

RELATIONSHIP ISSUES:
Forgiveness and Promising According to Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida

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Abstract

In retrospect this learning experience lead me to two conclusions. First, the way we hold someone responsible must reflect the openness and vulnerability of the actor and those to whom she relates. What we do when we hold someone responsible, administering a sentence, for example, must respond to the unending process of interaction and transformation that defines the human person in intersubjective life. This essentially describes the meaning and limits of holding someone responsible. The second lesson was more directly addressed in this thesis. It concerns the idea that the uncertain and vulnerable characteristics of the self that accompany our transformability, are not simply detriments to responsibility. Rather, the uncertain nature of a self as it exists in relationship with others is a condition of meaningfulness, responsibility, and love. As a condition of responsibility, our finitude calls for the sustaining ethical practices of promises and forgiveness. Uncertainty, even in its greatest manifestations as birth and death, is something we can embrace.

Acknowledgements

The concept and practice of belonging is likely the most important lesson I have learned throughout my experience at ICS and during the researching and writing of my M.A. thesis. Human beings find their support and bearing outside of themselves in such things as other selves, a world of meaning, and a material reality. Selves are both stretched across time and diffused in a complex web of relationships just as I found myself stretched and diffused throughout the process of writing this paper. On a profound level, my personal growth and academic achievement isn't simply my own. My movement towards maturity was made possible by administration, faculty, family, and friends.

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The economic connotations attached to the word "debt" seem to dirty the idea that relationships are made meaningful through the debt we owe each other. Perhaps this cannot be overcome and it certainly shouldn't be ignored. Nevertheless, thanks to the power of forgiveness, the gifts given by loved ones don't accumulate like interest payments on a mortgage. I am grateful for this fact as I reflect the debt I owe my teachers and my family. I confess that my editing skills would never be enough to repay my brother, Seth Ratzlaff, for his gift of time and wordsmithing. But it is from my wife Jenica that I have received my profoundest gift. Through my foray into graduate studies I have discovered that I belong to her like I belong to no other.

Preface

The things birth sets in motion seem to have an unlimited reach, extending far beyond the body that emerges from the womb. Few comparisons are fitting to describe the meaningfulness of birth. Over the course of writing this thesis I've had the opportunity to personally witness and experience the birth of two children, but also the birth of a mother, the birth of a father, and, ultimately, the birth of a family. This experience obviously "helped" shape my thesis in as much as it complicated the process.

Just as it would be remiss to overlook the importance of birth, I feel compelled to briefly discuss how this learning experience has transformed my relationship with religion. When you're saturated from an early age in religious ceremony and discourse, as I was, the meaning of religious concepts and rituals can be obscured by how self-evident they seem. One can easily take one's tradition for granted. My thesis brought this tendency to light for me, especially as I grew to better understand some of the theory that underpins principles germane to religion, such as, forgiveness, confession, reconciliation, promises, freedom, and conversion. This personal transformation illuminated religious texts and practices that I find belonging in. In particular, I have become increasingly interested in how themes significant to my Mennonite inheritance, such as, pacifism, reconciliation, and forgiveness could benefit from an engagement with the philosophical tradition represented in this thesis by Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida.

As important as religion and child rearing are to this thesis, the desire to write about responsibility originated from a question I faced in my volunteer and professional work in the field of restorative justice. The question, simply stated, is "to what extent can we hold someone responsible?" There's an emphasis in restorative justice circles on the underlying causes of crime, or

the broader context in which crime originates. Such an emphasis sometimes seems to elevate systemic causes of crime above causes associated with the decisions of an individual. My participation in discussions around these issues revealed the challenge of simultaneously recognizing the responsibility of the broader context that enables action and the responsibility of the individual. The level of responsibility we assign to one, seems to threaten the responsibility of the other. Essentially, this thesis is an attempt to consider the dynamics of this tension. Chapter One focuses on the character of a self: how a self emerges in, through, and out of its relationships with others. Chapter two focuses on responsible action: how responsibility is enabled and hindered by our relationships with others.

In retrospect this learning experience lead me to two conclusions. First, the way we hold someone responsible must reflect the openness and vulnerability of the actor and those to whom she relates. What we do when we hold someone responsible, administering a sentence, for example, must respond to the unending process of interaction and transformation that defines the human person in intersubjective life. This essentially describes the meaning and limits of holding someone responsible. The second lesson was more directly addressed in this thesis. It concerns the idea that the uncertain and vulnerable characteristics of the self that accompany our transformability, are not simply detriments to responsibility. Rather, the uncertain nature of a self as it exists in relationship with others is a condition of meaningfulness, responsibility, and love. As a condition of responsibility, our finitude calls for the sustaining ethical practices of promises and forgiveness. Uncertainty, even in its greatest manifestations as birth and death, is something we can embrace.

Introduction

Making commitments to others and exercising responsibility in relation to them can be a struggle. Committing to a partner or career path, for example, is a limiting and weighing decision. Promises mean action. And when a promise is broken, when one fails in one's commitment to another, relationships are often jeopardized. The pain and trials that accompany commitments can feel, at times, overwhelming. Such stress makes us wish we knew the right thing to do, negating the need for confession or forgiveness. This paper argues, however, that there is a fundamental opacity to life, that one's identity and the situation to which one is answerable to are never fully transparent, and thus that guarantees are never forthcoming. In other words, the implication of our identities in the things of the world and in our relationships to other people cause us to be fundamentally outside of our own control, and thus our identities and the ways in which we are supposed to take responsibility will always be uncertain for us.

This opacity significantly hinders our ability to act in an informed and decisive manner, a manner that comprehends all the extenuating circumstances of any given situation. Because of the uncertainty involved in the formation of identity and the enactment of ethical responsibility, human practices such as promising and forgiving have personal and ethical import: we promise to fulfill certain roles and commit to certain people in response to the uncertainty of our situations and ourselves, and we forgive the infidelities risked in the context of this uncertainty. And because of the fundamental opacity that characterizes human life, these activities of promising and forgiving are key to both identity and ethical action. Further, developing a coherent sense of identity and acting ethical remains possible, since it is not simply the case that uncertainty in relation to identity and ethical action merely threatens our capacity to act responsibly. Rather, as this thesis will show, such

uncertainty is the very condition of the possibility of ethical action. In other words, the very meaningfulness of our relationships is due to the activities of promising and forgiving that accompany uncertainty. In a sense, this thesis focuses on two ideas central to Hannah Arendt's thought, showing exactly how forgiveness and promising are significant in the way that she has already noticed. Forgiveness and promising are the specific and central *ethical practices* that reflect our status as beings who are uncertain to ourselves.

How one appears in public to others and the ways in which one tries to deal with the challenges of communicating oneself to others is the essential issue at stake in Chapter One. Ultimately this chapter is oriented towards the goal of showing how promises are the specific ethical practice demanded by the opaque nature of identity. Arendt's seminal work, *The Human Condition*, offers a way of illuminating the uncertainty of identity and the significance of promises, and so we will begin with that text, and specifically we will begin by examining the conditions under which we *appear* to others in public.¹ We are interested here in the way in which one experiences one's identity taking shape, the way in which it reveals and expresses itself and is revealed and expressed, and thus this chapter is dedicated to exploring the conditions under which this happens and a self appears, describing the role that artifacts and other people play in that context. After illuminating the necessary conditions of appearance, we extrapolate, primarily from Arendt's concept of "action," how these conditions—artifacts and other selves—are also, paradoxically, obstacles that *obstruct* the appearance of a self. The conditions of appearance and the way in which artifacts and other selves obscure the appearance of a self make up the content of Sections One through Three. The final two sections of Chapter One turn to the thought of Jacques Derrida. Using the concept of *différance*, it is claimed that the identity of the self is not only made opaque by artifacts and others, but also by time

¹ Arendt is interested specifically in the public domain here, and with things that can, in principle, be seen or heard by everyone, but we will speak about what is involved in appearing to others in general, not concerning ourselves exactly with the distinction between public and private.

and that self's own actions. These final two sections of Chapter One also help illuminate the propensity of the self to change in meaningful ways; time and a self's action introduce new realities to its life that it changes to accommodate. Finally, although given this propensity to change it seems to be difficult to define the identity of a self ultimately, we can see, from the very fact that societies and relationships between individuals basically function, that identities are also relatively stable, and that selves are capable of taking up specific roles and identities. What, then, is the relationship between this stability and the opacity of a self to itself and to others, as well as its propensity to change? We will see, in the concluding section of Chapter One, how promises are one central human practice we have that effectively addresses this difficulty, of taking responsibility for our opacity and our transformability. When we identify ourselves in a specific way, we invite specific kinds of interaction, and for that interaction others have to have a certain faith in our stability; hence, actors must effectively promise others that what they are involved in, the specific identities they assume, is true. A parent, for example, must promise others—her partner, children, and extended family—that she is committed to the project of parenting and, thus, is deserving of the name “parent.” Chapter One concludes by noticing how promises are a central ethical practice, in light of a self's status as a being who is uncertain of itself—a practice that aids in making human interaction and relationships possible.

In light of some of the challenges of appearing in public and communicating who we are to others, Chapter Two takes up the issue of responsibility, examining how one can interact with others in a responsible way. Turning once again to the work of Derrida, we focus on some of the themes raised in Chapter One, exploring the phenomenon of time, especially, and how it complicates our attempts to take responsibility. The difficulties created by time ultimately result in the fact that by responding in a specific way to a particular situation an individual may act ethically but she will also

necessarily fail in her commitments to others. One cannot respond to all the ethical demands made in each moment; in order to respond to one, one must sacrifice some others. Expecting that an individual will be capable of keeping all of her commitments or at least atoning for all the sacrifices she makes is debilitating. The opacity of life demonstrates the flawed logic of relationship based on this kind of economy, and introduces the need for the ethical practice of forgiveness: like the ethical practice of making promises, the practice of forgiveness reflects the self's status as a being who is necessarily uncertain of and opaque to itself and its situation. I will argue, however, that the difficulties associated with time are not simply obstacles to be overcome; rather, it is on the basis of these difficulties that responsible action remains a possibility.² If this is true, then forgiveness is essentially demanded; if we can only act in one-sided ways, and if this is in fact the condition of the possibility of responsible action, then forgiveness can be a legitimate way of responding to these one-sided ways of acting. Chapter Two concludes by suggesting that relationships flourish on the bedrock of forgiveness.

² That the opposing nature of these two imperatives is not simply an obstacle to be overcome was first suggested to me in Jeffrey Nealon in his book, *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction*. Here Nealon argues for a certain discipline of deconstruction characterized as a double gesture or double reading. In *Double Reading*, Nealon shows how such a discipline might function in the context of literary criticism. Nealon writes, "the necessity to think from within a language or a tradition, even as one attempts to think what is repressed within that tradition or what is beyond it" (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1996), 169).

Chapter One: Promises, Identity, and Being with Others

I: *A Few Preliminary Remarks on Appearance*

We develop into specific kinds of people with specific roles and responsibilities. How do we constitute and define ourselves in the face of others or publicly? How do our identities take shape? What are the conditions under which we come to be who we are? Relying on Arendt's notion of "appearance," let us identify some of these conditions of identity-formation, in order to position ourselves to be able to discuss, in Chapter Two, the possibility of developing a self capable of responsible action.

Arendt associates appearance with what she labels "the public realm." For Arendt, the term "public" signifies all those things that appear and, in principle, can be seen or heard by everyone.³ Arendt contrasts appearance to phenomena that occur in one's intimate or solitary private life, including "the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses."⁴ Phenomena in one's private life lead an "uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance."⁵ Consider, as an example, feelings of betrayal: a betrayal leaves the status of a relationship uncertain until the experience of the betrayal is articulated and thereby transformed from a private experience into a shared communication. All that is needed to deprivatize an experience is a sign that communicates what has occurred or been felt in private. Transforming something private, such as an experience, thought, or feeling, into a communicable sign, such as a

³ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50.

⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

word, deed, or object, allows others to “see what we see and hear what we hear.”⁶ Being in public with others, thus, requires signs that can, in principle, be seen or heard by everyone. When an agent communicates something private, others can confirm what she sees and hears, assuring her of the reality of her solitary experience. In fact, for Arendt, “appearance—something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves—constitutes reality”⁷—by which she means the reality of meaningfulness, human reality. Although it is true that subjective feelings and thoughts have a certain kind of “reality,” Arendt argues that the reality of the external world is accessed as objects are put on display, available for intersubjective sharing; when we have greater access to others’ capacities to make and interpret meaning, we have greater access to reality. A tree, for example, is meaningful for human interaction only because it is constituted as an object that can be shared with others.⁸ Arendt’s contrast between the private and public realms reveals not only that the appearance of a thing, such as an object, a concept, or a self, requires that it can be seen or heard by an audience, but also that the presence of others helps confirm or deny the reality of the thing in question—even, as is of interest for us, the reality of ourselves as selves.

Thus, to summarize, Arendt’s discussion of the distinction between the private and public realms of life, independently of what one might think of the distinction itself, reveals a general condition of appearance that seems to hold true for everything that is exposed in the public realm, including a self—that others are present and capable of witnessing the thing in question and of giving us access to it in the complexity of its meaningfulness. Our very own identities as selves are witnessed to by other people; our identity as meaningful is as if constituted by them, found outside of ourselves in them.

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50.

⁸ A similar observation will be made in Section Three when we observe that an individual’s identity arises within a complex “web” of relationships.

In addition to noticing that the realm of appearance requires that things, including selves, be capable of being displayed to others and of being recognized by them, it is important, for our purposes, to note a second characteristic of the public realm and thus a second condition of our capacity to appear in it: that its contents are durable enough to facilitate communication over time and between different selves. This second characteristic can be illustrated by contrasting biological life with the artificial, human-made world.

Arendt argues that biological life is an endless cycle of production and consumption indifferent to the world of appearance. The cyclical movement of nature, Arendt writes, “is a process that everywhere uses up durability, wears it down, makes it disappear, until eventually dead matter... returns into the over-all gigantic circle of nature herself, where no beginning and no end exist.”⁹ Consider the life-cycle of a tree. Beginning as a humble sapling, a tree grows into a massively complex organism before it returns to the earth. The significance of this is that the dead tree is consumed by insects and microbes, etc. and becomes nutrient-rich soil in which new organisms can thrive. From the viewpoint of nature, the tree is part of a continuous repetition: no distinction is made between the tree as dead, as young, as full-grown. Who is to say, from nature’s point of view, which is the best? Within the cyclical process of nature, growth and decay are effectively the same—the growth of a sapling is as much the process of nature as its decay. In fact, within the closed natural universe, according to Arendt, nothing appears or disappears, there is no death or birth as such, but simply a continuous cycle of life. Further, nothing is secure within the perpetual biological cycling; things are produced but will also be consumed by the motor of life. For Arendt, nature is always in a process of consuming and producing, a process that has neither a discernable end nor a discernable beginning. From nature’s viewpoint distinctions are of little consequence.

⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 96.

Life within a human world, on the contrary, follows a linear movement limited by a beginning and an end, one “whose very motion nevertheless is driven by the motor of biological life.”¹⁰ As abstracted from the natural world, artifacts are capable of taking on a life of their own, a life defined by a beginning and an end. A tree, for example, abstracted from nature, is perceived to have a life of its own distinct from a singular biological thing in itself caught up in the vortex of nature. Once abstracted from nature’s endless cycle, a tree, for example, becomes a thing that can, in principle, be meaningful for us. It can be communicated to others and used as a mediating power in our interaction with them, and thus can facilitate relationship. From the viewpoint of the human-made world, a thing abstracted from nature is understood as a particularity distinct from its surroundings. For our purposes, the point here is that, once abstracted from nature’s cycle, the tree takes on relevance for relationships between different human beings. Only when we abstract things from nature, and make them into determinate, lasting, and specific things, do they have meaning for our interaction, our relationships with others.

At least one characteristic we give to artifacts (be they physical objects or ideas) is their durability. The artificial world opposes or provides a measure of security from the turning of nature’s endless repetition. The fabricated human realm consists of everything from household goods and works of art to codes of law and a variety of languages. These products, Arendt argues, have the durability needed to weather nature’s insatiable “appetite” for production and consumption. Artificial products are not created for the purpose of being consumed, but are to be used without being used up. The human-made world provides a reprieve from nature’s constant threat of, for example, decay or overgrowth. Moreover, such durability actually enables communication. A self is capable of appearing in public, communicating who she is, through

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 97.

reference to and reliance upon the artificial world. A thing that remains present, in different times and places, can have *publicity*; it may be seen and heard and used to help accomplish our seeing and hearing. Indeed, the greater potential a thing has to be witnessed by the most possible people, the greater its publicity.¹¹ Thus, the durability and relative permanence of the artificial world enables communication, or, in Arendt's words, "makes appearance and disappearance possible."¹²

A self's appearance, therefore, depends on the durability of the human-made world. Through employing things of the artificial world, a self is capable of communicating and appearing to others. A self finds stability from the endless cycle of nature through acting in and through the artificial world, creating things that express who it is and that have the durability required to be shared with others.¹³ The artificial world offers a level of predictability through which human beings can "retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table."¹⁴ A self that appears depends, therefore, on a durable world of artifacts.

To summarize, human relationship does not occur in a world that is simply a natural cycle in which each moment is as essential or inessential as any other, but, because we live in a *human* world where there can be meaningful *things* mediating our interaction and supporting our existence, we can appear to others in public. Thus, contrasting the natural world to the world of artifacts reveals that, in addition to being conditioned by the presence of other selves, appearing and relating to others is made possible by a world of artifacts durable enough to be held in common. In the following sections, I will treat these points independently, describing in more detail how other selves and

¹¹ It is for this reason that Arendt admires the human drive for immortality as she believes that it generally indicates a healthy public realm (*The Human Condition*, 56).

¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 97.

¹³ Elsewhere, Arendt writes, "wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in between space that all human affairs are conducted" (*The Promise of Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 106).

¹⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137.

artifacts support and empower the development of individual identity, but also, paradoxically, how these conditions also operate as obstacles to transparent self-disclosure.

II: *The Self and Artifacts*

Understanding identity, one's own and others, as one communicates and interacts with others can be a challenge. The medium through which communication occurs is a source of this confusion. It is easy to confuse a self with that which appears, or more accurately, with the medium through which a self appears—the artificial world. Although the artificial world enables the appearance of a self—that is, its revelation in the public sphere—it is a mistake to equate a self with an artifact or the process of creating a self with the process of fabricating an object. Analyzing how a self differs from an artifact elucidates the opacity of the self, the way in which a self is made opaque by the things that mediate its appearance. Further, understanding both how a self differs from an artifact and a self's opaque nature brings clarity to the challenges confronting responsible interactions—mainly that we have to be capable of seeing, at one and the same time, how the self relies on artifactual reality in order to appear but is not reducible to it.

The fabrication of an artifact concerns itself with a definite end: the fabricator begins a project with some idea of what she intends to create, and the process is generally guided by this preliminary idea or guiding model. From the beginning, therefore, fabrication has a more or less predictable end, and we can judge the success of that fabrication on the basis of whether or not it resulted in the predictable end: either the carpenter, for instance, was successful or she failed to achieve what she was hired to accomplish. To have a beginning “and a definite, predictable end is

the mark of fabrication.”¹⁵ Additionally, fabrication is defined by the categories of means and ends: the fabricator selects the means to accomplish the end she has in mind. Finally, the process of fabrication finishes when something new—a chair or table, for example—has been created. The fabricated thing, therefore, “is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it and that it is only a means to produce this end.”¹⁶ Thus, the fabrication process—the way in which an artifact appears in the world—is marked by a guiding model and a predictable end.

In contrast to the process of fabrication of an artifact, the process of “fabricating” a self does not originate in a guiding model or end with a predictable product. The appearance of a self differs on both these accounts. This paradox—that the creation of a self is a beginning rather than an end—is obvious in the example of child-rearing. First, a self is not “fabricated” with an end in mind—indeed, when we see techniques oriented to such an end in the context of parenting, we label them “domineering” or “tyrannical.” Any sense of ends is developed in interaction with the very being who is being “fabricated.” It could be the case that a parent is aware of certain qualities that she would like to see manifest in her child, but she does not create these qualities in the same way that one fabricates a preconceived, enduring artifact—the same way a carpenter, for example, imagines, selects, and sets to work constructing a cedar bench. Rather, parents set to work creating a world in which these qualities are possible, a world in which a child has the opportunity to develop patience and kindness in herself, for example. Second, the appearance of a self differs from a fabricated thing in the sense that although it has a definite beginning—a natural birth—it has no predictable end. Children, arriving through the process of pregnancy and birth, carry an element of spontaneity. One cannot know the identity of a self before it is born in the same way that a

¹⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 143.

¹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 143.

carpenter understands a blueprint which guides her work. Arendt argues that the project of “fabricating” a self is clearly different than fabricating an artifact, because the “end,” the creation of a self, is not an end.

Parents create and sustain a world in which a child’s freedom is nurtured, in the hopes that a being with the capacity for engaging in responsible relationships with others will appear. Child-rearing’s end “product” is not really an end, but rather a self that is, according to Arendt, itself a beginning, capable of new things and of remaking itself.¹⁷ Further, the parent’s contribution to a child’s development is only one side of the equation; a child’s development is also a product of her own actions. And, although a child may desire to “make” herself into a particular person, her experience in “making” herself could change her desires. She could develop in ways that deviate from present plans or desires. Thus, the development that flows out of a self’s own actions cannot be guaranteed by some original desire or blueprint. This is essentially Arendt’s concept of natality: that through birth someone new—a self—enters the world that has the potential for spontaneous action.¹⁸ The appearance of a self neither ends the process of self creation, nor does it follow a guiding model. Rather, the appearance of a self is a beginning that has no precedent. Thus, it is not the case that a self is the end-product of a process of fabrication, nor, for that matter, is it the case that a self can be “manufactured” in the same way as an artificial thing. There is, therefore, a categorical difference between artifacts and selves: fabrication depends on an end (a guiding model

¹⁷ Attempts to calm or solve the unpredictability inherent to this event works towards the destruction of human life, which is a criticism Arendt ultimately levels at totalitarian regimes. Miguel Vatter, quoting Arendt’s work diaries from 1951, writes, “with men came into the world the beginning. On this rests the sanctity (*die Heiligkeit*) of human spontaneity. Totalitarian extermination of men as men is the extermination of their spontaneity. This means at the same time the reversal of creation as creation, as to-have-made-a-beginning [*die Rückgängigmachung der Schöpfung als Schöpfung, als Einen Anfang-gesetzt-Haben*]” (“Natality and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt,” *Revista De Ciencia Política* 26, no. 2 (2006): 142).

¹⁸ In the next section, “The Self and Others,” we discuss the role narratives play in the formation of a self’s identity. For an analysis of the relationship between Arendt’s concepts of natality and narratives, refer to Julia Kristeva’s book, *Hannah Arendt Life Is a Narrative*. Here Kristeva argues that Arendt uses the discourse of narrative, the invented story that accompanies history, to stabilize the indeterminateness created by natality ((Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 15).

and an end product) and selves depend on spontaneous action that has no predictable end; the “end” changes through the very process of “producing” the self.

The nature of a self also differs from the nature of an artifact in that artifacts are shareable and can generally be exchanged, whereas a self resists being held in common. One might give oneself to another, a self-sacrifice, but the recipient does not receive this gift in the same way that she might receive something. It is not the case that a self given or sacrificed becomes the property of the recipient. Jacques Derrida, analyzing a passage from Martin Heidegger, demonstrates this principle with the experience of death, writing, “I can give the other everything except immortality, except this *dying for her* to the extent of dying in the place of her and so freeing her from her own death... I cannot die in her place, I cannot give her my life in exchange for her death.”¹⁹ In other words, a self may sacrifice her own life so that another’s can be extended, but it is not as if death has been exchanged; the recipient will still have to face her own death in the future. Death, in a grandiose way, demonstrates the singular nature of a self—a self cannot be transformed into an artifact or commodity that can be shared or exchanged. Selves, in other words, have a character about them that is uniquely their own. In general, however, even beyond death, I cannot simply give another person perfect access to who I am; this, unlike an artifact, is fundamentally unshareable. One cannot share her identity without remainder: something will always remain hidden. The artifacts, in contrast, can change ownership and, generally speaking, are transparent to inquiry. One can, theoretically, observe all the different parts of an artifact, scientifically probing its every aspect. What secrets an artifact might harbor are open to discovery. For these reasons artifacts serve as medium through which a self can express who it is, even if such an expression is only ever partial.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42.

While we cannot share ourselves as such, we can rely on artifacts in order to share ourselves and express our identification with others, using a flower, a letter, or a ring, for instance, to make our thoughts and feelings known. In order to communicate a self to others, to share one's identity, we use the mediation of objects that can be held in common, i.e., the artificial world. Artifacts are, in a sense, the table around which human beings communicate and appear to one another. Individual's utilize artifacts to express identity. One's clothing, for instance, expresses something about who one is. Further, a person's words are often contradicted by the way in which she interacts with artifacts: the way she keeps her house reflects the fact that she is not the organized person she claims to be, for example. In general, human reality is completely integrated with the artificial world; artifacts are the ingredients out of which one builds a home or, as Arendt writes: the most important task of the human artifice "is to offer mortals a dwelling place more permanent and more stable than themselves."²⁰ Here we discover the first way that the transparency of a self is muddled: even though a self is importantly different from an artifact in the world, it cannot appear without appearing through this thing it is not—through and with the mediation of artifacts in the world.

Artifacts, then, can also be used to deceive others; for instance, one can use a ring to communicate a commitment that she does not intend to keep. Through carefully constructed photos, for example, one can pick and choose the types of things shared on social media carefully hiding those things about oneself that one does not want others to see. Because artifacts are something different from a self, they do not reveal a self in a completely transparent way. Artifacts, thus, are the medium through which identities are constructed and an obstacle that can obstruct identity.²¹

²⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 152.

²¹ On this point Arendt writes, "for the world and the things of the world, in the midst of which human affairs take place, are not the expression of human nature, that is, the imprint of human nature turned out-ward, but, on the contrary, are the result of the fact that human beings produce what they themselves are not—that is, things—and that

This section has led us to notice a number of things. First, our discussion of how a self appears has led us to notice that a self is not an end-product but rather is itself a beginning. Second, since a self is not the type of thing that can be held in common—death, for example, cannot be shared—then, in order to appear, a self must employ the common world of artifacts. In other words, failing to give oneself to another one gives *something* instead, such as a flower, a letter, or some other artifact in an effort to communicate with that other person. Since a self is different from common artifacts, however—a self is neither a definitive end nor can it be held in common—artifacts can point to a self but never fully disclose a self. One cannot, therefore, describe a self without getting entangled in the things of the world, resulting in a description that is not adequate to the self. In this way the disclosure of a self is muddled by artifacts in the world. While an established artificial world is one of the conditions necessary for a self to present itself, it yet, paradoxically, also hinders self-disclosure. When one interacts with others it is important, therefore, that one is open to seeing, at one and the same time, how the self relies on artifactual reality in order to appear but is not reducible to it.

III: *The Self and Others*

While we find out who we are and develop our identities through interaction with other people—that is, while the expression and development of identity is enabled by them—they, like artifacts, also contribute to the obfuscation of our identities. The relation between selfhood and others is a complex one that could easily overwhelm the task of this thesis. This section, therefore, concerns itself with only one aspect of this relation: the way in which the presence of other selves

even the so-called psychological or intellectual realms become permanent realities in which people can live and move only to the extent that these realms are present as things, as a world of things” (*The Promise of Politics*, 107).

both empowers and frustrates one's ability to unequivocally identify who one is as a particular self.²² Additionally, examining the nature of this empowerment/interruption helps illuminate the distinctiveness of identity that was suggested in the last section: that the production of a self does not come to an end, but, rather, identity formation is an ongoing process. Interaction, thus, depends on recognizing that, as much as one might appear as a complete, definitive subject, a self is always in the midst of changing in unpredictable ways. Let us begin by exploring in more detail the way in which other selves support the process of our development of identity, and then move on to discuss the way in which they oppose and frustrate it.

The "Web" of Relationships and a Self as a Narrative Centre of Gravity

Arendt argues that, opposed to a strictly materialistic understanding of the world—that in order to explain reality one need only refer to physical processes—there is a non-materialistic realm of reality that exists between human beings. Although this subjective in-between is not tangible, it “is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.”²³ She labels this reality the “web” of human relationships, “indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.”²⁴ Understanding this relational web is important for two reasons. First, it enables a description of the formation of a self that does not depend on the same categories as that of the fabrication process, which involves categories of means and ends, for example. This is important because, as we

²² In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that human “plurality” is a condition of the “web” of relationship. Peter Fuss provides some helpful insight into this concept arguing that by “plurality,” Arendt refers to something different than simply the diversity in organic nature seen between a rock and a tree. The plurality of humanity differs in the fact that humans alone have the ability to communicate this distinction. A human being can “communicate [itself] and not merely some shared attribute” (“Hannah Arendt's Conception of Political Community,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn A. Hill (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), 158). The issue under examination in this chapter relates to the challenge of actually communicating a self's identity.

²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.

²⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 183.

demonstrated, a self is categorically different from an end-product. Second, the relational web aids an analysis of how a self's dependence on other selves obstructs a completely transparent description of a self.

Let us look at Daniel Dennett's concrete description of the self as a centre of narrative gravity in order to have in front of us a concrete image of the way in which others are operative in our development as selves.²⁵ Dennett suggests that one of the best ways to imagine the self is by comparing it to an object's centre of gravity. A centre of gravity has no material reality, no mass, no colour, no physical qualities, and yet it has a spatio-temporal location.²⁶ Further, a center of gravity can be easily manipulated by changing the shape of the object. When a spoon is bent, for instance, it no longer balances on the same point. A self's identity, Dennett argues, is like the centre of gravity of a complex object with many moving parts, except that the moving parts of a self are the narratives told to make sense of that self's words and actions. A helpful way of envisioning this idea is to picture a self as the nucleus of an atom; rather than circled by electrons, however, a self is circled by a cloud of malleable narratives. As the narratives that circle a self are added to or edited, the self's narrative centre of gravity—its identity—shifts. Consider a child who, unable to clearly communicate her thoughts and desires, depends on parents to interpret her actions. The child might display an ability to shrug off painful experiences, for example, and, in response, a parent might attribute to the child the quality of toughness as opposed to sensitivity. Whether or not this narrative is accurate, it will most likely have an impact on that child's identity and how she understands the world around her. Further, when the child grows up she may give reasons for her past actions that

²⁵ When compared to Dennett's description of the self, Seyla Benhabib description of narrative in Arendt's thought reveals the commonality regarding the plasticity of identity in Arendt and Dennett. Benhabib writes, "the narrative structure of action and of human identity means that the continuing retelling of the past, its continued reintegration into the story of the present, its reevaluation, reassessment, and reconfiguration are ontological conditions of the kinds of beings we are" ("Hannah Arendt and the Redemptive Power of Narrative," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 125).

²⁶ Daniel Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, ed. Kessel, Frank S., et al. (Hillsdale, N.J.: Psychology Press, 1992), 104.

counter the meaning given to them by others, thus changing the interpretation and narratives associated with these actions. In this way a self is pushed and pulled not only by its own understanding of the world but also by the interpretations of others. For Dennett, a self's identity, therefore, is the centre point amongst all the inner and outer, public and private narratives about that self, and, like an object's centre of gravity, ever changes as new narratives develop and old ones are edited.

At what point a self makes its initial appearance in public and at what point its story comes to a conclusion is a potential point of contention between Arendt's and Dennett's conceptions of selfhood. Dennett argues that a self appears the moment narratives concerning this self begin to take shape. One could very easily imagine how a self as a centre of narrative gravity could be developed for a fetus in the womb as others begin interpreting an ultrasound and fetal movements and anticipating what the child and their future with the child will be like, or as gossip spreads about the pregnancy and its potential.²⁷ Further, Dennett's ideas suggest that a self's story can continue long after its death, as the narratives about one's life are influenced, after the fact, by historical events.²⁸ Arendt, in contrast, limits herself to a discussion of public action. In this context Arendt argues that a self appears once she engages with the web of human relationships by offering her own interpretation of the world. It is only once the self gains the capacity to interpret the world and has the courage to communicate this interpretation that she begins acting politically, adding her voice to the "web" of human relationships. Arendt writes, "the connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in the willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own."²⁹ In this way the self

²⁷ Rosilee Sherwood extrapolates a special case from Dennett, a theory of the "pregnant self" as an instance in time when two selves share a single body ("The Pregnant Self," (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Waterloo, 2009).

²⁸ Daniel Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1992), 430.

²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 186.

becomes the hero of the story that develops around its words and deeds.³⁰ Concerning the conclusion of one's story Arendt argues, in contrast to Dennett, that a story reaches its fulfilment with death. She believes that the story continues but that it is no longer simply the story of a single actor but rather becomes part of the storybook of history. Arendt writes,

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the parapolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimately becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action... The perplexity is that in any series of events that together form a story with a unique meaning we can at best isolate the agent who set the whole process into motion; and although this agent frequently remains the subject, the "hero" of the story, we never can point unequivocally to him as the author of its eventual outcome.³¹

For these reasons it is not altogether clear how Arendt would approach Dennett's claim that the self begins before its birth and continues after its death. It is clear, however, that the thoughts of both on this topic are similar and parallel each other in an enlightening way. Dennett's conception of the self as a narrative centre of gravity concretely fills out Arendt's own description of a self who is entangled within a web of relationships and narratives.

The Way a Self's Identity is Interrupted by the "Web" of Relationships

Even though an agent has the ability to participate in the formation of her identity, the narration of herself as "hero," to use Arendt's term, she is at the same time open to the way others interpret her actions and define her identity, her own heroic nature, for better or worse. So long as

³⁰ In her book, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, Adriana Cavarero examines Arendt's concept of the self as hero by putting it in conversation with the mythology of Oedipus and Ulysses (Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and selfhood*, trans. Paul Kottman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7-32).

³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

this is the case—that actions can be (mis)interpreted by others—any agent is both actively and passively involved in the construction of identity. As Dennett points out, a self, as a centre of narrative gravity, is always responding to the way in which her own narratives are expanded and edited, from the inside or out.

Arendt, concerned with the nature of intersubjective reality, examines the way in which narratives about one self are intertwined and interwoven with the narratives of others. These interrelations are essentially what constitute Arendt’s concept of the “web” of human relationships and this web illustrates how a self’s identity depends on others. According to this concept, a self always subsists in a pre-established narrative web. The self, according to Arendt, depends on and “always falls into an already existing web [of narratives] where their immediate consequences can be felt.”³² This pre-established web of narratives—familial, cultural, and national—provides the foundation from which a self can begin to navigate and interpret the world as she builds up and into her context. Narrative context not only serves as bedrock but also provides interpretive tools, such as history and language, that a self passively and actively adopts as constituents and pieces of her own story.³³ It is sometimes alarming to admit the (pre-)existence of such narratives—they are not always welcome or stylish, and sometimes feel constricting—but without them a self has no building blocks for identity. A child lacking a familiar name, for instance, can have a much more difficult time orienting herself in the human-made world. A previously established narrative context enables the self to actively participate in the formation of her identity, communicating who she is to others.

³² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184.

³³ Arendt writes, “The popular belief in a ‘strong man’ who, isolated against others, owes his strength to his being alone is either sheer superstition, based on the delusion that we can ‘make’ something in the realm of human affairs—‘make’ institutions or laws, for instance, as we make tables and chairs, or make men ‘better’ or ‘worse’—or it is conscious despair of all action... coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other ‘material’” (*The Human Condition*, 188).

But this narrative interrelation can also limit the pursuit of identity. If a narrative context grants one the ability to define identity, it must also inhibit that ability. Inheritance is by definition pre-existing. Narrative context is one's starting-point, and as such provides a determinate set of tools with which to begin the development of identity; however, these tools are definite and cannot be exchanged according to one's desires. A particular person born in Canada, for example, inherits a language, cultural customs, and a nationality, yet this is an irreversible reality; Canadian-born cannot be American-born too, at home in American life and comfortably wielding its resources.

Moreover, as identity takes shape, narrative context continues to play a determining role because others interpret a self's identity in their own unpredictable manners. Arendt writes that since a self always moves "among and in relation to other acting beings, she is never merely a 'doer' but always and at the same time a sufferer."³⁴ By this she means that a self may attempt to act in a way that defines and expresses her identity but how these actions are interpreted by others is beyond her control. Others can shape the self by interpreting her actions and informing her about how an act's consequences reverberate across a complex narrative context. For example, the consequences of a parent's child-rearing decisions are difficult to predict because their effects depend on how the child, and those with whom the child relates, decides to interpret them. Similarly, and perhaps more clearly, the parent helps the child interpret her actions, informing her about their nature and their consequences, and the child, as not yet developed, does not have control over this, which will substantially shape who she is. An individual can, of course, make informed decisions, but she is not in control of how the actions that result are interpreted by others and, therefore, cannot predict, with absolute certainty, what these actions will mean for her own identity or for the identities of those around her. Not only, therefore, does a self never quite know what she is doing when she acts,

³⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

but it is always possible that she can become responsible for consequences she never intended or even foresaw.³⁵

The human being, from the start, works with others not of her choosing. Indeed, this is family. A human being is not totally free to construct identity because she is, at least in part, determined by a narrative context and by others. Without the actions of others that work to construct and maintain the common world of appearance, including the narratives that give meaning to the material world, a self would lose its narrative foundation and the fabric she needs to appear, but with them the idea that she controls her own formation, and that others are always working for her benefit and supporting her interpretation of herself, is undermined.

The fact that a self is an active and passive participant in her own identity—that identity is the product of inner and outer forces—problematizes the notion of a personal name and life-story. Names and stories are the result of an author, usually one single author, and usually one with purpose. This cannot be said of a self. To say that one's identity is authored would be to presume that one's identity is fixed, that it is a finished product, that it follows a coherent and pre-established story line; (recall the difference already discussed between an end-product and the appearance of a self; the two are categorically different). Yet that the creation of a self follows a pre-established plan is obviously not the case. One's story is not guided or “made” by any single individual: it is instead the ever-changing focal point of a host of narrators, including the self-reflexive self, who spectates her own existence and interprets it alongside others.³⁶ Because a self depends on a multitude of others to interpret the meaning of her actions, she is not the true author of her identity—her identity

³⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233.

³⁶ Arendt explains that a “fictional story reveals a maker just as every work of art clearly indicates that it was made by somebody; this does not belong to the character of the story itself but only to the mode in which it came into existence. The distinction between a real and a fictional story is precisely that the latter was ‘made up’ and the former not made at all. The real story in which we are engaged as long as we live has no visible or invisible maker because it is not made” (*The Human Condition*, 186).

being the way in which her narrative centre of gravity changes over time.³⁷ Thus, unlike the fabrication process outlined in the previous section, one that is guided by a model, the production of a self's identity has no such guiding influence. A chair emerges out of a purposeful process; a self's identity cannot be said to appear in this same way because of its dependency on other selves, selves who are themselves unpredictable. It is this dependence that interrupts one's ability to delineate definitively one's identity from the point of view of inside or outside. How can we possibly fully comprehend something that is the immediate product of a multitude of narratives being told by a variety of different selves? To further explain this point, let us turn our attention to action, specifically action among other actors.

A self cannot control or predict the ways in which her action will resonate across the web of relationships in which she finds herself entangled. Each action affects others who are not simply passive to it but have the potential to act in ways that give the original act a different meaning for the actor. This means that, not only does a self have no identifiable author, but the process of identity formation has no predictable end. As a self's actions affect others they continue to be interpreted, and these interpretations continue to reverberate back to the self, potentially changing her identity. Even after death, a self's identity continues to change as others expand and edit the narratives that orbit that self, shifting its identity in an unpredictable manner. This is another way of saying that the consequences of one's actions have the potential to stretch infinitely into the future. One cannot predict how many generations will be affected by a single action. The formation of an identity, therefore, has no guiding model or definitive end. And, in the absence of an author, a self's identity rarely progresses purposefully.³⁸

³⁷ Arendt argues that the perplexing problem of history is that although it "owes its existence to men, it is still obviously not 'made' by them" (*The Human Condition*, 185).

³⁸ Dennett seems to be in a general agreement with Arendt's diagnoses (At the very least, as an outspoken atheist, he would be happy that she failed to find any invisible hand or god-like creature guiding the narrative from behind the

In conclusion, the presence of others provides the support necessary for a self to contribute to her narrative context and become the “hero” of those narratives that concern her. However, her dependency on others to aid her in understanding both her identity and the meaning of her actions means that she has little control over the story she leads. Even something as simple as a family-name reveals the way in which a self’s identity becomes muddled by the actions of others: family-names are inherited, each utterance pointing to a pre-established narrative, a family-tree rich with meaning. There is something inherently flawed, then, in the idea that a self can ever be provided with a definitive identity. The influence of others and the lack of an identifiable author makes it difficult to predict how a self will change as its actions affect and are interpreted by those with whom it relates. Thus, when one relates to another it is inadequate to take any particular identity as definitely reflecting “who” that other is. Because the self is always in the midst of change, as others (mis)interpret her actions, it is important that one recognize that what appears, the identity disclosed in public, is never the end of the story. Already in this observation, we can begin to notice the way time influences and interrupts identity, a topic taken up in the next section.

IV: Time and the Self as Past, Present, and Future

The final two conditions characterizing the formation and development of identity that will be explored in this chapter concern the way a self is both constituted and interrupted by time and by itself—the second being related to the first. Through time, a self can develop and change, in ways

scene, so to speak). He, does however, take a slightly different approach to explaining the way identities do not progress deliberately, writing, “our fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is not spinning webs or building dams, but telling stories, and more particularly concocting and controlling the story we tell others—and ourselves—about who we are. And just as spiders don’t have to think, consciously and deliberately, about how to spin their webs... we... do not consciously and deliberately figure out what narratives to tell and how to tell them. Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them; they spin us. Our human consciousness, and our narrative selfhood, is their product, not their source” (*Consciousness Explained*, 418).

that both fulfill its own views about itself and distort and obscure its original vision. A self's dynamic character, the fact that it changes over time, means that single acts only ever partially define a self. Identity stretches across time, across past actions as well as future actions. Moreover, the operation of time in the development and formation of identity leads us to notice how a self's identity involves a strange relation with its own actions: through the ongoing demand to act, a self develops itself in different directions, but it also opposes itself. A confessing criminal, for instance, can regret her criminal actions, opposing the past self who performed them, and rendering that past self non-authoritative for the present self. Any description of a self, therefore, may prove inadequate from the point of view of the future self and its actions. This section concludes by arguing that a self is always changing, and that the possibility of change is important because, without it, a self could only be considered a sufferer who, from her very beginnings as a child, suffers the consequences of a determinative material and narrative context. It will become evident that both time and one's own actions paradoxically both obscure the appearance of a self and at the same time, are operative in the process of identity formation.

Interrupted by Time

Time undermines determinate identities by creating a perplexity in each present characterization of a self—a self always acts in time, making every present self-definition incomplete. The nature of a confession succinctly illustrates the complexity introduced by time. When a previously unrepentant criminal confesses, her identity changes; the self becomes a *repentant* self. Time presents a subtle problem here: given the changing nature of a self—from unrepentant to repentant—how does one decide the nature of the actor? Does the self act as a repentant or

unrepentant self? On the one hand, an unrepentant criminal by definition does not confess. On the other hand, however, if there has been no confession, then the repentant criminal does not exist, at least not as such, and therefore cannot initiate the confession. So the confessing self is neither the unrepentant criminal nor the repentant criminal, yet, in the moment of confession the self is somehow related to both. Derrida claims that an impossible difference resides in the liminal moment a decision is made. Leonard Lawlor explains this difference:

In the experience of the present, there is always a small difference between the moment of now-ness and the past and the future... this infinitesimal difference is... a difference that is, as Derrida would say, “undecidable.” Although the minuscule difference is virtually unnoticeable in everyday common experience, when we in fact notice it, we cannot decide if we are experiencing the past or the present, if we are experiencing the present or the future.³⁹

In terms of the example of a criminal, in the present moment the confessing criminal is related to but different from both her past unrepentant self and her future repentant self. A self cannot decide if in the present she is experiencing her past or her future self.⁴⁰ Although his basic point is correct, Lawlor’s use of a quantitative adjective—calling the difference in the present an *infinitesimal* difference—may not be the best descriptor as it implies that more than one self is present in each moment. In reality only one self is present in each moment. This perplexity presents a difficulty for knowing and identifying a self. In each moment a self is grappling with its changing nature. If we were to pause this process of change and call upon a self to identify itself, it could only do so by telling us how it is both related to its past self that is about to change and its future self that does not

³⁹ Leonard Lawlor, “Jacques Derrida,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Spring 2014), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/derrida/>.

⁴⁰ Further, relating the infinitesimal difference to self-knowledge, Lawlor writes that “for Derrida, radical evil consists in the inconceivable, small, ‘infinitesimal difference’ (*une différence infime* [DLG 333/234]) that precedes and makes possible a me and an other” (*This is Not Sufficient: An Essay on Animality and Human Nature in Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 22). By “radical evil” Lawlor aims to describe those transgressions and sacrifices that one is forced to make due to the temporal character of action. Because action necessarily occurs in time, one cannot attain full knowledge of a situation before an act occurs nor can one answer to every ethical demand made in each moment. In order for action to take place, a sacrifice must be made.

yet exist. Being related to its future self that does not exist, descriptions of a self seem to be always lacking. A definitive name for a self is inadequate because it is based on something that is always in the midst of change. The changing nature of a self means, therefore, that disclosing a self is a process that never comes to an end. Time, in other words, ensures that a self never fully appears.

Interrupted by Itself

The self's propensity to change means that a self's future actions can show any present definition of a self to be false or inadequate. In this sense the identity of a self can be interrupted by itself. Although present in the example of a confession, this interruption is perhaps more obvious in Derrida's discussion of a signature, in which signing a signature reconstitutes and redefines the self who did the signing.

What or who makes a signature? Inquiring into this, Derrida discusses the signatures found on the American Declaration of Independence. He asks, "*who signs, and with what so-called proper name, the declarative act that founds an institution?*"⁴¹ Beginning with Thomas Jefferson, Derrida describes a chain of representatives leading up to the signing of the Declaration. Jefferson drafts and signs the Declaration, along with his fellow congressmen, as a representative of the American people. Because he is only a representative, the "good people" on whose behalf he signs are really the true signatories and therefore responsible. The "good people" authorize the signature and thereby declare themselves free and independent.⁴² However, Derrida finds it difficult to conclude that the "good people" are the ones responsible. As a way of illustrating this difficulty Derrida asks, "which comes first: does the act of signing and drafting the Declaration constitute independence from Britain or

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. & ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (New York: Stanford University Press, 2002), 47.

⁴² Derrida, "Declarations of Independence," 48.

does it confirm that the ‘good people’ of the United States are already independent?”⁴³ In other words, because of the way in which a self seems to be spread across time, it is impossible to decide whether the act itself creates independent agents or simply describes a pre-established reality. For instance, what does it mean to say that “the ‘good people’ are the ones with the authority to sign the Declaration”? Those with authority to sign must be already independent. However, do these independent people “exist” before the Declaration is signed? “But these people do not exist,” Derrida protests; “they do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not *as such*.”⁴⁴ Producing a signature is strange for the same reason a confession seems strange: because the agent with the authority to perform the action—to sign in the case of the Declaration, and to confess in the case of a confession—appears in and as the act. The “good people” have no way of enacting the proper authority to sign before they act, and yet they must act in order for those with that authority to exist. Just as an unconfessed criminal, by definition, does not confess (or one might say that she lacks the authority to confess), individuals who exist before the signing of the Declaration lack the authority to do what they set out to accomplish.

Although related to the way in which linear time confuses identity, this is perhaps even more perplexing because it means that by some illicit means (certainly not lawful) the self acts as a representative of its future self. Once complete, the signature, for example, creates a self with the authority to declare independence. A future self, in a fabulous way, grants authority to its past self.⁴⁵ For Derrida, it is the hypothetical future self that authorizes the present self, in this case the present self represented in the signature. Since the signature depends on a hypothetical future self, one can

⁴³ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 49.

⁴⁴ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 49.

⁴⁵ Derrida argues that the source of the signature is an imaginary projection who comes to life, so to speak, after the act. Free independent citizens sign the Declaration “by differing or deferring themselves through the intervention of their representatives, whose representivity is fully legitimated only by the signature, thus after the fact or belatedly...” (Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 50). Authority to sign, therefore, is given in, as Derrida says, a “fabulous” reflective gesture.

only promise others that this self adds its signature in a fabulous way. But it also means that the signatories commit to becoming this self. The Declaration declares independence and it is both a commitment and a statement. It declares that the United States is and will become independent. It is as if the signature needs to persuade people of its authority. Once signed in the name of an independent citizen of the United States, both future generations and other nations must be persuaded of the truth of the signature. It is always the case that a name or determinate identity is never an end or a conclusion; it always calls for more proof.

Extrapolating from this reasoning, it appears to be the case that a future self can always reinterpret or change the meaning of a past self's actions and the identity associated with these actions. Whatever appears in the present, whatever present identity one assumes, can always be reinterpreted in the future. Identity, thus, seems to be inherently opaque. To be clear, it is not the case that a future self can exactly change past events, but the meaning of these events can effectively change based on how a future self acts. Independent Americans, for example, legitimize what was, at the time, illegal through how they conduct themselves after signing the Declaration. After the Declaration is signed, independent Americans are tasked with the responsibility of persuading others of the truth of the signature. This is important because it demonstrates with greater clarity the way a self—to be specific, a future self—can oppose any attempt to define a self's identity. Identity may always be reinterpreted or falsified by future action.

To summarize, the relationship between time and action reveals perplexity within the self. It is not the case that two selves actually exist but rather that, in the present, a self cannot decide if she is dealing with her past self or her future self. In the present it is *as if* a self relates to its future self. This “as if” is key because one's future self does not exist before the action is completed—the repentant criminal does not, by definition, “exist” in the moment of confession, and yet the

repentant criminal is in a meaningful way related to this moment, depending on it for its “existence.”⁴⁶ The perplexity of one’s identity in the present is never really resolved. Present descriptions of a self always depend on a future self legitimizing one’s declared identity, a future self that does not exist just yet and is therefore only a hypothetical possibility for the present acting self. It could be the case that future actions prove a present description false, that present action is misrelated to its future imaginary self—that confession, for instance, is not a true confession but rather a ploy that does not create or describe a *repentant* criminal (it does however create and describe a different type of criminal: a dishonest one). Similarly, as the future self is, in part at least, unknowable, it is always possible that a future self may change and reinterpret the meaning of past action. Thus, what appears in the present is only part of the story. In this way, a self’s identity stretches across time, being constituted by the self of the past, the self that appears in the present, and the future self to come.⁴⁷ In addition to grappling with the past, a self’s identity depends on the self that does not “exist” in the present. At the same time, the self is made opaque by this future self.

In the last three sections we have observed a number of conditions that are required in order for a self to appear. First, because a self cannot be held in common or shared directly, it requires a common world of artifacts through which to enact and communicate itself. The first condition, in

⁴⁶ A note on *différance*: Before we continue it is prudent to explicitly state, as best I can, the connection between the what has been characterized as time’s interruption of the self and Derrida’s concept of *différance*. *Différance*, Derrida claims, puts into question “the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principle responsibility” (“Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6). In short, Derrida argues that defining some thing or some person responsible for beginning an action is difficult because what “is” not present constitutes what appears in the present moment. In a confession, for example, the repentant criminal, who is not present at the moment of confession, constitutes the confession. What “is” not present can never be reduced to a present moment or determinate thing and yet what “is” not present depends on the present moment and determinate things—the repentant criminal would not exist if it were not for the confession (Derrida, “Différance,” 6).

⁴⁷ Defining Derrida’s concept “*différance*” John Russon makes a similar point regarding the existence of things in general. Russon writes, “*Différance* is the fundamental character of anything’s existence: anything (a person, a book, a dinner-party, a rose-bush) exists through time in such a way that, at any time, the thing is simultaneously a specific realization of itself and an as-yet-unrealized possibility for the future. The thing itself is not simply one or the other of these two, but is their relation.” (“Derrida, Jacques,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette (New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2013), 1). In this section we have analyzed how *différance* might apply specifically to a self.

other words, is that of an artificial world. The second condition is the presence of others: in order to make sense of the world, the self needs a narrative context or paradigm through which to navigate the world, and this is built by other people. Just as a child needs help learning how to walk, so too does she need the support of a “web” of interconnected relationships to begin interpreting the world. Although objects and others provide the conditions for the appearance of a self, they also, paradoxically, serve to obscure a self’s identity. A self cannot appear without appearing to be an artifact, something it is not, and artifacts never tell the ultimate truth about who a self is; and although not usually at the complete mercy of others, a self, nevertheless, is always dependent on the meaning others reveal about its identity.

Time and a self’s own actions seem to disrupt the appearance of a self differently than artifacts and the actions of others, since action necessarily occurs in time. Objects muddle the appearance of a self through appearing in place of a self, and others interrupt the appearance of a self by making it impossible to separate self’s identity from its narrative context. With these obstacles in mind, one could argue that these interruptions simply hide a self, in a sense, by covering over identity like a mask. Time, however, opposes this position by dividing the self permanently from the possibility of its own completely independent self-constitution. Identity is not hidden by time, but time interrupts the appearance of a self by ensuring that it never settles on a definitive identity. To be clear, it is not as if there is a knowable aspect of a self that exists but does not appear; rather, what “is” not present does not exist and is not knowable.⁴⁸ No amount of time for reflecting

⁴⁸ Derrida explains, “this im-possible is not privation. It is not the inaccessible, and it is not what I can indefinitely defer: it announces itself; it precedes me, swoops down upon and seizes me *here and now* in a non virtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality. It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon, that I do not see coming, that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later. Such an urgency cannot be *idealized* any more than the other as other can. This im-possible is thus not a (regulative) *idea* or *ideal*. It is what is most undeniably *real*. And sensible. Like the other. Like the irreducible and nonappropriable *différance* of the other” (Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (New York: Stanford University Press, 2005), 84).

on the identity of a self can resolve this opacity, because reflection itself is an act that changes one's identity. Although it seems frustrating, the interruption of time reveals the changing nature of identity. As Derrida explains, when an individual confesses, she exonerates herself for the crime in the sense that although the crime was committed by her, her confession ensures that she is no longer identical with this past self.⁴⁹ Because a self is constantly changing, a single act or activity can never unequivocally define who that self is. In other words, the fact that action necessarily occurs in time, that time obscures the identity of a self, ensures the potential that a self's identity will change, or, perhaps more accurately, that change is inherent to the character of a self. Thus, the opacity of a self is operative in a self's potential to change in meaningful ways. Without a definitive definition, conversion is always a possibility.

Thus far I have addressed the ways in which the self is opaque to itself, outside of its own control, and changing. This changing is never-ending and is often unpredictable; it originates in both external forces, such as the voice of another self, and internal ones, such as the impulse towards character development. If we appreciate this opacity and the changing nature of ourselves, however, we can also develop the capacity to maintain greater openness towards differences and foreign influences—a self, may remain open to change, secure in the knowledge that what she knows about her identity is not the end of the story. A parent, for example, who understands that her identity is opaque can be open to the ways in which the actions of others, her children in particular, play a meaningful role in the creation of her own identity as a parent. Conversely, a parent fixated on

⁴⁹ Derrida problematizes the “I” in the statement: “I confess.” The problem being that the “I” is never constituted before the confession. “Because if I say “I confess,” it means that I am what I am, who I am, identical with myself. I confess something, a crime, and my confessing a crime means that I am not one with my crime, so I exonerate myself from the crime when I confess. The same goes for someone who says ‘I give’ or ‘I forgive’ or ‘I decide.’” (John Caputo and Michael Scanlon, *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005), 32).

manufacturing her “true” identity, a desire bred from confusing the process of identity-formation with the process of fabrication, risks acting oppressively towards others, hindering the development of meaningful relationships. Such a parent might find herself relating to a child as a means for achieving a vision she has for her own identity. Alternatively, consider the example of gender roles. Many people assume that the nature of an identity is a product of gender and therefore fixed. Such an assumption suppresses the legitimacy of an individual’s own actions. Stringent ideas about gender roles ignore the particularities that are in direct opposition to the narratives about gender. The opacity of a self legitimizes change and difference. Recognizing that identity is not static leads one to notice the importance of relating to things and others different from oneself in a more generous way. This logic also holds true on the private level: an individual who holds to her own identity with a loose grip is better positioned to appreciate how her own actions change who she is. The repentant criminal is a prime example of this: her repentance is an acknowledgement that her criminal actions have made her into a criminal. The opacity of the self, thus, calls for a level of openness towards foreign and intimate forces that affect one’s identity, acknowledging the legitimate role these forces have in the production of identity.

Although the opacity of the self encourages an openness to change, it is also the case that we have relatively stable societies, communities, groups, and identities, and that that stability is due to our adoption, at times, of specific identities and roles. Personal and social stability depends on the specific roles, responsibilities, and identities of each member. Society cripples without the commitments (or contracts) of its members. Without some level of certainty about the roles and identities of ourselves and others, accomplishing even the most menial tasks would become practically impossible. This is made strikingly clear on the most basic level: in order for relationships to function, a person must commit to a specific other person. In a family unit, for example, the

parent of so-and-so must actually act as the parent of the so-and-so, and an individual cannot be a parent to everyone in general. A functioning society, and a family specifically, depends on a certain level of confidence in the identities individuals assume.

Moreover, not only does society depend on individuals assuming determinate identities and specific roles, acting in reliable ways, but determinate action is also unavoidable. Remaining absolutely open to all the different possible identities that a self could become is untenable, and our actions constantly implicate us in determinations. Consider, once again, the confessing criminal. This moment of confession is disorientating—the confessor cannot decide if she is experiencing her past criminal self or her future repentant self. Remaining in this moment of discord, if that were possible, would hamper our functioning—one could never act in a definitive way. Practically speaking, a self does not stay in any single moment that impedes the ability to decide if she is experiencing a past or a future self. Rather, time pushes the self forward, forcing a decision and a determinate action—an individual, for example, either decides to remain unrepentant or she repents; she cannot refrain from acting. A self, therefore, cannot avoid acting in a determinate way, which entails closing off certain possibilities and committing to others. These themes, the relationship between time and a decision, are the subject matter of Chapter Two.

Although a decision is made—for example, a criminal confesses—the opacity of the self continues to haunt its identity. As we observed, actions can always be reinterpreted. It is always possible that, in the future, the original confession could be proven false, or, for instance, the criminal could be not truly repentant. The opacity of the self, therefore, makes it impossible to guarantee and consider permanent any particular form that an identity takes. The question that arises here is: if we concede that a self is indeed opaque, then why should the actor or the observer of the action believe the version of the self that appears? It is always possible, after all, that the “true” self

remains hidden or has yet to arrive. It is in this context that the question of reliability and responsibility arises, a question that we will address in the next chapter. How can a self engage in responsible action, if its identity is opaque to itself and constantly changing? How can we be taken seriously in our commitments, considered to be authentic moral agents, if the threat of transformation and lack of continuity persists?

To summarize: on the one hand, therefore, selves are opaque and thus call for a certain level of openness towards different possibilities. It is always possible that a self will change in unexpected ways, for example. On other hand, a functioning society and functioning relationships require that selves assume specific roles and take up particular identities and commitments. Further, one cannot help but act in a determinate way that is closed to certain possibilities. The relationship between these two requirements—that one remain open to change, and make determinate decisions that defy this openness—seems to be an asymmetrical one: even after a determinate decision is made, one can never be certain of a self's identity. The fact that action necessarily occurs in time eliminates all guarantees. What seems to be required in order to appreciate the opacity of the self while simultaneously making decisions and assuming specific roles is the power of promises: that individuals commit to certain roles and identities and that others have faith in these commitments. Indeed, as will be demonstrated, the ethical practice of making promises reflects the self's status as a being permanently barred from complete independent self-constitution.

V: The Power of Promises and the Need for a Name

Derrida illuminates the need for faith in a promise by explicating the experience of the signatories of the Declaration. Interrogating the identity of the Declaration's signatories revealed a

number of different sources; most importantly, however, was the distinction between those who sign in the present moment and the way this act changes them. Since the signatory is not independent until the act of signature, the signature lacks legitimacy. The moment a signature is added to the Declaration its author can only promise others that what she is involved in is indeed “true.” The present signatory and those to whom she relates must have faith that the signatory’s actions will lead to a future independent citizen with the authority to retroactively legitimate the signature.

Thomas Jefferson, Derrida claims, was aware of this difficulty. In the Declaration the act of faith is represented by what Derrida characterizes as the “last instance.”⁵⁰ Derrida argues that in addition to the fabulously retroactive signature there is one more “subjectivity” that comes to “sign,” one more signature hiding behind the scenes. This last signatory comes “in order to guarantee it, this production of signature.”⁵¹ In the Declaration this guarantee is given the name “God.” As creator of nature and natural laws, God can guarantee and legitimize the work of the signature and the independent agent to which it attests.⁵² Although not without its problems, this appeal to God provides a sense of confidence in the new identity.

Depending on how the appeal to God is understood, it either functions as a resolution for indefinite identity or an acknowledgement of the fact (by functioning as an acknowledgement that the effect of the Declaration rests on proof that is ultimately lacking). Arendt argues that by appealing to a “self-evident” truth, the divine guarantor overcomes the opacity of selfhood, and thereby usurps the need to promise and persuade others. Arendt decries this aspect of the Declaration, claiming that such an appeal:

⁵⁰ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 52.

⁵¹ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 51.

⁵² Derrida writes, “God is the name—the best one—for this last instance” (“Declarations of Independence,” 52).

needs no agreement since, because of its self-evidence, it compels without argumentative demonstration or political persuasion. By virtue of being self-evident, these truths are prerational—they inform reason but are not its product—and since their self-evidence puts them beyond disclosure and argument, they are in a sense no less compelling than “despotic power” and no less absolute than the revealed truths of religion or the axiomatic verities of mathematics.⁵³

Arendt clearly believes that the Declaration goes too far by appealing to the authority of God and arguing that its “truth” is self-evident. Such a claim mistakenly assumes that identity can be absolutely fixed, that there is no reason for the Declaration to be open to change or for there to be any difference in opinion. In fact, Arendt argues that the appeal to God eliminates even the need to persuade others of the truth of the statement.

It is not clear whether Derrida would disagree with Arendt’s analysis. Indeed, if the appeal to the authority of God (or what is in this case, a fixed, artificial, final signator) is simply a way to evade the problem of indefinite identity, then it is certainly a problematic statement. Derrida, however, suggests a more generous reading of the Declaration.⁵⁴ He argues that in order for the Declaration to have meaning and effect it must have a “last instance”—it must be somehow backed up or guaranteed by an absolute authority.⁵⁵ By this statement Derrida is not suggesting that what the Declaration does or declares is just or above reproach. Rather, Derrida suggests that the use of the name “God” to legitimate the Declaration can be understood as the ultimate promise, as the

⁵³ Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 192; While making a slightly different point, Bonnie Honig argues that although this statements seems to reveal a fundamental difference between the work of Arendt and Derrida it is not self evident that Derrida would disagree completely Arendt’s reading, a claim we will explore in what follows (“Declarations of Independence: Arendt and Derrida on the Problem of Founding a Republic,” *The American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 111-113).

⁵⁴ The way in which Derrida and Arendt take up the topic of God in the Declaration, but more broadly the issue of faith, speaks to a difference that goes beyond this isolated example. In one of Derrida’s few comments on Arendt, he calls attention to the absence of the problematic of testimony in Arendt’s writing and further asserts that she was not interested in what distinguishes witnessing from proof or the archive (“History of the Lie: Prolegomena,” in *Without Alibi*, trans. P. Kampf, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 67). Considering the close connection drawn out here between faith and witnessing, one gets a sense of how Derrida and Arendt differ on the issue of faith and ultimately the role of religion. Charles Barbour takes up this topic in his article, “The acts of faith: On witnessing in Derrida and Arendt” (*Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 6, (2011): 679-645).

⁵⁵ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 52.

commitment to be answerable to an ultimate form of “Justice.” In other words, although the Declaration is not necessarily beyond dispute, the reason for the Declaration, the name in which the Declaration is signed—justice, responsibility, or in this case God—is not in the last instance deconstructible. In a response to a question on this topic, Derrida states:

You recall at the beginning of question four the violence accompanying the institution of any law—the institution can be nothing but violent not because it is a violence accompanying the transgression of law, but because there is as yet no law... Once this institution has taken place, one can of course always contest—and this is the history of all revolutions—the imposition of the law, argue that it was violent and unjust, seek reparation, revolt against it, and so forth. Such dispute is necessarily endless. If, however, the laws in question, whether they be general or particular, are violent for the reason adduced above and are deconstructible—that is they can be considered to be a historical artifact that is suitable for analysis and deconstruction—that in the name of which one deconstructs is not in the last instance deconstructible. I call this irreducibility *justice*.⁵⁶

Although I cannot fully elucidate this passage here, it does bring clarity to Derrida’s position on God’s name in the Declaration. Derrida offers an alternative to Arendt’s interpretation of the Declaration’s appeal to God. The good people sign the Declaration in the name of justice, in the name of responsibility, in the name of freedom, but ultimately, in the name of God, and in so doing ally themselves with an absolute, rendering themselves answerable to it. For this reason, Derrida argues that “God is the name—the best name—for this last instance and this ultimate signature.”⁵⁷ One can argue with the way in which the Declaration deals with the specifics of the situation, but how does one oppose the *reasons* for the Declaration? Justice, Derrida ultimately argues, is irreducible

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Nietzsche and the Machine,” in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. & ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (New York: Stanford University Press, 2002), 231.

⁵⁷ Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” 52.

and undeconstructible. “God” could be the best name for these undeconstructible principles that are found at the limits of knowledge and calculation.⁵⁸

Signing the Declaration is ultimately making a promise: that this identity we take as the “good people” is stable and confirmed for the future. Those who sign, of course, ultimately do not have control over their future selves, over the truth of their signature, so they need to promise those tied by the Declaration that they will continue to be the “good people” of the signature. “God” is in a sense what stands in as the guarantor of the original signature, through which the people, although not absolutely predictable in the future, hold themselves to the absolute in promising, make themselves answerable to the absolute in their promising.

In the introduction of this chapter I stated that, for Arendt, the realm of appearance was a place where things, experiences, and feelings could come out of the shadowy private realm into the public where their existence could be verified by the presence and observation of others. Since the self is opaque and dynamic, however, there is no complete assurance of its identity. A self’s appearance is always haunted by the possibility that what appears is false or at least incomplete. The only recourse one has, Arendt and Derrida argue, is to persuade and to promise those others to whom it appears that the self they witness is indeed true.⁵⁹ A repentant criminal can only promise and through her acts persuade others that the self who appears—the confessed criminal, for example—does in fact reflect the truth about her identity. Derrida writes that to bear witness to the self who appears means that:

⁵⁸ In his book, *Derrida From Now On*, Michael Naas offers some helpful insight on Derrida’s thoughts on the issue of God and religion. These issues are taken up in chapters three and nine: “Derrida’s Derrida’s Laïcité” and “*Comme si, comme ça*: Following Derrida on the Phantasms of the Self, the State, and a Sovereign God” ((New York: Fordham University Press 2008)).

⁵⁹ Similarly, Arendt describes the undecidable nature of each decision as an ocean of uncertainty and unpredictability and that “binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men... Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each man’s lonely heart...” (*The Human Condition*, 237).

I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible), and although you do not have access to it, not the same access, you, my addressees, *you have to believe me*, because I engage myself to tell you the truth, I am already engaged in it, I tell you that I am telling you the truth. Believe me. You have to believe me.⁶⁰

The opacity of a self requires that, in any identity-producing action, it appeal to the good faith of others, that it promise others that the present self is the “true” self. To be assured of one’s own reality, therefore, one depends on the good faith of others. Thus, the power of promises plays a constitutive role in the appearance of a self. Identity operates on faith in these promises: that members of a society believe the narratives told about themselves and others even if the identities that result have no guarantee.

Conclusion

The opacity of the self leads us to notice that change is inherent to the self. Unlike an end-product, the self is always embarking on new initiatives that simultaneously describe and change her identity. The positive result of this, however, is that meaningful action is possible, that one does not simply and passively suffer or undergo a determining material and narrative context. On the one hand, a self must remain open to change. On the other hand, however, society functions when its members maintain more definite identities, so a civil citizen must appear in a definite manner, even if this identity is not (or cannot be) guaranteed. The human solution to this dilemma is the promise. Promises help a self and others suspend or suppress a self’s opaque and fluctuating nature so that specific roles can be filled and meaningful relationships can be formed. A parent must promise others, her partner, children, and extended family, that she is committed to the project of parenting

⁶⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit & Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham Univ Press, 2005), 76.

and, thus, is deserving of the name. Such a promise enables her family members to expect particular things and relate to her in a particular way (as a parent). Similarly, in order for society to function, one must promise others that what one is involved in, the specific identity one assumes, is true, and that others must have faith in this testimony. The appearance of a self depends on the power of promises and the good faith of those to which a self relates. It is on the basis of faith that a self's identity may appear and be verified in the public realm.

Given the fluctuating character of identity, however, the next question that arises is the question of how responsible action is possible. If I and my situation are opaque to me, if I cannot have complete knowledge of myself or my situation, then how can I act in a way that is moral, responsible, and answerable to the demands of any given situation? We turn to this question in Chapter Two, exploring the ways in which we can be responsible even in the context of our vulnerability to artifacts, others, time, and our own temporal constitution.

Chapter Two: Forgiveness and the Ground of Responsibility

Chapter One outlined how the implication of our identities in the things of the world, in our relationships to other people, and in time cause us to be fundamentally outside of our own control, and, thus, how our identities will always be clouded with uncertainty. We concluded by claiming that because of the opacity of life, promises are key to identity-formation and ethical action. Chapter Two builds on these ideas, moving from a discussion of identity to a focus on decision-making and ethical action. Unable to define identities in a complete way and barred from being able to anticipate exactly how the meaning of action will change in the future, decisions and attempts to act responsibly flow out of an incomplete, one-sided understanding of the situation. The first section of this chapter begins by exploring the one-sidedness of one's perspective by explicating Derrida's concept of "urgency." With his concept of "urgency" Derrida characterizes the way in which time bars one from attaining a completely comprehensive perspective on the situation in question.⁶¹ Due to the urgency of the situation, to the fact that action necessarily occurs in time, one always seems to act before one is adequately prepared. Despite this challenge for responsible action, it is also demonstrated that the very limited character of one's perspective is what *allows* for the possibility of making responsible decisions. The fact that one does not possess knowledge that guarantees *the* most responsible course of action, knowledge that could propel a mechanical carrying-out of "the right thing to do," allows one to participate in figuring out what reality is: how to act and how to respond to a particular situation, for instance. Lack of total knowledge makes room for meaningful participation in the production of reality. In this way, one's limited perspective makes meaningful actions possible.

⁶¹ On this point Jacques Derrida writes, "as can be understood if one stops for a moment: *différance* and urgency are the same thing, they have always been the same thing" ("Ethics and Politics Today," in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, trans. & ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg (New York: Stanford University Press, 2002), 296).

Derrida proposes a concept of responsibility that appreciates this perplexity, a concept that requires refraining from action to broaden one's perspective and make a decision from this limited perspective. The second section of this chapter explicates the repercussions of this seemingly contradictory concept: specifically, that meeting a particular responsibility means that one will fail to respond to some other responsibility. After outlining the nature of this failure it is argued that responsibility is supported by the practice of forgiveness. By confessing and offering forgiveness one takes responsibility for the contradiction within the concept of responsibility. Thus, Chapter Two culminates in a discussion of forgiveness, which is a second ethical practice that, like promises, reflects our status as beings who are fundamentally opaque to ourselves and for whom the situation for which we are responsible is also opaque.

I. Responsibility

A Responsible Decision's Two Prerequisites: Reflection and Action

Generally, if one desires to respond in a responsible manner to a particular situation then it seems to be the case that at least two conditions must be met. First, an individual must in principle take time to reflect on all the different aspects of the situation, understanding, as best she can, the demands of the situation and her position to respond. When an individual takes time to understand the situation she is better suited to decide how to respond appropriately. A parent, for example, is in a better position to make a responsible decision when, after hearing an infant cry, she takes time to understand why the child is crying and how best to address the situation. Responding without consideration of the situation—by simply feeding the infant candy, for example—may have an initial

positive result but could not be considered to be a responsible act, because a responsible decision requires time for some reasoning and some knowledge of the situation. An arbitrary and uninformed decision is not a responsible one. In practice, however, and as we shall see, the amount of time available for reflection varies; often the situation requires an immediate response. In such cases we can sometimes observe a pre-reflective working-out of a situation or the operation of an individual's habits. If an individual has developed the habit of patience, for example, then we will most likely observe this virtue being worked out in situations that require patience. The point I want to make here, however, is that *in principle* a responsible decision is preceded by patient and rigorous consideration of the situation (the role of immediate reactions is clarified in the following sections). The second general requirement of a responsible decision is the necessity of action. Understanding the situation is, of course, not enough; an act is also required. Once a parent has considered the situation, for example, she must *make* a decision by taking action, responding to the particulars of the moment. No responsibility is taken if action is needlessly postponed. Simply put, responsibility requires reflection and action. Let us explore now, however, the complications that get in the way of these conditions, or the way in which the demand for a responsible decision affects our collection of knowledge and our performance of action. Although there is a certain amount of truth in this initial analysis of responsibility's two conditions, through examining these conditions in detail, it will become clear that one cannot make a clear distinction between knowledge and action, and thus, the concept of responsibility will need to be reimagined.

The Urgent Structure of a Decision and Irresponsibility

On closer inspection, Derrida finds that time complicates our two prerequisites of a responsible decision. He essentially labels this complication “urgency.” Derrida explains that, in addition to being informed and prompting action, a responsible decision must also “and above all... be made *with the utmost urgency*. And by *urgency* I mean the necessity of not waiting, or rather, the *impossibility of waiting* for the end of the reflection...”⁶² Let us now explore Derrida’s concept of urgency, showing how the constraints of time complicate the nature of responsibility, limiting the procurement of complete knowledge of the situation.

First, time complicates the issue of making a responsible decision by undermining reflection. Situations are essentially time-sensitive; one does not have an unlimited amount of time to reflect before a decision is required. Consider a seemingly simple situation: when, for example, a slow-moving, elderly woman impedes one’s commute and looks like she is having trouble going up the stairs. Such a situation calls one unexpectedly to account for otherwise habitual actions, and requires a quick decision: does one stop to help carry her luggage or jump to the other side of the stairs and rush past her? The comprehensive perspective would require an understanding of the situation: How large is the staircase? Does the elderly woman want help? Am I capable of helping? The more an agent understands the circumstance, the more aware she becomes of both the need for and the nature of the response it elicits. The difficulty increases when one attempts to anticipate the consequences of a response because, as we observed in Chapter One, the consequences of one’s actions reverberate indefinitely and unpredictably across a complex narrative context. Although one knows generally how to address these questions fully understanding the specific circumstance *in a*

⁶² Derrida, “Ethics and Politics Today,” 296.

timely fashion is an immense challenge. Even if a comprehensive perspective were conceivable, time-constraints make it basically impossible to develop. At some point the situation will be resolved: the commuter will arrive at the end of the staircase. Although it is possible to come to a level of certainty through patient consideration, one can see how the time-sensitive nature of the situation makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive perspective regarding the responsible course of action, and how responsibility may require an action that is not fully thought through.

Second, in addition to the time-sensitive nature of such situations, Derrida argues that there is a more radical way in which time interrupts the possibility of reflection. The inaction that results from taking time to reflect “is already an action, a decision, an engagement, a responsibility that has been taken.”⁶³ Even the initial confrontation and thought—“something’s gone wrong; I need to act”—is a response to the question, “what should I do?” By standing at the bottom of the stairs to consider the situation, the commuter has already taken action. Thus, a decision and an action, even if it is a decision to reflect, seems to occur immediately, originating from a pre-reflective state of mind. In other words, the fact that reflection is itself action demonstrates that in the moment of confrontation, when an agent is faced with a situation, she does not have time to reflect before she acts. Decisions occur, in this sense, immediate. For this reason Derrida claims that “there isn’t time.”⁶⁴ He describes this paradox as urgency, arguing that every decision, properly understood, has this urgent structure—because action necessarily takes place in time, agents never have time to reflect before an initial decision occurs. The urgent structure of a decision, to be clear, does not mean that one should not reflect or that a decision should be made in ignorance. The point is simply that reflection is itself action, and even a refusal to reflect on anything is action as well; thus, an agent is responsible whether she wishes to be or not.

⁶³ Derrida, “Ethics and Politics Today,” 296.

⁶⁴ Derrida, “Ethics and Politics Today,” 295.

As an act, reflection has an effect on the situation. The commuter who stands at the bottom of the stairs to reflect on the situation is acting in a way that changes the circumstance. Due to reflection's character as action and its effect on the situation, fully comprehending a situation seems impossible. More time to deliberate would certainly not solve the problem; one cannot stop the clock, so to speak, in order to understand the situation prior to making a decision that has an impact. This predicament is essentially the same as the one we noticed regarding attempts to define a self: recall the observation that any description of a self both describes and changes that self's identity. The confession, for example, changes the criminal. Like a self, a situation is always changing, making it impossible to fully understand the event that demands a response.⁶⁵ At no point in time is a situation fully transparent. Thus, a decision, if a decision occurs, must be made without full knowledge of the facts. Derrida writes,

I am not saying that one needs ignorance or some form of not-knowing; not at all, on the contrary, one needs to know and one needs to know as much as possible and as well as possible, but between one's knowledge and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted.⁶⁶

From the very moment of confrontation when the question "what should I do?" presents itself, the agent finds herself never completely ready to make a decision yet faced with the urgency to do so. A decision, if one occurs, always flows out of a partial one-sided understanding of the situation.

To reiterate, reflection is interrupted by the time-sensitive nature of the human situation and by the character of anything we do or do not do as *action*. At some moment in time the agent will need to act and yet will not be adequately prepared, and in fact, by reflecting or indeed by choosing not to reflect, she has already made a decision and begun to act. The ethical implication of urgency is

⁶⁵ Sean Gaston helpfully points out that one cannot stop at pure potentiality—the condition of nondecision, when any decision is possible. Rather, Gaston writes, "by stopping at the question of potentiality is perhaps already to have moved from the potential to the actual" (*Derrida, Literature and War: Absence and the Chance of Meeting* (New York: Continuum, 2009), 41).

⁶⁶ Derrida, "Ethics and Politics Today," 289.

the fact that action occurs before the actor has time to consider those perspectives outside her own; her actions flow out of a limited understanding of and immediate responses to the situation. Although one might desire to respond to another's needs, for example, these needs are not transparent to the actor. The actor, so long as she desires to act responsibly, must reconcile herself to the fact that her own knowledge is partial and that her actions, as conscientious as she might hope they are, always flow out of this one-sided and, in a sense, selfish perspective. Whether or not the behaviour in which the actor engages is correct, because the agent acts out of a limited view of each situation, the decision and the act cannot be guaranteed to be fully responsible.

Urgency as a Condition for the Possibility of a Decision and its Risks

The distinct experience of a making a decision can be illuminated by contrasting it to a mechanistic process. Recall that fabrication follows a guiding model. A carpenter, for example, calculates how to fabricate a particular object based on a blueprint or model. Fabrication, to risk over-simplifying the process, resembles a child working in a colouring book: so long as the child stays within the lines, her activity will lead to its objective. The actions that follow a model or rule occur "automatically," so to speak: any decision involved in the process was made prior to its deployment. In contrast, although one may ultimately decide to follow a model or a rule, the decision cannot result from a rule, standard, or blueprint; if it did, then it would not be a decision and responsibility would rest somewhere other than with the actor. In other words, if action simply followed some grand blueprint, the principle of freedom would be irrelevant. Whether or not a grand blueprint exists is beside the point I want to make here. The important point, for our discussion, is that time permanently divides one from knowledge of *the* correct response. Being

uncertain how to address a situation allows for agents to participate in making reality by deciding how to navigate complex situations. Thus, because one's perspective is limited, meaningful decisions and the experience of the importance of one's own agency are possible.

The urgent structure of a decision led us to notice that, even if one had an unlimited amount of time to reflect on a situation, decisions must occur before one knows exactly what is required. If a decision does occur, therefore, the value of its results cannot be guaranteed beforehand, since the situation cannot be fully understood. Time's interruption seems to be precisely what a decision requires: between one's knowledge of the situation and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted.⁶⁷ Indeed, as we just discovered, decisions depend on this moment of not knowing, because without it, with full knowledge of the situation, there could only be "the imperturbable application of rules, of rules known or knowable, the deployment of a program with full knowledge of the facts."⁶⁸ In other words, the urgent structure of a decision—the way time makes a situation opaque—is operative in creating the possibility of the event of a decision. What appeared to be simply an obstacle to the possibility of making a responsible decision turns out simultaneously to be both the possibility and the impossibility of this decision: urgency simultaneously ensures a lack of readiness and is the very condition on which a decision depends. Urgency, Derrida writes,

is simultaneously the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of all responsibility. No responsibility is taken if at a given moment one could not decide *without knowing*, without knowledge, theoretical reflection, the *determinative* inquiry having encountered its limit or its suspension, its interruption. Without this interruption—and this interruption is what defines the structure of urgency that I am talking about—there would never be a decision or responsibility, but only the deployment consequent to a *determinate* knowledge, the imperturbable application of

⁶⁷ Derrida argues that a responsible decision requires an interruption: "one needs to know as much as possible and as well as possible, but between one's knowledge and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted..." ("Ethics and Politics Today," 298).

⁶⁸ Derrida, "Ethics and Politics Today," 298.

rules, of rules known or knowable, the deployment of a program with full knowledge of the facts.⁶⁹

Situations lack meaning if everything is decided beforehand. The thing that makes room for change and development—that one can participate in shaping reality—is the opacity of life, that reality is not completely transparent to the actor. Thus, while one might believe it to be desirable to know exactly and perfectly what the right thing to do is, and while this might in fact be desirable, such knowledge would also erase the possibility of relating to reality in a meaningful way by being called to make decisions. With full knowledge of reality, with the capacity to mechanistically apply rules, or with access to a grand blueprint, so to speak, actions become mechanical rather than the result of meaningful decisions, and our very significance as human beings is undermined.

Participating in figuring out how to navigate the world comes with a risk: decisions have no ultimate guarantee. The risk that a decision will fail to be responsible is presumably, on a charitable reading, what motivates mandatory minimum sentences; instituting mandatory sentences can stem from the fear that a judge will fail to administer justice.⁷⁰ Eliminating all risk by being capable of guaranteeing the appropriate response seems desirable (if not practically impossible). But, as demonstrated previously, such a guarantee actually frustrates the possibility of making decisions and acting in a meaningful way (and, in this case, conceals the fact that a decision has already been made in the very institution of a mandatory minimum sentence). If a decision can be guaranteed it would turn back into a calculative process and would not be a decision, nor would it be responsible. As

⁶⁹ Derrida, “Ethics and Politics Today,” 298.

⁷⁰ Derrida writes, “abandoned to itself, the incalculable and giving [donatrice] idea of justice is always very close to the bad, even to the worst for it can always be reappropriated by the most perverse calculation. It is always possible, and this is part of the madness of which we were speaking. An absolute assurance against this risk can only saturate or suture the opening of the call to justice” (“Force of Law,” 257).

Derrida writes: “if it were guaranteed, the decision would have turned back into calculation and one could not call it just...” or free, since it would have followed a pre-devised plan.⁷¹

Whether or not a decision has actually taken place, however, is not ultimately decidable; that “a decision as such has taken place, that it has not, through such and such a detour, followed a cause, a calculation...” is always unclear.⁷² To turn again to the issue of the judgement of a judge, on the one hand, if the judge’s ruling follows the law, for example, there is no way of telling whether or not a decision was made or if the judge simply applied the original law without any interpretation. On the other hand, if the judge’s ruling seems to go against the law, it could still be the case that the judge is simply following a rule or calculation and not making a decision, or that the judge is arbitrarily choosing a course of action without any substantial reflection at all. On this point Derrida wonders

who will ever be able to assure and ensure that a decision as such has taken place, that it has not, through such and such a detour, followed a cause, a calculation, a rule, without even that imperceptible suspense and suspension [*suspens*] that freely decides to apply—or not—a rule?⁷³

Neither appearing to follow the law nor appearing to not follow the law is identical with making a decision.

The uncertainty and risk that accompany the lack of guarantee, the need to make a decision beyond the rule, finds one remedy in the power of promises. In order for others to act with confidence, for a wife to be confident in the faithfulness of her husband, for example, one must believe that a decision actually occurred, in this case that a commitment to a trusting relationship was made. Just as a self must rely on others believing that she is telling them the truth about her identity, decision-makers rely on others believing that a decision did indeed occur. One may be

⁷¹ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 253.

⁷² Derrida, “Force of Law,” 253.

⁷³ Derrida, “Force of Law,” 253.

capable of persuading others of the truth of the decision after the act, but in the moment such history is unavailable. As we discussed in Chapter One, making and being held to certain promises brings stability to the uncertainty created by the finite character of action. Having faith in another's promise to have made a decision is a testament not only to the possibility of a free decision but also to the fact that decisions do, on occasion, actually occur.

More importantly for the topic of responsibility, however, is the fact that this lack of guarantee actually encourages continued reflection, and reflection is the precise thing that responsibility requires. Consider once again a criminal's confession. Time and one's future action can always contradict a confession, suggesting that it might be false. A false confession would be reflected in a continuation of criminal behavior rather than true repentance and a true decision. The false confession, in this sense, does not start a new chain of consequence nor does it represent a decision that interrupts the consequential flow of action. This example illustrates the need for vigilance both on the part of the decision-maker and those who hold her to account. A decision's lack of guarantee means that one cannot stop asking whether or not the decision did in fact occur. Urgency, therefore, not only creates the possibility for an uncoerced-decision, but it also provokes the possibility of continued reflection.

In summary, first we observed that a decision is not made on the bases of a reflective process. Reflection's character as action means that there is never time to reflect before an action that changes the situation occurs. Action, therefore, always seems to occur before one is ready. Thus, responsibility seems to suffer from the necessity that it be assumed in the *absence* of adequate reflection; one never has the time necessary to adequately reflect on a situation before an action occurs. Second, we considered the character of a decision in more detail, noticing that if a decision were to occur it must have some independence from a guiding model or determining rule. Third,

with this character of a decision in mind, we took up the way in which time obstructs responsibility once again to discover that this obstacle—the inability to adequately reflect on a situation before a decision is required—is the condition for the possibility of a decision. If a decision occurs, it is made in a moment of not knowing exactly what is required. Time's obstacle to responsibility obstructs all guarantees, allowing the agent to *participate* in reality and giving moral meaning to actions. A lack of guarantee, in other words, is precisely what the possibility of a decision requires: between one's knowledge of the situation and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted; decisions must flow out of one's *own* limited perspective and not simply along a predefined path. This brings us to the fourth and final point: the uncertainty and risks associated with this lack of guarantee provoke continued reflection. Uncertainty insures that vigilance must continue even after a decision is made. Thus, urgency is not only operative in making a decision possible but it also calls one's attention to the necessity of reflection and in this way has the potential to increase responsibility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fact that action necessarily occurs in time both hinders responsibility and makes a responsible decision possible. It is, therefore, simultaneously the condition for the possibility and the condition for the impossibility of a responsible decision. In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida gives a cogent account of this *aporia*:

Saying that a responsible decision must be taken on the basis of knowledge seems to define the condition of possibility of responsibility (one can't make a responsible decision without science or conscience, without knowing what one is doing, for what reasons, in view of what and under what conditions), at the same time as it defines the condition of impossibility of this same responsibility (if decision-making is relegated to a knowledge that is content to follow or to develop, then it is no more a

responsible decision, it is the technical deployment of a cognitive apparatus, the simple mechanistic deployment of theorem).⁷⁴

The absence of adequate reflection does not mean that responsibility necessarily dissolves; rather, Derrida suggests that responsibility must be thought of differently.⁷⁵ Derrida's proposal for how to think about responsibility differently is reflected in the *aporia* outlined above. The philosophical puzzle makes the concept of responsibility strange, since it requires that we think of responsibility as a principle that makes two contradictory demands: in principle, responsibility requires one "not to wait, while holding oneself back nonetheless to continue to reconsider things. A responsible decision, if there is one, always comes at this price, as does vigilance, as does everything that might tear us from our dogmatic slumber, if this is possible."⁷⁶ One needs to know as much as possible and as well as possible, "but between one's knowledge and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted..."⁷⁷ That we learn to wait without waiting seems to be a difficult, maybe impossible, challenge.

II. Sacrifice and Forgiveness

In Section One we began with the assumption that a responsible decision requires reflection and action. However, on closer inspection we discovered that time always seems to interrupt reflection. This interruption turned out to be both the condition for the possibility and the condition for the impossibility of a responsible decision. Thus, we were led to formulate a way of thinking responsibly that appreciates this paradox: a responsible decision must be well-considered, but

⁷⁴ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 24.

⁷⁵ Derrida concludes, "If I am responsible even before I want to be, this does not mean that responsibility dissolves, but that one must think it differently..." ("Ethics and Politics Today," 296).

⁷⁶ Derrida, "The Aforementioned So-Called Human Genome," 214.

⁷⁷ Derrida, "Ethics and Politics Today," 298.

between one's knowledge of the situation and the decision, the chain of consequence must be interrupted. One is faced with the challenge of learning how to not wait, while at the same time waiting to reflect before a decision is made. Through exploring this strange formula further, we will be led to notice that if responsible decisions do indeed occur they do so at the expense of an unjustifiable sacrifice and, consequently, that this particular concept of responsibility needs to be grounded in forgiveness.

An Unjustifiable Sacrifice

Consider, once against, the example of our commuter and her need to decide whether or not she will help an elderly woman up a set of stairs. We observed that the time-sensitive nature of a situation makes it practically impossible for the commuter to consider all the relevant aspects of the situation before a decision is needed. Besides, stopping to reflect is already a response to the situation. The commuter, thus, is faced with deciding when to cut her reflection short in order to act. One cannot decide, because one does not know, which relevant aspects of the situation will be ignored. It must be accepted that something will need to be excluded or sacrificed in the reflective process. She is faced with deciding where to tie a knot, so to speak, between waiting to reflect and interrupting this process with a response. Unfortunately, it is impossible to decide how to tie a perfect knot between reflection and action because the decision occurs without full knowledge of the situation. In other words, it is impossible to guarantee which aspects of the situation can be ignored and which are essential. The decision is, therefore, a gamble, made with the hope that only the least pertinent information is sacrificed for the sake of time. The decision—not the decision to assist or withhold help, but the decision as to where to stop reflecting and begin acting—cannot be

justified, and if it could it would no longer be a decision but, as we have observed, simply part of a calculative process and thus lacking meaning. The decision to aid or ignore the elderly woman cannot be guaranteed to address the demands of the situation. In this sense, an actor never quite knows what she is doing and always risks becoming “guilty” of consequences she never intended or even foresaw.⁷⁸ It could be the case that the aspects of the situation one fails to consider would have revealed a flaw in the reasoning that led to the decision, or that what one does jeopardizes one’s capacity to act responsibly in a different situation. The essential point is that, because one can never fully comprehend the situation, the reflection process must come to an end at an unjustifiable moment, which entails that some potentially important knowledge of the situation is sacrificed. Unfortunately, this risk cannot be completely overcome. Urgency ensures that one is faced with the challenge of deciding where to cut reflection short, a decision that is ultimately unjustifiable because it is based on the actor’s *own* limited perspective and risky because it can result in the failure of responsibility.⁷⁹

The unjustifiable nature of a decision, the fact that one must, in a sense, gamble when deciding where to tie a knot between reflection and action, means that, even after the decision is made, there is always room for more reflection. In fact, the impossibility of the revised formula of responsibility—that one learn to not wait, while holding back to wait for reflection to occur—always encourages more reflection. We essentially made this observation in the last section: that reflection is provoked by the uncertainty and risk that accompanies all decisions.

When Derrida’s formula of responsibility is observed in practice the risk seems to always be realized—something is always sacrificed when a decision is made. In other words, a determinate action that follows a decision not only flows out of an unjustifiable interruption of the reflective

⁷⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233.

⁷⁹ Derrida refers to this difficulty as the “ordeal of the undecidable” (“Force of Law,” 252).

process but also results in a tangible (for lack of a better term) sacrifice. Because a response is owed in time, to *someone* or to some particular circumstance, the actor must sacrifice her answerability to other individuals and other situations that also make demands on the actor. By cutting the reflective process short, the commuter, for example, chooses to ignore her answerability to everything and everyone else she does not have time to consider but to which and to whom she is also, in principle, answerable to in that moment. In practice, therefore, the commuter is responsible to the elderly woman only by being irresponsible to others—her colleagues, perhaps, who are forced to wait as she assists the woman in need. The finitude of action means that a sacrifice is necessary in both the reflective process and in one's relationships to others. Thus, the unjustifiable sacrifice made in the reflective process is always mirrored in the exclusivity of an action. Action cannot be fully and purely responsible. The fact that action necessarily occurs in time means that some responsibilities must be excluded, an exclusivity that ultimately rests on an actor's own limited perspective.

By preferring what one does in the here and now—by volunteering in a particular municipality, by looking after a particular child, by choosing to speak a particular language or work in a particular profession—one is perhaps fulfilling a duty or a responsibility. But in so doing one has also sacrificed and betrayed, at every moment, all one's other obligations: obligations to the other others whom one knows or does not know, to the billions who are dying of starvation or sickness.⁸⁰ No single individual has the time or ability to care for all the children in the world who need help, for example, and by taking time and energy to care for some of them an individual effectively chooses not to care for the others. One can respond to another only by sacrificing one's responsibility to someone else. Describing this sacrifice Derrida writes:

I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others... Paradox, scandal, and aporia

⁸⁰ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.

are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the exposure of conceptual thinking to its limit, to its death and finitude. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, request, love, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others, I put to death, I betray and lie...⁸¹

In the same way as finitude makes it impossible to attain full knowledge of a situation that demands a response, so to does the finite nature of action make it impossible to attend to everyone and everything that in principle requires our attention.

The sacrifice involved in the reflective process is mirrored in the way an individual is unable to finally justify why she sacrifices one obligation by responding to another. It is not the case that one can act purely responsibly, remaining completely faithful to all. Of course reasons can be given for acting in one way and not another but, because an exhaustive survey is impossible and the reflective process is cut short at an unjustifiable point, these reasons are not absolutely justifiable. How would a parent, for example, ever ultimately justify feeding her own family while allowing others to die of hunger? A parent fails in her responsibility to those others who need help, yet it is only by making this sacrifice that she acts responsibly by caring for her family. The decision that binds an individual to singularities, Derrida writes, “to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable...”⁸² This is essentially the conflict found at the centre of all relationships: when one commits to a particular person, role, identity, or situation, one fails in other commitments to other people and other situations that may be no less pressing or relevant. Therefore, when Derrida’s formula of responsibility—that one must learn not to wait while simultaneously waiting for the end of reflection—is put into practice, an individual takes

⁸¹ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.

⁸² Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 70.

responsibility only by making an unjustifiable sacrifice, both in the reflective process and in her relationships to others.

In conclusion, one can extrapolate two imperatives from Derrida's revised definition of responsibility: relationships, and being responsible to others, result in a negotiation between being attentive to the particular, while at the same time holding back so as to continue considering what can be generally held as true about the situation. Yet, if the sacrifice of the general by a particular action cannot finally be justified, then Derrida's formula means that the sacrifice can never be paid for, reimbursed, or reconciled. When one attempts to negotiate between these two imperatives, no equitable agreement will be found. The balance sheets will never add up, so to speak; they will always be in the red. Further, due to an action's lack of guarantee, the imperative to continue reflecting and taking responsibility always trumps the imperative to make a decision and not wait to reflect.

The imbalance of these two imperatives, the way in which each requires a sacrifice that can never be resolved, invokes the notion of forgiveness. Practising forgiveness is one way of acknowledging that we can only ever respond to ethical dilemmas in excessive, one-sided ways.⁸³ In this way, forgiveness, like promising, address the difficulty caused by the opacity of life by trying to respond to and recognize the necessity of the exclusive one-sidedness of actions.

⁸³ Examining Derridian ethics, Shannon Hoff provides a cogent explanation of how responsibility can be located in the bind between the particular or actual and the unconditional ideal (such as justice). Hoff writes, "In order to respond to a particular situation I must act, but in acting I interpret what the ideal requires for this situation and so assert my own authority in place of its authority; I take on the conditions that acting requires and thus fail to enact an unconditional ideal; I bring about another one-sided situation that may need to be transformed for the sake of the ideal of justice. The demand to be ethical persists in commanding me in a way that is in some sense fundamentally unanswerable, insofar as every answer I give is both responsible and irresponsible. To try to evade this situation and aim for absolute answerability, however—refusing to act in a conditioned way in the name of unconditional hospitality—will entail simply the failure to enact any hospitality at all." Hoff continues, "There is no way out of this bind. Its 'impossibility,' however, calls not for 'throwing up one's hands' in moral resignation but for the effort of *understanding* it and allowing that understanding to shape one's orientation to action" ("Translating Principle into Practice: On Derrida and the Terms of Feminism," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (2015): 405). As we will see, a way in which one's orientation is shaped by understanding the "impossibility" of responsibility is a movement towards the notion of forgiveness and its necessity.

Forgiveness

A few general comments about forgiveness can be made at this juncture. What one sacrifices by making a determinate decision is essentially the conditions on which ethical relationships are based. The commuter, as we observed, spends time aiding an elderly woman during her commute only by breaking her commitments to others, such as the commitment of punctuality she owes to her boss or coworkers. By sacrificing this commitment, the commuter harms the trust that underlies and enables her relationship with these others. The immediate possible consequences of this sacrifice are the destruction of these relationships and the inability for others to have faith in the person the commuter promises to be.

As a response to the failure that hounds ethical action, forgiveness actually *supports* the possibility of taking responsibility in at least three ways. First, forgiveness interrupts the chain of consequence set off by the original sacrifice. What one rationally expects is that a debt, created by the sacrifice, must be repaid; one must atone for being late for work, for instance. On this point Arendt writes,

In this respect, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, which 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, permitting the chain reaction contained in every action to take its unhindered course.⁸⁴

In this sense forgiveness is an unexpected response that ends the destructive chain of consequence set off by the original sacrifice. Further, the irrationality of forgiveness is the response that Derrida's dissymmetrical formula of responsibility seems to elicit. If the disjointedness of the formula is not simply an obstacle to responsibility—if it actually encourages greater reflection and, therefore,

⁸⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240.

increases responsibility—than one must come to terms with the dissymmetry without completely eliminating it. Forgiveness allows for this possibility.⁸⁵ Already we can begin to see a certain kind of logic to forgiveness; it is not simply irrational. This is basically the second way forgiveness addresses the challenge of responsibility; it involves the recognition that one can only ever act responsibly in a partial and one-sided way. Forgiveness seems like a logical response for one's colleagues, for instance, who could be happy that the commuter is the kind of person who would do an ethical thing even if it results in inconveniencing them. Forgiveness, therefore, is both illogical, in that it interrupts the economy of exchange created by the sacrifice, and logical, in the sense that it acknowledges that one can only act responsibly by inconveniencing someone. Finally, taken together, these two results reveal how, when forgiveness is offered, it provides a way of imagining the possibility of new relationships built on the remains of the old.⁸⁶ The commuter's coworkers, for example, are able to see past the transgression to discover something about "who" the commuter is. In a more negative example, confession and forgiveness allow for a criminal to begin receiving help from those she harmed and to begin addressing the damage inflicted.⁸⁷ Forgiveness offers a

⁸⁵ In a footnote in Chapter One we briefly noted a divergence in the thought of Derrida and Arendt on the issue of witnessing. In Derrida's remarks on Arendt in *Of Forgiveness*, a similar difference is raised by Derrida himself. Derrida criticizes Arendt for assuming that forgiveness must rest on a human possibility, a possibility that he immediately equates with "a sovereign 'I can.'" ("On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness," trans. Mark Dooley & Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 37; Derrida makes similar remarks in "To Forgive," this time without mentioning the assumption of a sovereign "I can" ("To Forgive," in *Questioning God*, ed. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 30.) For more on this point of contention between Arendt and Derrida see: Andrew Schaap, "The Proto-Politics of Reconciliation: Lefort and the Aporia of Forgiveness in Arendt and Derrida," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 4 (2006): 626-29; and Samir Haddad, "Arendt, Derrida, and The Inheritance of Forgiveness," *Philosophy Today* 51, no. 4 (2007): 416-426.

⁸⁶ Shannon Hoff, drawing on the thought of Hegel, makes a similar point, suggesting that "it is possible to imagine the construction of a new basis for a shared life upon the remains of the old, and this, for Hegel, is accomplished by forgiveness" ("Law, Love, and Life: Forgiveness and the Transformation of Politics," *Philosophy Today, SPEP Supplement* 54, no. 2 (2010): 165).

⁸⁷ It is important to note that the destruction that results from making a determinate decision is the specific thing at issue in the this instance. One cannot avoid the unjustifiable sacrifice that accompanies a decision, even if that decision was the result of a process that attempted to find the most palpable place to tie a knot between reflection and action, sacrificing as little as possible. What remains to be considered in detail is the distinction between this sacrifice and what Derrida characterizes as the "worst violence." The worst violence, according to Lawlor, concerns "a relation that makes of more than one simply one, that makes, out of a division, an indivisible sovereignty" (Leonard Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida," <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/derrida/>). Explicating the distinction between radical

possibility for the relationship between the actor and those she transgresses to continue anew in light of the sacrifice that resulted from a determinate act. To summarize, the three ways in which forgiveness supports responsibility are: 1) it ends the chain of consequence set off by the original sacrifice; 2) it acknowledges the irresponsibility that haunts all attempts to act responsibly; and 3) it allows for new relationships to be built in the wreckage of the old.

Forgiveness seems essential for both identity and ethical action. In the first place, identity, as we observed in Chapter One, depends on one being able to be in the presence of others. When we act in one-sided ways, however, we can damage those relationships, the narrative webs in which one resides and depends, and so hinder the development and persistence of identity. Forgiveness, however, can allow for the restoration of these webs and end the process of destruction set off by the original, transgressive act. Forgiveness is important for responsibility because one acts responsibly or ethically for the sake of relationship, and forgiveness is directed precisely at the sustenance of relationship. Rather than allowing the sacrifice associated with determinacy to simply close off future possibilities and destroy relationships, forgiveness pries the future open, allowing different possibilities and the potential for more mature relationships. While much more could be said on the topic of finitude and forgiveness, the general suggestions made here are meant to simply point in a helpful direction: that the necessary opacity and one-sidedness of decision-making demands in response the ethical practice of forgiveness.

violence and the worst violence is beyond the scope of our study, but one can see from what is suggested here how such a study could bring clarity to discussion of sin in a religious context, but also help us better conceive of criminality. If every act harbours a criminal element, if even the judge must act as if she is beyond the law, it seems important to be capable of, in principle at least, distinguishing the criminal element of a decision from the criminality in the worst sense.

Conclusion

Chapter One examined the challenges involved in a self's experience of identity-production—how a self simultaneously reveals and expresses itself and is revealed and expressed. First, it began by examining the conditions under which this happens, discussing the role of artifacts and others in this context: artifacts are a medium through which a self appears to others, and others provide the narrative context in which and through which an individual may begin to express and discover identity. Second, although operative in providing the means through which a self expresses and reveals itself, the way in which the self appears to others, it is also the case that artifacts and others determine appearance in ways that are beyond a self's ability to control. In this sense, identity is often located outside a self, in the narratives of others and in the artificial world. After considering how artifacts and others both reveal identity and cause it to be opaque, we turned to the way in which time and one's own action permanently divides one from the possibility of a comprehensive understanding of identity. Identity, in a sense, stretches across time, meaning that an aspect of one's identity always remains unknowable. As evidence of this obscurity we noticed that a future self can always oppose a past identity. Thus, what appears in the present is never the complete story of who a self is; it is always the case that a present identity can change. Time ensures that one can never settle on a definitive definition of who one is. In this way a self is limited in her capacity to participate in the production of identity as artifacts, others, time, and its future self determine identity and ensure that it can only ever be partially known.

The last two sections of Chapter One explicate how the opacity of identity affects one's relationship with others. First, the fact that we never have complete control of our experience of identity formation calls our attention to the necessity of being open to the way in which forces

outside ourselves determine and shape a self. Identity, in other words, is not constructed the same way a carpenter constructs a chair. Our experience of its formation does not reveal a guiding principle or master blueprint. Identity-production follows an unpredictable path, and, thus, demands that a self live in a mode of openness to the way in which identity reveals itself through the medium of others. Second, although always uncertain, our experience of identity seems to rely on a level of stability. Society and one's relationships with others requires a relatively fixed and stable identity—in general, citizens must commit to specific roles and responsibilities in order to fit in. A self is made relatable by some particular and relatively predictable identity. Thus, as identity forms, it is important, on the one hand, to remain open to difference while, on the other, it is important to find some predictability in this process. The concluding section of Chapter One addresses the seemingly contradictory way in which identity is both in flux and in need of security. We argue that the ethical practice of promising offers a way in which we can relate to others without denying the uncertain nature of identity. Although always accompanied by the risk of infidelity, addressing others or just simply being with them requires a level of trust. A self promises others that it is a particular way—trustworthy, committed, invested in a shared project, etc.—and relies on others having faith in this promise. Promises help a self and others suspend or suppress a self's opaque and fluctuating nature so that specific roles can be filled and meaningful relationships can develop. Thus, the uncertain nature of identity finds a remedy in the power of promises.

In Chapter One, then, we developed a picture of identity that is fundamentally opaque. Although we participate in the process, the way in which identity takes shape is fundamentally out of our hands. Being with others, relating and acting together, requires that we make promises, suspending the uncertainty of our situation and identity. Yet, this promise always risks infidelities; it remains to be seen if a promise will be fulfilled. Given the fluctuating character of identity and the

risk involved in making promises, however, the next question that arose was the question of how responsible action is possible. If my own self and my situation are opaque to me, if I cannot have complete knowledge of myself or my situation, then how can I act in a way that is moral, responsible, and answerable to the demands of any given situation? We turned to this question in Chapter Two, exploring the ways in which we can be responsible even in the context of our vulnerability to artifacts, others, time, and our own temporal constitution. We oriented this discussion to the topic of forgiveness, a second key ethical practice that reveals itself in our weakness.

Chapter Two builds on Chapter One, employing, once again, the way in which time obstructs knowledge, but focused specifically on how time complicates a self's understanding of the situation for which it is responsible. Unable to understand the situation from a complete perspective, decisions and responsible actions flow out of a partial one-sided understanding of what the situation demands. Chapter Two begins by exploring the nature of this one-sidedness through Derrida's concept of "urgency." Here we observed that a self always seems to act before she is ready. One does not have access to the time necessary to understand the situation well enough to act in a fully responsible way. At some point in time reflection must end and action begin and, in fact, action has already begun by the very nature of reflection as action. At what point one stops reflecting and begins to act, however, is problematic because one always acts: there is no putting off the beginning of action. The lack of comprehensive knowledge makes this decision a kind of gamble; without full knowledge of the situation the agent is forced to cut the reflective process short at an ultimately unjustifiable moment. However, this lack of guarantee—the fact that one does not know "the right thing to do"—is not simply an obstacle to responsible action. Rather, it is argued that one's limited perspective is what *allows* for the possibility of making a responsible decision. Barred from accessing

full knowledge of the situation, or an ultimate blueprint for how to act, human beings must figure out what reality is and how to act for themselves. That the world is unclear to the agent makes room for meaningful participation in the production of reality. In this way, one's limited perspective allows for meaningful actions. Once again we discovered an essential vulnerability in the human experience, one is capable of figuring what reality is but only at the risk of acting irresponsibly. In light of this vulnerability, Derrida's proposes a concept of responsibility that incorporates human weakness by the very fact that it never finds balance: responsibility, he argues, requires that one make a decision from a limited perspective while at the same time refraining from action to continue to broaden this perspective through reflection. This formula is imbalanced by its contradictory nature: it is impossible to take action and, at the same time, refrain from acting. Thus, action, even an act that is responsible in some way, will necessarily fail this principle of responsibility. The final section of this thesis explicates the difficulties of this concept, revealing, specifically, how it finds support in the ethical practice of forgiveness. Being responsible, we argued, means meeting a particular demand at the expense of some other. We only ever succeed in being responsible by failing to respond to some other responsibility. As a response to the failure that hounds ethical action, forgiveness actually *supports* the possibility of taking responsibility in three ways: 1) it ends the chain of consequence set off by the original sacrifice; 2) it acknowledges the irresponsibility that haunts all attempts to act responsibly; and 3) it allows for new relationships to be built in the wreckage of the old. Responsible action finds support, first, in the promise and faith from which it begins, and, second, in the forgiveness that makes it possible for a self to continue acting in meaningful ways.

In the introduction to this thesis, I lamented the way in which commitments to others and exercising responsibility in relation to them is a struggle. It turns out, however, that the ways in

which these things are a struggle—the risks we must take and the confessions required—seems to be the same ways in which they find meaning. When one begins to see the inextricable link between the opacity inherent in relationships and their meaningfulness, the struggle against uncertainty can be transformed. Instead of simply representing failure, our inability to guarantee our identity or act fully responsibly is the aspect of our relationships with others by which affection and love are made meaningful concepts. One chooses to relate and spend time with another, not because they have to or because it is “the right thing to do,” but because one feels compelled to do so. By being grounded in a promise and sustained by forgiveness a meaningful bond is created in and through the struggle that accompanies our relationships with others. We become united to one another in our relationships through our weakness. In his poem, “The Country of Marriage,” Wendell Berry does not explicitly reference forgiveness, but one cannot help but see both forgiveness and promises operating behind each line. Below I quote the fifth verse of Wendell’s poem, which, standing on its own, brings our attention to these themes.

*Our bond is no little economy based on the exchange
of my love and work for yours, so much for so much
of an expendable fund. We don't know what its
limits are—
that puts us in the dark. We are more together
than we know, how else could we keep on
discovering
we are more together than we thought?
You are the known way leading always to the
unknown,
and you are the known place to which the unknown
is always
leading me back. More blessed in you than I know,
I possess nothing worthy to give you, nothing
not belittled by my saying that I possess it.*

*Even an hour of love is a moral predicament, a
blessing
a man may be hard up to be worthy of. He can only
accept it, as a plant accepts from all the bounty of the
light
enough to live, and then accepts the dark,
passing unencumbered back to the earth, as I
have fallen time and again from the great strength
of my desire, helpless, into your arms.⁸⁸*

The poem assumes that the uncertainty of one's situation and identity is not simply a barrier to relationship. Rather, it expresses well the way in which this uncertainty, our human weakness, is the thing which makes relationships meaningful. This new understanding of our limitations in terms of relating to one another is essentially the purpose of this paper. We confess and forgive, falling helpless into each other's arms.

⁸⁸ Wendell Berry, *A Country of Marriage: Poems*, reprint ed. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2013), 6.

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