

Action

All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them.

ISAK DINESEN

Nam in mn̄i actione principaliter intenditur ab agente, sive necessitate naturae sive voluntarie agat, propriam similitudinem explicat; unde fit quod omne agens, in quantum huiusmodi, delectatur, quia, cum omne quod est appetat suum esse, ac in agenda agentis esse modammodo ampliatur, sequitur de necessitate delectatio. . . . Nihil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet,

(For in every action what is primarily intended by the doer, whether he acts from natural necessity or out of free will, is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing; since everything that desires its own being, and since in action the being of the doer is somehow intensified, delight necessarily follows. . . . Thus, nothing acts unless [by acting] it makes patent its latent self.)

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THE DISCLOSURE OF THE AGENT IN SPEECH AND ACTION

Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction. If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to

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make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough.

Human distinctness is not the same as otherness—the curious quality of *alteritas* possessed by everything that is and therefore, in medieval philosophy, one of the four basic, universal characteristics of Being, transcending every particular quality. Otherness, it is true, is an important aspect of plurality, the reason why all our definitions are distinctions, why we are unable to say what anything is without distinguishing it from something else. Otherness in its most abstract form is found only in the sheer multiplication of inorganic objects, whereas all organic life already shows variations and distinctions, even between specimens of the same species. But only man can express this distinction and distinguish himself, and only he can communicate himself and not merely something—thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear. In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings.

Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other, not indeed as physical objects, but *qua* men. This appearance, as distinguished from mere bodily existence, rests on initiative, but it is an initiative from which no human being can refrain and still be human. This is true of no other activity in the *vita activa*. Men can very well live without laboring, they can force others to labor for them, and they can very well decide merely to use and enjoy the world of things without themselves adding a single useful object to it; the life of an exploiter or slaveholder and the life of a parasite may be unjust, but they certainly are human. A life without speech and without action, on the other hand—and this is the only way of life that in earnest has renounced all appearance and all vanity in the biblical sense of the word—is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical ap-

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pearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.¹ To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, "to begin," "to lead," and eventually "to rule," indicates), to set something into motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin *agere*). Because they are *initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, men take initiative, are prompted into action. [*Initium*] *ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit* ("that there be a beginning, man was created before whom there was nobody"), said Augustine in his political philosophy.² This beginning is not the same as the beginning of the world;³ it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before.

It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started

1. This description is supported by recent findings in psychology and biology which also stress the inner affinity between speech and action, their spontaneity and practical purposelessness. See especially Arnold Gehlen, *Der Mensch: Seine Natur und seine Stellung in der Welt* (1955), which gives an excellent summary of the results and interpretations of current scientific research and contains a wealth of valuable insights. That Gehlen, like the scientists upon whose results he bases his own theories, believes that these specifically human capabilities are also a "biological necessity," that is, necessary for a biologically weak and ill-fitted organism such as man, is another matter and need not concern us here.

2. *De civitate Dei* xii. 20.

3. According to Augustine, the two were so different that he used a different word to indicate the beginning which is man (*initium*), designating the beginning of the world by *principium*, which is the standard translation for the first Bible verse. As can be seen from *De civitate Dei* xi. 32, the word *principium* carried for Augustine a much less radical meaning; the beginning of the world "does not mean that nothing was made before (for the angels were)," whereas he adds explicitly in the phrase quoted above with reference to man that nobody was before him.

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which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. Thus, the origin of life from inorganic matter is an infinite improbability of inorganic processes, as is the coming into being of the earth viewed from the standpoint of processes in the universe, or the evolution of human out of animal life. The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before. If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds; yet obviously the affinity between speech and revelation is much closer than that between action and revelation,⁴ just as the affinity between action and beginning is closer than that between speech and beginning, although many, and even most acts, are performed in the manner of speech. Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of

4. This is the reason why Plato says that *lexis* ("speech") adheres more closely to truth than *praxis*.

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deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word, and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do.

No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action. In all other performances speech plays a subordinate role, as a means of communication or a mere accompaniment to something that could also be achieved in silence. It is true that speech is extremely useful as a means of communication and information, but as such it could be replaced by a sign language, which then might prove to be even more useful and expedient to convey certain meanings, as in mathematics and other scientific disciplines or in certain forms of teamwork. Thus, it is also true that man's capacity to act, and especially to act in concert, is extremely useful for purposes of self-defense or of pursuit of interests; but if nothing more were at stake here than to use action as a means to an end, it is obvious that the same end could be much more easily attained in mute violence, so that action seems a not very efficient substitute for violence, just as speech, from the viewpoint of sheer utility, seems an awkward substitute for sign language.

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of "who" in contradistinction to "what" somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity, but its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a wilful purpose, as though one possessed and could dispose of this "who" in the same manner he has and can dispose of his qualities. On the contrary, it is more than likely that the "who," which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself, like the *daimon* in Greek religion which accompanies each man throughout his life, always

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looking over his shoulder from behind and thus visible only to those he encounters.

This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness. Although nobody knows whom he reveals when he discloses himself in deed or word, he must be willing to risk the disclosure, and this neither the doer of good works, who must be without self and preserve complete anonymity, nor the criminal, who must hide himself from others, can take upon themselves. Both are lonely figures, the one being for, the other against, all men; they, therefore, remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures who usually enter the historical scene in times of corruption, disintegration, and political bankruptcy. Because of its inherent tendency to disclose the agent together with the act, action needs for its full appearance the shining brightness we once called glory, and which is possible only in the public realm.

Without the disclosure of the agent in the act, action loses its specific character and becomes one form of achievement among others. It is then indeed no less a means to an end than making is a means to produce an object. This happens whenever human togetherness is lost, that is, when people are only for or against other people, as for instance in modern warfare, where men go into action and use means of violence in order to achieve certain objectives for their own side and against the enemy. In these instances, which of course have always existed, speech becomes indeed "mere talk," simply one more means toward the end, whether it serves to deceive the enemy or to dazzle everybody with propaganda; here words reveal nothing, disclosure comes only from the deed itself, and this achievement, like all other achievements, cannot disclose the "who," the unique and distinct identity of the agent.

In these instances action has lost the quality through which it transcends mere productive activity, which, from the humble making of use objects to the inspired creation of art works, has no more meaning than is revealed in the finished product and does not intend to show more than is plainly visible at the end of the production process. Action without a name, a "who" attached to

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it, is meaningless, whereas an art work retains its relevance whether or not we know the master's name. The monuments to the "Unknown Soldier" after World War I bear testimony to the then still existing need for glorification, for finding a "who," an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The frustration of this wish and the unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually nobody inspired the erection of the monuments to the "unknown," to all those whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity.⁸

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THE WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ENACTED STORIES

The manifestation of who the speaker and doer unexchangeably is, though it is plainly visible, retains a curious intangibility that confounds all efforts toward unequivocal verbal expression. The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a "character" in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us. This frustration has the closest affinity with the well-known philosophic impossibility to arrive at a definition of man, all definitions being determinations or interpretations of *what* man is, of qualities, therefore, which he could possibly share with other living beings, whereas his specific difference would be found in a determination of what kind of a "who" he is. Yet apart from this philosophic perplexity, the impossibility, as it were, to solidify in words the living essence of the person as it shows itself in the flux of action and speech, has great bearing upon the whole realm of human affairs, where we exist primarily as acting and speaking beings. It excludes in principle our ever being able to handle these affairs as we handle things whose nature is at our

5. William Faulkner's *A Fable* (1954) surpasses almost all of World War I literature in perceptiveness and clarity because its hero is the Unknown Soldier.

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disposal because we can name them. The point is that the manifestation of the "who" comes to pass in the same manner as the notoriously unreliable manifestations of ancient oracles, which, according to Heraclitus, "neither reveal nor hide in words, but give manifest signs."⁶ This is a basic factor in the equally notorious uncertainty not only of all political matters, but of all affairs that go on between men directly, without the intermediary, stabilizing, and solidifying influence of things.⁷

This is only the first of many frustrations by which action, and consequently the togetherness and intercourse of men, are ridden. It is perhaps the most fundamental of those we shall deal with, in so far as it does not rise out of comparisons with more reliable and productive activities, such as fabrication or contemplation or cognition or even labor, but indicates something that frustrates action in terms of its own purposes. What is at stake is the revelatory character without which action and speech would lose all human relevance.

Action and speech go on between men, as they are directed toward them, and they retain their agent-revealing capacity even if their content is exclusively "objective," concerned with the matters of the world of things in which men move, which physically lies between them and out of which arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. These interests constitute, in the word's most literal significance, something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. Most action and speech is concerned with this in-between, which varies with each group of people, so that most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality in addition to being a disclosure of the acting and speaking agent. Since this disclosure of the subject is an integral part of all, even the most "objective" intercourse, the physical, worldly in-between along with its inter-

6. *Oute legei oute kryptei alia semainei* (Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* [4th ed., 1922], frag. B93).

7. Socrates used the same word as Heraclitus, *semainein* ("to show and give signs"), for the manifestation of his *daimonion* (Xenophon *Memorabilia* I. 1. 2, 4). If we are to trust Xenophon, Socrates likened his *daimonion* to the oracles and insisted that both should be used only for human affairs, where nothing is certain, and not for problems of the arts and crafts, where everything is predictable (*ibid.* 7-9).

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ests is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another. This second, subjective in-between is not tangible, since there are no tangible objects into which it could solidify; the process of acting and speaking can leave behind no such results and end products. But for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common. We call this reality the "web" of human relationships, indicating by the metaphor its somewhat intangible quality.

To be sure, this web is no less bound to the objective world of things than speech is to the existence of a living body, but the relationship is not like that of a facade or, in Marxian terminology, of an essentially superfluous superstructure affixed to the useful structure of the building itself. The basic error of all materialism in politics—and this materialism is not Marxian and not even modern in origin, but as old as our history of political theory⁸—is to overlook the inevitability with which men disclose themselves as subjects, as distinct and unique persons, even when they wholly concentrate upon reaching an altogether worldly, material object. To dispense with this disclosure, if indeed it could ever be done, would mean to transform men into something they are not; to deny, on the other hand, that this disclosure is real and has consequences of its own is simply unrealistic.

The realm of human affairs, strictly speaking, consists of the

8. Materialism in political theory is at least as old as the Platonic-Aristotelian assumption that political communities (*poleis*)—and not only family life or the coexistence of several households (*oikiai*)—owe their existence to material necessity. (For Plato see *Republic* 369, where the *polis*' origin is seen in our wants and lack of self-sufficiency. For Aristotle, who here as elsewhere is closer to current Greek opinion than Plato, see *Politics* 1252b29: "The *polis* comes into existence for the sake of living, but remains in existence for the sake of living well.") The Aristotelian concept of *sympheron*, which we later encounter in Cicero's *utilitas*, must be understood in this context. Both, in turn, are forerunners of the later interest theory which is fully developed as early as Bodin—as kings rule over peoples, Interest rules over kings. In the modern development, Marx is outstanding not because of his materialism, but because he is the only political thinker who was consistent enough to base his theory of material interest on a demonstrably material human activity, on laboring—that is, on the metabolism of the human body with matter.

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web of human relationships which exists wherever men live together. The disclosure of the "who" through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life story of the newcomer, affecting uniquely the life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact. It is because of this already existing web of human relationships, with its innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions, that action almost never achieves its purpose; but it is also because of this medium, in which action alone is real, that it "produces" stories with or without intention as naturally as fabrication produces tangible things. These stories may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of material. They themselves, in their living reality, are of an altogether different nature than these reifications. They tell us more about their subjects, the "hero" in the center of each story, than any product of human hands ever tells us about the master who produced it, and yet they are not products, properly speaking. Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. In other words, the stories, the results of action and speech, reveal an agent, but this agent is not an author or producer. Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical 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. For the great unknown in history, that has baffled the philosophy of history in the modern age, arises not only when one considers history as a whole and finds that its subject, mankind, is an abstraction which never can become an active agent; the same unknown has baffled

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political philosophy from its beginning in antiquity and contributed to the general contempt in which philosophers since Plato have held the realm of human affairs. 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.

It is for this reason that Plato thought that human affairs (*ta ton anthropon pragmatd*), the outcome of action (*praxis*), should not be treated with great seriousness; the actions of men appear like the gestures of puppets led by an invisible hand behind the scene, so that man seems to be a kind of plaything of a god.⁹ It is noteworthy that Plato, who had no inkling of the modern concept of history, should have been the first to invent the metaphor of an actor behind the scenes who, behind the backs of acting men, pulls the strings and is responsible for the story. The Platonic god is but a symbol for the fact that real stories, in distinction from those we invent, have no author; as such, he is the true forerunner of Providence, the "invisible hand," Nature, the "world spirit," class interest, and the like, with which Christian and modern philosophers of history tried to solve the perplexing problem that although history owes its existence to men, it is still obviously not "made" by them. (Nothing in fact indicates more clearly the political nature of history—its being a story of action and deeds rather than of trends and forces or ideas—than the introduction of an invisible actor behind the scenes whom we find in all philosophies of history, which for this reason alone can be recognized as political philosophies in disguise. By the same token, the simple fact that Adam Smith needed an "invisible hand" to guide economic dealings on the exchange market shows plainly that more than sheer economic activity is involved in exchange and that "economic man," when he makes his appearance on the market, is an acting being and neither exclusively a producer nor a trader and barterer.)

The invisible actor behind the scenes is an invention arising from a mental perplexity but corresponding to no real experience.

9. *Laws* 803 and 644.

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Through it, the story resulting from action is misconstrued as a fictional story, where indeed an author pulls the strings and directs the play. The 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 only "somebody" it reveals is its hero, and it is the only medium in which the originally intangible manifestation of a uniquely distinct "who" can become tangible *ex post facto* through action and speech. *Who* somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was. Thus, although we know much less of Socrates, who did not write a single line and left no work behind, than of Plato or Aristotle, we know much better and more intimately who he was, because we know his story, than we know who Aristotle was, about whose opinions we are so much better informed.

The hero the story discloses needs no heroic qualities; the word "hero" originally, that is, in Homer, was no more than a name given each free man who participated in the Trojan enterprise¹⁰ and about whom a story could be told. The connotation of courage, which we now feel to be an indispensable quality of the hero, is in fact already present in a willingness to act and speak at all, to insert one's self into the world and begin a story of one's own. And this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences; courage and even boldness are already present in leaving one's private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one's self. The extent of this original courage, without which action and speech and

10. In Homer, the word *herds* has certainly a connotation of distinction, but of no other than every free man was capable. Nowhere does it appear in the later meaning of "half-god," which perhaps arose out of a deification of the ancient epic heroes.

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therefore, according to the Greeks, freedom, would not be possible at all, is not less great and may even be greater if the "hero" happens to be a coward.

The specific content as well as the general meaning of action and speech may take various forms of reification in art works which glorify a deed or an accomplishment and, by transformation and condensation, show some extraordinary event in its full significance. However, the specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and "reified" only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the *drama*, whose very name (from the Greek verb *dran*, "to act") indicates that play-acting actually is an imitation of acting.¹¹ But the imitative element lies not only in the art of the actor, but, as Aristotle rightly claims, in the making or writing of the play, at least to the extent that the drama comes fully to life only when it is enacted in the theater. Only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story's plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the "heroes" who reveal themselves in it.¹² In terms of Greek tragedy, this would mean that the story's direct as well as its universal meaning is revealed by the chorus, which does not imitate¹³ and whose comments are pure poetry, whereas the intangible identities of the agents in the story, since they escape all

11. Aristotle already mentions that the word *drama* was chosen because *drontes* ("acting people") are imitated (*Poetics* 1448a28). From the treatise itself, it is obvious that Aristotle's model for "imitation" in art is taken from the drama, and the generalization of the concept to make it applicable to all arts seems rather awkward.

12. Aristotle therefore usually speaks not of an imitation of action (*praxis*) but of the agents (*prattontes*) (see *Poetics* 1448a1 ff., 1448b25, 1449b24fF.). He is not consistent, however, in this use (cf. 1451a29, 1447a28). The decisive point is that tragedy does not deal with the qualities of men, their *poiotes*, but with whatever happened with respect to them, with their actions and life and good or ill fortune (1450a15-18). The content of tragedy, therefore, is not what we would call character but action or the plot.

13. That the chorus "imitates less" is mentioned in the Ps. Aristotelian *Problemata* (918b28).

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generalization and therefore all reification, can be conveyed only through an imitation of their acting. This is also why the theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others.

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THE FRAILTY 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"¹⁴—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."¹⁵ 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-

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

15. 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.

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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 set into motion," "to lead") and *gerere* (whose original meaning is "to bear").¹⁶ 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

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

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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.¹⁷ Limita-

17. It is interesting to note that Montesquieu, whose concern was not with laws but with the actions their spirit would inspire, defines laws as *rappports* sub-

Action

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

sisting between different beings (*Esprit des lois*, Book I, ch. 1; cf. 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).

The Human Condition

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.

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THE GREEK SOLUTION

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 *eudaimon* 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 did 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 *eudaimia* means neither happiness nor beatitude; it cannot be translated and per-