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Chapter V
Action

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THE FRAILITY OF HUMAN AFFAIRS

Action, as distinguished from fabrication, is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act. Action and speech need the surrounding presence of others no less than fabrication needs the surrounding presence of nature for its material, and of a world in which to place the finished product. Fabrication is surrounded by and in constant contact with the world: action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of the acts and words of other men. 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"¹ — or it is conscious despair of all action, political and non-political, coupled with the utopian hope that it may be possible to treat men as one treats other "material."² The strength the individual needs for every process of production becomes altogether worthless when action is at stake, regardless of whether this strength is intellectual or a matter of purely material force. History is full of ex- [189] amples of the impotence of the strong and superior man who does not know how to enlist the help, the co-acting of his fellow men. His failure is frequently blamed upon the fatal inferiority of the many and the resentment every outstanding person inspires in those who are mediocre. Yet true as such observations are bound to be, they do not touch the heart of the matter.

In order to illustrate what is at stake here we may remember that Greek and Latin, unlike the modern languages, contain two altogether different and yet interrelated words with which to designate the verb "to act." To the two Greek verbs *archein* ("to begin," "to lead," finally "to rule") and *prattein* ("to pass through," "to achieve," "to finish") correspond the two Latin verbs *agere* ("to

¹ Plato already reproached Pericles because he did not "make the citizens better" and because the Athenians were even worse at the end of his career than before (*Gorgias* 515).

² Recent political history is full of examples indicating that the term "human material" is no harmless metaphor, and the same is true for a whole host of modern scientific experiments in social engineering, biochemistry, brain surgery, etc., all of which tend to treat and change human material like other matter. This mechanistic approach is typical of the modern age; antiquity, when it pursued similar aims, was inclined to think of men in terms of savage animals who need be tamed and domesticated. The only possible achievement in either case is to kill man, not indeed necessarily as a living organism, but *qua* man.

set into motion," "to lead") and *gerere* (whose original meaning is "to bear").³ Here it seems as though each action were divided into two parts, the beginning made by a single person and the achievement in which many join by "bearing" and "finishing" the enterprise, by seeing it through. Not only are the words interrelated in a similar manner, the history of their usage is very similar too. In both cases the word that originally designated only the second part of action, its achievement — *prattein* and *gerere* — became the accepted word for action in general, whereas the words designating the beginning of action became specialized in meaning, at least in political language. *Archein* came to mean chiefly "to rule" and "to lead" when it was specifically used, and *agere* came to mean "to lead" rather than "to set into motion."

Thus the role of the beginner and leader, who was a *primus inter pares* (in the case of Homer, a king among kings), changed into that of a ruler; the original interdependence of action, the dependence of the beginner and leader upon others for help and the dependence of his followers upon him for an occasion to act themselves, split into two altogether different functions: the function of giving commands, which became the prerogative of the ruler, and the function of executing them, which became the duty of his subjects. This ruler is alone, isolated against others by his force, just as the beginner was isolated through his initiative at [190] the start, before he had found others to join him. Yet the strength of the beginner and leader shows itself only in his initiative and the risk he takes, not in the actual achievement. In the case of the successful ruler, he may claim for himself what actually is the achievement of many — something that Agamemnon, who was a king but no ruler, would never have been permitted. Through this claim, the ruler monopolizes, so to speak, the strength of those without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything. Thus, the delusion of extraordinary strength arises and with it the fallacy of the strong man who is powerful because he is alone.

Because the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting beings, he is never merely a "doer" but always and at the same time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. These consequences are boundless, because action, though it may proceed from nowhere, so to speak, acts into a medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes. Since action acts upon beings who are capable of their own actions, reaction, apart from being a response, is always a new action that strikes out on its own and affects others. Thus action and reaction among men never move in a closed circle and can never be reliably confined to two partners. This boundlessness is characteristic not of political action alone, in the narrower sense of the word, as though the boundlessness of human interrelatedness were only the result of the boundless multitude of people involved, which could be escaped by resigning oneself to action within a limited, graspable framework of circumstances; the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation.

Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries.⁴ Limita- [191]

³ For *archein* and *prattein* see especially their use in Homer (cf. C. Capelle, *Wörterbuch des Homeros und der Homeriden* [1889]).

⁴ It is interesting to note that Montesquieu, whose concern was not with laws but with the actions their spirit would inspire, defines laws as rapports subsisting between different beings (*Esprit des lois*, Book I, ch. 1; cf.

tions and boundaries exist within the realm of human affairs, but they never offer a framework that can reliably withstand the onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself. The frailty of human institutions and laws and, generally, of all matters pertaining to men's living together, arises from the human condition of natality and is quite independent of the frailty of human nature. The fences inclosing private property and insuring the limitations of each household, the territorial boundaries which protect and make possible the physical identity of a people, and the laws which protect and make possible its political existence, are of such great importance to the stability of human affairs precisely because no such limiting and protecting principles rise out of the activities going on in the realm of human affairs itself. The limitations of the law are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from within the body politic, just as the boundaries of the territory are never entirely reliable safeguards against action from without. The boundlessness of action is only the other side of its tremendous capacity for establishing relationships, that is, its specific productivity; this is why the old virtue of moderation, of keeping within bounds, is indeed one of the political virtues par excellence, just as the political temptation par excellence is indeed *hubris* (as the Greeks, fully experienced in the potentialities of action, knew so well) and not the will to power, as we are inclined to believe.

Yet while the various limitations and boundaries we find in every body politic may offer some protection against the inherent boundlessness of action, they are altogether helpless to offset its second outstanding character: its inherent unpredictability. This is not simply a question of inability to foretell all the logical consequences of a particular act, in which case an electronic computer would be able to foretell the future, but arises directly out of the story which, as the result of action, begins and establishes [192] itself as soon as the fleeting moment of the deed is past. The trouble is that whatever the character and content of the subsequent story may be, whether it is played in private or public life, whether it involves many or few actors, its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended. In contradistinction to fabrication, where the light by which to judge the finished product is provided by the image or model perceived beforehand by the craftsman's eye, the light that illuminates processes of action, and therefore all historical processes, appears only at their end, frequently when all the participants are dead. Action reveals itself fully only to the storyteller, that is, to the backward glance of the historian, who indeed always knows better what it was all about than the participants. All accounts told by the actors themselves, though they may in rare cases give an entirely trustworthy statement of intentions, aims, and motives, become mere useful source material in the historian's hands and can never match his story in significance and truthfulness. What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows. Even though stories are the inevitable results of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who perceives and "makes" the story.

Book XXVI, ch. 1). This definition is surprising because laws had always been defined in terms of boundaries and limitations. The reason for it is that Montesquieu was less interested in what he called the "nature of government" — whether it was a republic or a monarchy, for instance — than in its "principle . . . by which it is made to act, . . . the human passions which set it in motion" (Book III, ch. 1).

This unpredictability of outcome is closely related to the revelatory character of action and speech, in which one discloses one's self without ever either knowing himself or being able to calculate beforehand whom he reveals. The ancient saying that nobody can be called *eudaimōn* before he is dead may point to the issue at stake, if we could hear its original meaning after two and a half thousand years of hackneyed repetition; not even its Latin translation, proverbial and trite already in Rome — *nemo ante mortem beatus esse dici potest* — conveys this meaning, although it may have inspired the practice of the Catholic Church to beatify her saints only after they have long been safely dead. For *eudaimonia* means neither happiness nor beatitude; it cannot be translated and per- [193] haps cannot even be explained. It has the connotation of blessedness, but without any religious overtones, and it means literally something like the well-being of the *daimōn* who accompanies each man throughout life, who is his distinct identity, but appears and is visible only to others.⁵ Unlike happiness, therefore, which is a passing mood, and unlike good fortune, which one may have at certain periods of life and lack in others, *eudaimonia*, like life itself, is a lasting state of being which is neither subject to change nor capable of effecting change. To be *eudaimōn* and to have been *eudaimōn*, according to Aristotle, are the same, just as to "live well" (*eu dzēn*) and to have "lived well" are the same as long as life lasts; they are not states or activities which change a person's quality, such as learning and having learned, which indicate two altogether different attributes of the same person at different moments.⁶

This unchangeable identity of the person, though disclosing itself intangibly in act and speech, becomes tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life; but as such it can be known, that is, grasped as a palpable entity only after it has come to its end. In other words, human essence — not human nature in general (which does not exist) nor the sum total of qualities and shortcomings in the individual, but the essence of who somebody is — can come into being only when life departs, leaving behind nothing but a story. Therefore whoever consciously aims at being "essential," at leaving behind a story and an identity which will win "immortal fame," must not only risk his life but expressly choose, as Achilles did, a short life and premature death. Only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness, because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences and con- [194] tinuation of what he began. What gives the story of Achilles its paradigmatic significance is that it shows in a nutshell that *eudaimonia* can be bought only at the price of life and that one can make sure of it only by foregoing the continuity of living in which we disclose ourselves piecemeal, by summing up all of one's life in a single deed, so that the story of the act comes to its end together with life itself. Even Achilles, it is true, remains dependent upon the storyteller, poet, or historian, without whom everything he did remains futile; but he is the only "hero," and therefore the hero par excellence, who delivers into the narrator's hands the full significance of his deed, so that it is as though he had not merely enacted the story of his life but at the same time also "made" it.

⁵ For this interpretation of *daimōn* and *eudaimonia*, see Sophocles *Oedipus Rex* 1186 ff., especially the verses: *Tis gar, tis anēr pleon / tas eudaimonias pherei / ē tosouton hoson dokein / kai doxant' apoklinai* ("For which, which man [can] bear more *eudaimonia* than he grasps from appearance and deflects in its appearance?"). It is against this inevitable distortion that the chorus asserts its own knowledge: these others see, they "have" Oedipus' *daimōn* before their eyes as an example; the misery of the mortals is their blindness toward their own *daimōn*.

⁶ Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1048a23 ff.

No doubt this concept of action is highly individualistic, as we would say today.⁷ It stresses the urge toward self-disclosure at the expense of all other factors and therefore remains relatively untouched by the predicament of unpredictability. As such it became the prototype of action for Greek antiquity and influenced, in the form of the so-called agonal spirit, the passionate drive to show one's self in measuring up against others that underlies the concept of politics prevalent in the city-states. An outstanding symptom of this prevailing influence is that the Greeks, in distinction from all later developments, did not count legislating among the political activities. In their opinion, the lawmaker was like the builder of the city wall, someone who had to do and finish his work before political activity could begin. He therefore was treated like any other craftsman or architect and could be called from abroad and commissioned without having to be a citizen, whereas the right to *politeuesthai*, to engage in the numerous activities which eventually went on in the *polis*, was entirely restricted to citizens. To them, the laws, like the wall around the city, were not results of action but products of making. Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space [195] being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law; legislator and architect belonged in the same category.⁸ But these tangible entities themselves were not the content of politics (not Athens, but the Athenians, were the *polis*⁹), and they did not command the same loyalty we know from the Roman type of patriotism.

Though it is true that Plato and Aristotle elevated lawmaking and city-building to the highest rank in political life, this does not indicate that they enlarged the fundamental Greek experiences of action and politics to comprehend what later turned out to be the political genius of Rome: legislation and foundation. The Socratic school, on the contrary, turned to these activities, which to the Greeks were prepolitical, because they wished to turn against politics and against action. To them, legislating and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because in them men "act like craftsmen": the result of their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end.¹⁰ This is no longer or, rather, not yet action (*praxis*), properly speaking, but making (*poiēsis*), which they prefer because of its greater reliability. It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs.

How this remedy can destroy the very substance of human relationships is perhaps best illustrated in one of the rare instances [196] where Aristotle draws an example of acting from the sphere of private life, in the relationship between the benefactor and his recipient. With that candid absence of moralizing that is the mark of Greek, though not of Roman, antiquity, he states first as a matter of fact that the benefactor always loves those he has helped more than he is loved by them. He then

⁷ The fact that the Greek word for "every one" (*hekastos*) is derived from *hekas* ("far off") seems to indicate how deep-rooted this "individualism" must have been.

⁸ See, for instance, Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b25. There is no more elemental difference between Greece and Rome than their respective attitudes toward territory and law. In Rome, the foundation of the city and the establishment of its laws remained the great and decisive act to which all later deeds and accomplishments had to be related in order to acquire political validity and legitimation.

⁹ See M. F. Schachermeyr, "La formation de la cité Grecque," *Diogenes*, No. 4 (1953), who compares the Greek usage with that of Babylon, where the notion of "the Babylonians" could be expressed only by saying: the people of the territory of the city of Babylon.

¹⁰ "For [the legislators] alone act like craftsmen [*cheirotechnoi*]" because their act has a tangible end, an *eschaton*, which is the decree passed in the assembly (*psēphisma*) (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1141b29).

goes on to explain that this is only natural, since the benefactor has done a work, an *ergon*, while the recipient has only endured his beneficence. The benefactor, according to Aristotle, loves his "work," the life of the recipient which he has "made," as the poet loves his poems, and he reminds his readers that the poet's love for his work is hardly less passionate than a mother's love for her children.¹¹ This explanation shows clearly that he thinks of acting in terms of making, and of its result, the relationship between men, in terms of an accomplished "work" (his emphatic attempts to distinguish between action and fabrication, *praxis* and *poiēsis*, notwithstanding).¹² In this instance, it is perfectly obvious how this interpretation, though it may serve to explain psychologically the phenomenon of ingratitude on the assumption that both benefactor and recipient agree about an interpretation of action in terms of making, actually spoils the action itself and its true result, the relationship it should have established. The example of the legislator is less plausible for us only because the Greek notion of the task and role of the legislator in the public realm is so utterly alien to our own. In any event, work, such as the activity of the legislator in Greek understanding, can become the content of action only on condition that further action is not desirable or possible; and action can result in an end product only on condition that its own authentic, non-tangible, and always utterly fragile meaning is destroyed.

The original, prephilosophic Greek remedy for this frailty had been the foundation of the *polis*. The *polis*, as it grew out of and remained rooted in the Greek pre-*polis* experience and estimate of what makes it worthwhile for men to live together (*syzēn*), [197] namely, the "sharing of words and deeds,"¹³ had a twofold function. First, it was intended¹³ to enable men to do permanently, albeit under certain restrictions, what otherwise had been possible only as an extraordinary and infrequent enterprise for which they had to leave their households. The *polis* was supposed to multiply the occasions to win "immortal fame," that is, to multiply the chances for everybody to distinguish himself, to show in deed and word who he was in his unique distinctness. One, if not the chief, reason for the incredible development of gift and genius in Athens, as well as for the hardly less surprising swift decline of the city-state, was precisely that from beginning to end its foremost aim was to make the extraordinary an ordinary occurrence of everyday life. The second function of the *polis*, again closely connected with the hazards of action as experienced before its coming into being, was to offer a remedy for the futility of action and speech; for the chances that a deed deserving fame would not be forgotten, that it actually would become "immortal," were not very good. Homer was not only a shining example of the poet's political function, and therefore the "educator of all Hellas"; the very fact that so great an enterprise as the Trojan War could have been forgotten without a poet to immortalize it several hundred years later offered only too good an example of what could happen to human greatness if it had nothing but poets to rely on for its permanence.

We are not concerned here with the historical causes for the rise of the Greek city-state; what the Greeks themselves thought of it and its *raison d'être*, they have made unmistakably clear. The *polis* — if we trust the famous words of Pericles in the Funeral Oration — gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without

¹¹ *Ibid.* 1168a13 ff.

¹² *Ibid.* 1140.

¹³ *Logōn kai pragmatōn koinōnein*, as Aristotle once put it (*ibid.* 1126b12).

assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages.¹⁴ In other words, men's life together in the form of the *polis* seemed to assure that the most [198] futile of human activities, action and speech, and the least tangible and most ephemeral of man-made "products," the deeds and stories which are their outcome, would become imperishable. The organization of the *polis*, physically secured by the wall around the city and physiognomically guaranteed by its laws — lest the succeeding generations change its identity beyond recognition — is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men, who outside the *polis* could attend only the short duration of the performance and therefore needed Homer and "others of his craft" in order to be presented to those who were not there.

According to this self-interpretation, the political realm rises directly out of acting together, the "sharing of words and deeds." Thus action not only has the most intimate relationship to the public part of the world common to us all, but is the one activity which constitutes it. It is as though the wall of the *polis* and the boundaries of the law were drawn around an already existing public space which, however, without such stabilizing protection could not endure, could not survive the moment of action and speech itself. Not historically, of course, but speaking metaphorically and theoretically, it is as though the men who returned from the Trojan War had wished to make permanent the space of action which had arisen from their deeds and sufferings, to prevent its perishing with their dispersal and return to their isolated homesteads.

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. "Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*": these famous words became not merely the watchword of Greek colonization, they expressed the conviction that action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not [199] merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.

This space does not always exist, and although all men are capable of deed and word, most of them — like the slave, the foreigner, and the barbarian in antiquity, like the laborer or craftsman prior to the modern age, the jobholder or businessman in our world — do not live in it. No man, moreover, can live in it all the time. To be deprived of it means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men the reality of the world is guaranteed by the presence of others, by its appearing to all; "for what appears to all, this we call Being,"¹⁵ and whatever lacks this appearance comes and passes away like a dream, intimately and exclusively our own but without reality.¹⁶

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¹⁴ Thucydides ii. 41.

¹⁵ Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1172b36 ff.

¹⁶ Heraclitus' statement that the world is one and common to those who are awake, but that everybody who is asleep turns away to his own (*Diels, op. cit.*, B89), says essentially the same as Aristotle's remark just quoted.