affirm, along with Arendt, that the
good deed that is giving leaves no trace in the world.

**Derrida and Forgiveness**

In this way Derrida’s reading of the gift approaches, but does not quite conform to the model
articulated in Arendt’s analysis of Christian goodness. However, thus far I have only discussed
Derrida’s claims as they relate to half of the Arendtian story—I have compared his analysis of
the gift against Arendt’s claim that goodness cannot appear in the public world. In addition,
Arendt makes the further charge that the attempt to do good works is destructive of this world. It
is for this reason she sees it as an anti-political force, and preaches the message that political
actors must learn “how not to be good”—she advocates a politics below the good. What, then,
would Derrida say to this?

The Derridean response again comes very close to affirming Arendt’s position, for
Derrida too counsels a politics below the good. However, just as the position of giving in the
world is rendered impure from the Derridean point of view, so too the status of this “below” is
less than clear-cut. To demonstrate this, I will move from the gift to a related theme in Derrida’s
writings, forgiveness. Forgiveness is relevant here not only because of the etymological
connection between giving and forgiving, which Derrida exploits, but also because it too is
evoked in the Sermon on the Mount. After warning against public giving and prayer, Jesus offers
the Lord’s Prayer, which asks that God “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Jesus
then goes on to state that “if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also
forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your
Forgiveness is thus another example of what is given in an act of Christian goodness.

Strangely, Derrida does not discuss forgiveness in his interpretation of Matthew 6 in *The Gift of Death*. But forgiveness does appear elsewhere in his writings. I will focus on the claims he makes in “On Forgiveness.” Here Derrida discusses forgiveness as a gift, but the analysis is cast in terms slightly different from those that I have already examined. Derrida argues that the tradition from which we inherit our ideas of forgiveness (a tradition he names Abrahamic, “in order to bring together Judaism, the Christianities, and the Islams,”) is caught in an equivocation: “Sometimes, forgiveness (given by God, or inspired by divine prescription) must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition; sometimes it requires, as its minimal condition, the repentance and transformation of the sinner.” Our concept of forgiveness thus remains divided between unconditional and conditional understandings.

What is the status of this division? Derrida claims that it is not the result of a confusion in the tradition, a sign that we have yet to properly understand just what forgiveness means. Rather, he argues that this equivocation between unconditional and conditional understandings of forgiveness is an essential one—forgiveness has to be understood in both of these senses, at once. This is because, even as they contradict one another, these two understandings at the same time rely on one another—in Derridean terminology, they are aporetic. On its own, unconditional forgiveness is not enough, because it remains too pure to engage with things in the world. It thus needs conditions in order to effective: “If one wants, and it is necessary, forgiveness to become effective, concrete, historic; if one wants it to *arrive*, to happen by changing things, it is necessary that this purity engage itself in a series of conditions of all kinds.” For its part, conditional forgiveness alone is also not enough, for Derrida maintains that the very meaning of
forgiveness invokes an unconditionality. Conditional forgiveness therefore “refers to a certain idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness, without which this discourse would not have the least meaning.” Referring to the unconditional enables the conditional understandings to be of forgiveness, and not of something else.

Thus while the language of this analysis differs from that of the gift, a similar claim is advanced concerning the worldly status of forgiveness. Just as with a pure giving, pure forgiveness is said to be impossible in the world, and yet, it remains tied to the world. There is a similar economy at work here between the calculable and the incalculable, the finite and the infinite, where the unconditional gives meaning to the worldly, conditional acts, and, even as it lies outside the world, it can only be evoked through engaging with the world. The contrast with Arendt’s interpretation of Christian goodness thus remains, for Derrida is arguing that this act of doing good—forgiving—cannot be divorced from the world.

Further, Derrida argues that forgiveness remains in a similar relation to politics. “In order to inflect politics… in order to change the law… it is necessary to refer to a ‘‘hyperbolic’’ ethical vision of forgiveness’…. It alone can inspire here, now, in the urgency, without waiting, response and responsibilities.” According to Derrida, pure forgiveness can inspire politics to change. We can thus see that Derrida also differs from the second step taken in Arendt’s analysis of Christian goodness. To repeat, Arendt argued that goodness, in its inability to be in the world, goes beyond a simple unsuitability or irrelevance to politics to the point where it is destructive of it. Because of the loneliness that it produces, the attempt to do good acts actively negates the plural, public world within which politics must take place. By contrast, on Derrida’s reading, pure forgiveness also cannot be in the world, and yet, in its impure appearance, can inflect the political in ways not always destructive.
Now in highlighting this difference between Arendt and Derrida I do not mean to suggest that Derrida thinks that forgiving is good for politics. Derrida uses this vocabulary of unconditionality and conditionality across his writings to analyze a number of ethical and political concepts—in addition to forgiveness, he makes similar claims concerning hospitality, justice, and democracy—and he is consistent in maintaining that all of these concepts always carry with them both a chance and a threat. Thus, in the present case Derrida notes that forgiveness is not without violence, since “what makes the ‘I forgive you’ sometimes unbearable or odious, even obscene, is the affirmation of sovereignty.” This ambivalence can be seen more clearly by returning to Derrida’s remarks on the gift. Here too he argues extensively, and more directly, that it is a mistake to equate giving with the good. “If giving is spontaneously evaluated as good… it remains the case that this ‘good’ can easily be reversed. We know that as good, it can also be bad, poisonous (Gift, gift), and this from the moment the gift puts the other in debt, with the result that giving amounts to hurting, to doing harm.” As a gift, forgiveness thereby carries both the good and the bad, the benign and the dangerous, and this ambivalence is irreducible.

It is because of this ambivalence that Derrida can be seen also to side with a politics below the good, but the situation of this “below” is rather different to that presented by Arendt. Arendt sees goodness as only destructive of politics, and she is thus clearly against a politics of the good. For his part, Derrida sees politics as being based on a “perhaps” where what we think of as the best can turn toward the worst, and where the best is never divorced from violence. Forgiveness is thus potentially destructive of politics, but is also one of its chances. For this reason Derrida’s stance on this politics, a politics that engages with the unconditionality of forgiveness, remains ambivalent, being neither a strict opposition nor a simple affirmation.
Arendt and Forgiveness, or, How to do Things with the Words of Jesus

I have argued that Derrida theorizes giving and forgiving in a manner similar to Arendt’s analysis of Christian goodness, save for the fact that for Derrida these concepts remain tied to the world, however tenuously, in a non-destructive relation. As a consequence, Derrida provides a picture of a politics that, while also being opposed to the good, nevertheless engages with the Christian heritage in a way Arendt would seem to refuse. This established, I now want to turn to Arendt’s own analysis of forgiveness, which also appears in *The Human Condition*.

One might expect Arendt to consider forgiveness in much the same terms as Christian goodness, given the presence of the two in the Sermon on the Mount. This would be to present forgiveness as another anti-political force, otherworldly in character and ultimately beyond the human. However, this is precisely what Arendt does not do. Instead of handing forgiveness over to the divine, she claims it to be an eminently human power, as one of two faculties (the other is promising) that can remedy the dangers inherent in political action. Arendt embraces what she sees as forgiveness’s power of release, its power to let the past be past and thus cut short the on-going and otherwise never-ending consequences of human action. This power is, she maintains, crucial for human freedom. “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.”³⁶ For Arendt, goodness destroys the political, while forgiveness just might save it.

This contrast is even more striking since Arendt is explicit in acknowledging Jesus as the primary source of our understanding of forgiveness, even to the point of referring again to
Matthew Chapter 6. But the second reference to this Gospel chapter in *The Human Condition* is made in view of a very different end. Arendt earlier highlighted Jesus’ claims for the impossibility of open displays of piety in order to show how goodness cannot “‘appear unto men,’ but only unto God.” This placed goodness beyond the human world, and formed the basis of the claim that a love of it is destructive of the political. In the section on forgiveness, the spotlight is on those other lines from the same sermon that I have already cited: “If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” For Arendt, these words convey a very different message, namely, that in the case of forgiveness there is a dependence of God on humanity. Forgiveness is thereby firmly placed in the sphere of the human, with divine forgiveness conditional upon human forgiveness. Thus in *The Human Condition* Jesus is a religious figure with a religious message when he preaches goodness, and the content of this message is anti-political. By contrast, the doctrine of forgiveness, even as it appears in the same sermon, uttered but a breath later, are the words of a political theorist delivering a secular message that is crucial to the practice of politics.

Now there is a Derridean critique that one could run of Arendt’s position, and indeed Derrida himself suggests what this might look like in ‘Of Forgiveness.’ In the course of this interview, Derrida mentions Arendt’s analysis in *The Human Condition*, asserting in passing that she shares with Jankélévitch the assumption that “ Forgiveness must rest on a human possibility,” a possibility that he immediately equates with “a sovereign ‘I can.’” The reference to sovereignty invites a consideration of how Derrida’s more extended interrogations of it, particularly in *Rogues*, might be brought to bear on Arendt’s discussion of forgiveness. However, one of the basic assumptions of such a critique is questionable. For while Arendt does cast
forgiveness as a human possibility, it is too hasty to see this as presupposing a traditional conception of sovereignty. In fact, Arendt explicitly situates forgiveness, along with all action, as non-sovereign. This is one of the central claims of her thinking, and it is not by accident that it is repeated immediately before the discussion of forgiveness in *The Human Condition*—Arendt is clear in maintaining that there is a basic error in the “identification of sovereignty with freedom which has always been taken for granted by political as well as philosophic thought.”

Freedom is only found in action, which is always plural, beyond the limits of the sovereign I. Nonetheless, correcting this misreading on Derrida’s part does not complete negate his point. For in divorcing forgiveness from love, which is a crucial step in her claim that it is a secular, non-religious doctrine, Arendt goes on to suggest that it has much more in common with Aristotle’s notion of political friendship. Following the analysis of Aristotle given by Derrida in *Politics of Friendship*, one may well be able to show that Arendt has not broken free of all aspects of sovereignty, despite her wishes.

However, rather than pursue this critique, I would like to return my analysis to the issue of inheritance. What do these two accounts of forgiveness demonstrate about Arendt’s and Derrida’s respective methods of inheriting from the past? Derrida’s analysis depends heavily on a tradition, and on preserving a certain coherence of this tradition, such that he can then show the instability and ultimate incoherence of what this tradition contains. For the aporia of forgiveness begins with the equivocation between unconditional and conditional understandings of forgiveness bequeathed to us from the past. There is no question, for Derrida, of simply ignoring one set of these understandings, say, the unconditional, and arguing that forgiveness is merely misunderstood in those moments where texts privilege this aspect. On the contrary, Derrida maintains that the very meaning of forgiveness is tied to this unconditionality. To
suggest that we could change this meaning, and assert that forgiveness is fully conditional, without remainder, is to deny the weight of a tradition which in this instance Derrida insists cannot be avoided. But notice that if we were able to make this move then the aporia would disappear, since the meaning of forgiveness would no longer be divided in a contradictory tension.

Arendt, I suggest, is precisely attempting to make such a move, for she reworks the inherited understanding of forgiveness such that it moves out of its dependence on the unconditional. Arendt openly asserts that the fact that Jesus discovered the role of forgiveness “in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense,” and that forgiveness is among the “authentic political experiences… not primarily related to the Christian religious message.” Now in breaking with tradition in this way, Arendt presents a double, one might say schizophrenic Jesus—founder of the Christian religion on the one hand, ancient Jewish political theorist on the other, who it seems can indeed give one message with one hand without the other knowing it. Whether we agree with this move or not, or whether we think it is ultimately successful, I want to highlight the greater degree of freedom that Arendt claims at this moment in the face of the tradition. Under Arendt’s gaze, tradition has lost some of its weight, and we can pick and choose among the diverse threads of the legacies bequeathed to us, even to the point where we can undo contradictions from time to time. This is something that Derrida does not allow.

Thus the picture I am presenting is of a Derrida in one respect conservative of tradition, precisely where Arendt would make a break. To clarify this statement, I will make two further points. First, it is of course the case that neither of these positions on inheritance is simply assumed by each thinker without thought or justification. Arendt argues, on a number of
occasions, that our present condition is defined by a break in the thread of tradition. She claims in particular that totalitarianism has shown the utter inadequacy of traditional standards and conceptual categories for understanding the present. This does not mean, however, that the past has no relevance, only that our traditional ways of relating to the past are no longer useful. The break in tradition thus makes possible a freedom in the way we inherit the past, as we are challenged to engage with it outside of traditional sources. It is this freedom that I am suggesting Arendt not only preaches, but also tries to practice.44

Derrida, for his part, has shown time and again with a formidable persistence how so many philosophers failed to break with tradition, more often than not precisely at those moments when they thought they were most radical. This is most evident in his early writings, where he reads thinkers such as Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, Levinas, Levi-Strauss, and Foucault, all of whom thought they were turning away from metaphysics in one way or another, only to reinstate metaphysical oppositions at the heart of their thinking.45 In the light of these readings, it is therefore not enough to claim that one is escaping traditional patterns of thinking, and it might seem that such any such attempt is always doomed to fail.

Second, it is important not to take this characterization as a caricature of these two thinkers. I am not proposing a simple opposition between Arendt the innovator and Derrida the conservative. This picture is easily refuted by the sophistication of each thinker’s position—Arendt is not always or everywhere so free with the tradition, sometimes seeming to suggest that contradictions in thinking cannot be dissolved, and Derrida has explicitly challenged the distinction between innovation and conservation.46 Such a view also ignores the precise ways in which, in these instances, Arendt is being innovative and Derrida conservative in the inheritance of the past, and how the distinction between innovation and conservation does indeed become
contaminated at these very moments. Part of the force of Arendt’s innovation in retrieving a political Jesus relies on the fact that she conserves the traditional interpretation of the religious Jesus—this traditional interpretation provides the body into which her incision is made. Similarly, Derrida conserves a traditional understanding of forgiveness in order to destabilize it in his aporetic analysis, an analysis that is itself innovative. The moment of conservation is thus at the service of innovation.

Nevertheless, while avoiding the caricature, I do want to suggest that my analysis points to general features of these two thinkers’ methods of inheritance. If it is not to be found each time, this kind of relation to the past does recur from time to time in the writings of Arendt and Derrida. Arendt tends to make such dramatic breaks with the history of philosophy, while Derrida tends to be more cautious, acknowledging the weight and compulsion of tradition as he proceeds in minute steps. Which model is superior? It is tempting to back off at this point, and leave things in suspension, but I’d rather not do that. So I’ll hazard a guess, if only a provisional one. In the case of forgiveness, I think Arendt is right and Derrida wrong. I’m unconvinced that forgiveness needs to refer to the unconditional, that the weight of the tradition is so strong on this point so as to leave no other option. This does not mean, however, that Arendt’s reformulation is itself without contradiction—in particular she theorizes a fragile forgiveness which is perhaps too unstable to save politics in the way she would like.

This judgment points to a more general way of relating to the work of these two thinkers whose success or failure is as yet untested. Acknowledging that Derridean deconstruction, or what I have been here calling inheritance, proceeds only through moments of strategic conservation is to identity the very points that would constrain any analysis that might follow from this activity. I find that reading Arendt helps loosen things up, for she has an uncanny
ability to point out moments in the tradition that appear to be necessary, and yet are contingent. And, strangely enough, the moments she identifies resonate strongly with Derrida’s concerns. And, strangely enough, the moments she identifies resonate strongly with Derrida’s concerns.47 What this suggests, therefore, is a need to continue to think these two thinkers together, so as to probe more deeply the limits of what is possible in the inheritance of the past.

Notes:

3 For a very perceptive discussion of this avoidance, see Penelope Deutscher, “‘Women and So on’: Rogues and the Autoimmunity of Feminism,” Symposium 11 (2007).
4 I know of no works that address Arendt and Derrida together with respect to their debt to Heidegger. Indeed, a comprehensive study of Derrida’s relationship to Heidegger is yet to be written. For extensive analysis of the connections between Arendt and Heidegger, see, most notably, Jacques Taminiaux, The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger, trans Michael Gendre (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997); and Dana R. Villa, Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
5 “According to Greek thought, the human capacity for political organization is not only different from but stands in direct opposition to that natural association whose center is the home (oikia) and the family.” Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 24.
6 Ibid., 30.
7 Ibid., 30, 57.
8 Ibid., 73.
9 Ibid., 74.
10 Ibid., 75.
12 Matthew 6: 6, 18.
13 Arendt, The Human Condition, 75.
14 Ibid., 76.
15 Ibid., 76-77.
17 Ibid., 87.
18 Arendt, The Human Condition, 77.
20 Ibid., 99.
21 Ibid., 98.
Derrida does in fact mention the Lord’s prayer in one published discussion of forgiveness: “For it is not by chance, nor contingent, nor avoidable, that it would be always and finally of God that we ask forgiveness, even when we are linked by a scene of forgiveness, to one or the other [à tel ou tel] on earth, as we recalled last time when evoking ‘Our Father who are in Heaven’” Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” trans. Gil Anidjar, in Acts of Religion, ed. Gil Anidjar (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 397. These remarks suggest that Derrida’s interpretation of Jesus’ message is opposed to that given by Arendt that I discuss below. However, in the absence of the text of the previous seminar session (which this citation implies contains more on this matter), it is difficult to determine Derrida’s precise view.

It is important to emphasize that for Derrida the meaning of forgiveness involves both the unconditional and conditional understandings, and must do so if it is to be aporetic. I thus disagree with the interpretation offered by Ernesto Verdeja in his article “Derrida and the Impossibility of Forgiveness,” Contemporary Political Theory 3 (2004). Verdeja argues that “for Derrida forgiveness is properly theorized as unconditional, impossible and pure, and not as a negotiation of the two poles” (28). This enables Verdeja to claim that Derrida’s use of aporia in this instance is inconsistent with other uses in his work, in particular in denying the dangers of the abuse of this concept (44-45n12). But if we refuse that the meaning of forgiveness is found solely in the pure or unconditional pole, then this conclusion does not hold, and we can follow Derrida in pointing out the dangers that arise with any act of forgiveness as I do below.

This contrast is not as fine as it might be, and a further complication arises when we consider just what is meant by “politics” for each thinker. For Arendt, the politics that goodness threatens is the politics she is against—a model of governance ultimately based on Platonic rule and steeped in violence. Indeed, in her eyes, this second system of治理 is especially appropriate in this context since Derrida uses it as alternative to the role played by the Platonic good. If we were to follow this thought, we should, however, be careful not to assimilate too quickly the workings of khôra to that of the gift, since, as Derrida states in the same work, “Khôra receives rather than gives” (Derrida, Rogues, xiv.).


37 Ibid., 75.


40 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234. Note also that this shows Arendt’s goal to be much closer to Derrida’s “dream for thought” of dissociating “unconditionality and sovereignty” than he acknowledges (Derrida, “On Forgiveness, 59-60).

41 Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997). A second path that this text opens up that might prove relevant to a critique of Arendt’s position would be to transfer the insights of Derrida’s interrogation of the public/private split in Schmitt’s thought to the role this distinction plays at the basis of *The Human Condition*.

42 As Derrida states in answer to a question after giving the lecture “To Forgive”: “What, then, regulates my use of the word forgiveness? What should forgiveness mean, if it is not something of that sort? Well, here I must say I do not know. I have no knowledge of this. I can know what is inscribed in the concept of forgiveness that I inherit, so I work on this heritage” “On Forgiveness: A Roundtable Discussion with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning God*, 53.


44 See, for example, the Introduction to volume one of Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

45 For a very clear account of this Derridean move, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 38.

46 Speaking of inconsistencies in Marx, for example, Arendt writes: “Such fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers, in whom they can be discounted. In the work of great authors they lead into the very center of their work and are the most important clue to a true understanding of their problems and insight.” Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 25). Derrida’s interrogation of the distinction between innovation and conservation is developed most extensively in Jacques Derrida, “Psyche: Inventions of the Other,” trans. Catherine Porter, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

47 An example of relating Derrida and Arendt in this way is found in Richard J. Bernstein’s “Derrida: The Aporia of Forgiveness?” *Constellations* 13 (2006): 404, where he proposes that Derrida’s talk of “negotiating” an aporia can be usefully illuminated by considering Arendt’s reworking of Kantian reflective judgment.