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THE (IM)POSSIBILITY TO FORGIVE – SOME ASPECTS OF FORGIVENESS AND RESENTMENT

Pure forgiveness and pseudo-forgiveness in Jankélévitch

Forgiveness and clemency are not interchangeable. Pardon, as forgiveness specified for particular cases of wrongdoing, is a form of clemency. Forgiveness can be seen as intrinsically good (assuming it as an inherent, unsullied value), and extrinsically beneficial (if seen as leading to reconciliation, it can ‘restore’ bitterness and attenuate the coping with evil and injustice). Granting forgiveness can be a merciful act, or an act of absolution. It gives peace of mind to both the offended and the forgiven offender. As atrocities, injustice and evil-doing happen all the time, the need to forgive, along with the problem of inability to forgive, arise all the time as well, in any cultural or historical context. The fact that the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the public realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth, and that the discovery was made in a religious context and articulated in a religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.¹ The paper will give an account on Vladimir Jankélévitch’s and Jacques Derrida’s ideas on the possibilities of forgiveness, with a brief overview on John Milbank and Jean Améry.

In order to briefly glance at the concepts of forgiveness of Jankélévitch, it is important to note that in his philosophy, he dis-

¹ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, p. 238.

tinguishes between and interval (duration) and an instant.² While diverging from Bergson's view that time involves a continuous duration that evolves organically, Jankélévitch did not deny duration, but believed it to be punctuated and delineated by instants, which, like time itself, are "almost nothing".³ However, the instant is not a very brief duration or the smallest possible interval of time, because these are still aspects of duration, of the interval. The instant, however, is not negation of duration, or of the interval of time, because the negation of duration is of the order of duration and, thus, measured by duration. The instant, on the other hand, is something that is of a wholly different order than being, which is the measure of duration.⁴ The instant designates the ungraspable threshold where being ceases to be something and where nothing ceases to be nothing, where each contradictory is at the point of and in the middle of becoming its contradictory.⁵ At this limit (or threshold), a change occurs, at this border a being goes out of existence and another being comes into existence. The instant is a rupture, fission, or discontinuity, that neither exists nor does not exist (for not-being is the negation of being), it is both being and not-being and neither being nor not-being, it almost is.⁶ The reality of sequences is related to the interval, and absolute beginnings are related to an instant of action. Both have certain ethical possibilities which can be exteriorised through them: the

² See V. Jankélévitch, *Philosophie première: Introduction à une philosophie du presque*, PUF, Paris, 1953, p. 210; translator Andrew Kelley's "Introduction" of V. Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005, pp. xvi-xvii; Colin Smith, "The Philosophy of Vladimir Jankelevitch", *Philosophy*, Vol. 32 (123), 2009, pp. 318-321.

³ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 210. *Almost nothing* is not complete negation, it cannot be equated with nothingness, because that would make it unreal.

⁴ Ibid., The wholly other is characteristic of Rudolf Otto's discussion of the numinous reality, see his work *Das Heilige*, and of Levinas, who attributes it to Jankélévitch., see E. Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma", *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh, 1998, p. 47. Kelley mentions this in his *Translator's Introduction*, and has also dedicated a paper to the issue – 'Jankélévitch and Levinas on the "Wholly Other"', *Levinas Studies*, Vol. 8, 2013, pp. 23-43.

⁵ V. Jankélévitch, *Philosophie première: Introduction à une philosophie du presque*, p. 210.

⁶ Ibid.

interval is something through which virtue can be had, done and improved, whilst the instant allows for the creation of a new order, new ethical event.⁷ “Instantaneous actions” are in some sense “miracles” since they do not come not from reason, or deliberation;⁸ “the grace of forgiveness and of selfless love is granted to us in an instant and as a disappearing appearance—this is to say that at the same moment it is found and lost again.”⁹ These events are not less valuable, as they create the possibility for radical change, which is why they may achieve more ethical work than virtue. The nature (or rather, structure) of the instant pertains to forgiveness,¹⁰ in fact, the instant is a defining feature of it. Forgiveness, additionally, happens in a “personal relation with another person” (since forgiveness takes into account the full personhood of the other).¹¹ Also, it must be a gratuitous gift, for to ask for something in return would amount to an economic exchange. Forgiveness is almost nothing (*presque rien*) for Jankélévitch. If forgiveness happened for a specific, delineated reason, it would no longer be a gift, but an exchange.¹² If it operated in terms of logical excuses and conditions for reconciliation, it would require time to develop, an interval. Reconciliation takes steps, it does not just happen, like forgiveness does, and Jankélévitch wants to go beyond the Judaeo-Christian background in which he seems to

⁷ For example, friendship and loving devotion require attention to another person over some period of time, and it is impossible to develop them and confirm them without this duration. On the other hand, there is no way to explain or instil love as a virtue, so events like love and forgiveness occur only in the instant.

⁸ V. Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 48 (it was first published as *Le pardon* in 1967).

⁹ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

¹¹ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Should it not do so, it would fall under something like clemency or compassion (both of which presumably take work), which does not necessarily resolve the brokenness in the relation between the victim and the offender. Only when one recognizes the shared brokenness of others’ humanity along with oneself’s, is forgiveness possible.

¹² Pure, metaempirical, metalogical forgiveness, it can be summarised, must be an instantaneous event, in relation with another person, miraculous and ineffable, a gratuitous, gracious gift exceeding the order of systems, be they moral, legal, or juridical.

move, by imagining the difference between everyday forgiveness (which he considers pseudo-forgiveness) and pure forgiveness, which borders the ineffable, and does not pertain to the quotidian sphere of ordinary language.¹³ Jankélévitch examines three forms of pseudo-forgiveness: temporal decay, which entails justification or “understanding”, which leads to liquidation. Basic decay, the passage of time, since time is a (morally neutral category), has potentiality for various moral directions. If decay is a natural effect of duration, Jankélévitch writes, then it is necessary to admit that forgiveness truly confirms and even ratifies the very intention of nature.¹⁴ When he discusses the passage of time, the progression and retrogression (retrogression being a sluggish progress, for regressive and progressive progress differ in the qualitative tonality), he considers rancour – it acts only as an obstacle and as a retarding cause. Sooner or later, the rancorous person will give in to time, tired of holding a grudge against his offender “... before becoming grows weary of becoming”.¹⁵ No resentment, no matter how stubborn, can resist the continuous and implacable force of progressive forgetting, explains Jankélévitch. Like sand buries dead civilizations, a relentless accumulative forgetting covers all rancour, and the memory of any crime goes toward zero, so after centuries we come to doubt whether the unforgivable crime once remembered was ever even committed.¹⁶ If we assume that change is constant, and one is never the same person as before, holding a rancour against someone is holding a grudge against a phantom, for he no longer exists.¹⁷ Rancour outlives its cause,

¹³ Since it is almost nothing, he approaches the topic of forgiveness apophatically, which is why Looney dedicates a considerable space to “Apophatic approaches”, in his A. T. Looney, *Vladimir Jankélévitch – The Time of Forgiveness*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2015, pp. 44-76.

¹⁴ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 13.

¹⁵ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

¹⁶ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 17. Forgiveness, “forestalling inevitable forgetting and inevitable obsolescence, recognizes in sum the invincibility of inexorable destiny”, he formulates, to which he applies what Aristotle and Leo Shestov said about the inexorable (in the sense that is that which cannot be persuaded): necessity is held to be something that cannot be persuaded (Ibid.).

¹⁷ The refusal to forgive immobilizes the sinner in their misdeed, as it identifies the agent with the act, and reduces the being of this agent to the

and is the memory of evil, a “heinous recollection and inverted gratitude...”.¹⁸ Decay is the caricature of grace for Jankélévitch.¹⁹ Time is neutral and incapable of forgiveness, whilst the act of forgiving is done by an intentional being. If time passes, and the wrongdoing is obfuscated, the evil forgotten, then this is all it is – forgetting, it is not a gracious genuine forgiveness, but merely a natural progression of intervals attenuating the feelings of bitterness and resentment.

Integration is also a part of pseudo-forgiveness. Through a process he labels as “stomaching”, which occurs when one “processes” the misdeed, without considering the implications, it is made easy for the evildoing to appear as part of a defence mechanism, to be re-presented again, either as a relapse or transformed, thus hindering the growth of the person. Through integration, the victim does not ignore the ramifications of a certain misdeed, but even fails to truly repudiate the wrongdoing, and ignores the misdeed almost altogether. One does not get rid of the anger, nor does one manage to replace resentment with peaceful coming to terms, but merely lives with the residual anger.

Forgiveness is a virtue of the instant, and all these forms take intervals to develop, and lack the potential of a radical shift, as well as the absolute abolishment of resentment. Finding excuses, or “intellection”, is the attempt to explain the motives and the general sense of the evildoing - it is about rationalising why anyone would do such a bad thing. Rational and explanatory justifications of wrongdoing are present in wide-spread processes of reconciliation (understand why someone did something is in order to understand the evil they did). This, again, lacks the instantaneity and the gratuitousness of real forgiveness. Forgiveness means not knowing the motive behind the opportunity, nor making excuses for the reasons for acting badly, on the contrary, it im-

“having done x”. The rancorous person is wrong in fixating the offender in an immutable and incorrigible essence as guilty, for they have since stopped being that person.

¹⁸ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 20. He mentions *zlopamiatstvo* in Russian, which expresses aptly the remembrance of evil. This also works in other Slavic languages.

¹⁹ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 27.

plies the renouncing of hope to learn about the acts committed.²⁰ Inexcusable, absolute evil must exist for Jankélévitch's concept of instantaneous leap of genuine forgiveness to make sense. Forgiveness is necessary only in the face of radical evil, otherwise it can easily be substituted with intellection, or the slow subsiding of bitterness. Absolute evil does not get processed through excuses and explanations.²¹ For the intellectualist, to forgive is to recognise implicitly the nothingness of evil, and in turn, the nonexistence of sin, the absurdity of rancour and the uselessness of forgiveness itself. If the source of evil is some diabolical *arche*, the guilty person is not so responsible – the intellectualist refutes the idea of absolute wickedness inherent in the will (there is no will of evil).²² However, if will cannot be evil, it cannot be good either, which means that by abolishing the possibility of bi-willing, intellectualism abolishes the will. Holding a grudge against a will that cannot even will is meaningless.

Liquidation, also a sub-category of pseudo-forgiveness, implies forgetting the wrongdoing, renouncing the misdeed and the pain it caused without considering it in any particular way.²³ It is the resolution to finish up that permits us to accelerate the seemingly interminable process, or better, if gives us the capability to accomplish what would take ages in just one instant. This instantaneousness is the “limit“ of an infinite speed – in passing sudden-

²⁰ Furthermore, should all forms and instances of evildoing be seen as potentially justifiable through reasoning and careful outlining of motives, it would mean that no deed is left unexplained, inexcusable, no perpetrator is beyond understanding, no evil is truly inexplicably evil. If reasoning and excuses are used to exculpate the wrongdoers, and if adequate perception of circumstances serves to explain why bad deeds are committed, then forgiveness becomes superfluous; intellection renders forgiveness unnecessary.

²¹ See V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

²² If the perpetrator of evil, the committer of sin, was himself corrupted by Satan, they are no longer objects of rancour, but themselves victims of sort, or as Jankélévitch puts it: “the more that Satan is guilty, then the more that Adam is innocent“, which leads to displacement of resentment, the “victim“ holds a grudge against the devil himself (V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 58). There is no longer an offense, a victim, an offender, no sin or sinner, no need to forgive; without a *raison d'être* for rancour, forgiveness is without material (*op. cit.*, p. 59).

²³ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

ly “to the limit“ we forestall the decay of memory without having to wait out eons. In this passage to the limit, Jankélévitch funds gratuitousness and suddenness as two of the essential characteristics of forgiveness. The mechanism of grace here is twofold – grace in a modest form is implied in the demand of the offender, for they beg the offended to grant them what they theoretically have the right to refuse (as they are not necessarily obliged to concede), and in the act of forgiveness by the offended. The offender solicits clemency. For the victim, however, to let go of the rancour and potential vengeance, to liquidate what is due to him and his rights, is to accept a sort of sacrifice. Waving the “debt“ of the offender, forgiving in exchange for nothing, is in itself gracious, a disinterested gift.²⁴

Forgiveness is beyond retribution, as no retributive justice can truly and genuinely deal with the instantaneous act of letting go. It is, as was shown, beyond the decay of time, intellection and liquidation, it finds its élan in an instant, like a leap, ignoring justifications of reason, constraints of justice, and the passage of time. It is a sort of madness; it favours grace, which can be glimpsed only in an instant of action. This also means that forgiveness must forgive the unforgivable, for it to work on anything else but Absolute evil, would reduce it to one of the forms of pseudo-forgiveness. If the unforgivable is absolute (evil), forgiveness is absolute too. The idea is that when a crime can neither be justified, nor explained, nor even understood, when, with everything that could be explained having been explained, when there are no excuses for the atrocities, no mitigating circumstances of any sort, then there is no longer anything else to do but forgive.²⁵ There is an

²⁴ Ibid. This “gracious discount“, however, knows nothing of correct proportioning and excuse rates. The matter is abolished. Quiet is the thought of it, the file of it complete. What once happened gets destroyed; the past is reduced to ashes, not to be spoken of again. It is not simply forgetting, it is deleting the past, obliterating it from memory, as if it never happened. Liquidation, unlike forgetting through temporal decay, can be instantaneous, but lacks the relational nature of forgiveness, and is not a gratuitous gift.

²⁵ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

asymmetry between justice and forgiveness,²⁶ because forgiveness returns not evil for evil, or good for good, but good for evil.²⁷

In a maze of ‘howevers’, and in a consideration of forgiveness as complete renunciation of misdeeds, and the impossibility of forgiveness, Jankélévitch then waivers between the forgivable and the unforgivable. What is difficult, but also what seems to be true for him, is that nothing is unforgivable. Forgiveness, although a leap in an instant, is a choice in the face of Absolute Good and Absolute Evil. The concept of the Absolute is irremediably torn apart, split in two necessary, irreconcilable forms.²⁸ If there is Absolute Evil, in the form of unforgivable wickedness, only Absolute Good as “the inexhaustible good of forgiveness” can counteract it.²⁹ The troubling element of this relationship is that forgiveness and evil seem to be complementary: forgiveness

²⁶ Taking justice as retributive, as Jankélévitch does – for this see Kelley’s ‘Introduction’, p. xviii.

²⁷ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 142.

This begs another question: if we conceive mercy as going beyond the legally prescribed retribution, outside the perimeters of established justice, forgiveness is, in this respect, merciful. Concerning mercy, if it is thought to be a virtue, and to temper justice, to go beyond the established moral and legal order, then it is outside of what is formally just. If justice is not enough, or is of a different order than mercy, and if mercy requires a tempering of justice, or going outside of justice, then in a certain way mercy requires (or may require) a departure from justice. The question that arises is whether, logically, to be merciful is to be unjust. This is a problem, as “But it is a vice, not a virtue, to manifest injustice – see also in J. Murphy and J. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1988, p. 167. Mercy might be thought as unjust, but in these same parameters forgiveness, when granted by a victim to their offender, may be seen as selfish, as it does not add much (and not too often), to the public understanding of the execution of justice. In this same way, however, it can be seen as selfless, as it is for a great “metaphysical” order, and not the ordinary judiciary dealings.

Forgiveness forgives in one fell swoop and in a single, invisible *élan*, and it pardons undividedly, explains Jankélévitch To forgive means to turn opposite of the direction that is indicated to us by justice. In a single, radical incomprehensible moment, forgiveness effaces all, sweeps away all, and forgets all. In a blink of an eye, it turns the past into a tabula rasa, miraculously, yet simply, as if it were saying “hello“ (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 153).

²⁸ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 162.

²⁹ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 163.

either forgives only absolute evil, or does not exist (gets reduced to pseudo-forgiveness).

Acting in the instant is madness, but it opens possibilities. Both Absolute Evil and Absolute Good always lurk on the horizon of possibility, just outside of the sphere of normative ethics, for any event in the instant is not within the regular order. When order is disregarded, anything goes, not in the sense that anything will happen, but in the sense that anything might happen. This also means that one might (and will) follow the other in a succession of appearances: when forgiveness is attained, Evil could reappear, evil will be abolished through forgiveness, and so on. Neither can definitely prevail while the other lurks just outside the proverbial window of opportunity – love is stronger than evil, and evil stronger than love, each is stronger than the other.³⁰ The instantaneous nature of forgiveness operates outside an established, accepted moral order. Therefore, one needs to be careful – being an absolute beginning, the instant erases the past and opens a brand new future. The creation of a new Good allows for the possibility of a new Evil as well, which makes it impossible to be firmly affirmative about the avoidance or the advocacy of events of the instant (and which is probably why Jankélévitch gets progressively hesitant as the book draws to a close).

We should not pardon them – the unforgivable in Jankélévitch

The tone and prescriptions of ‘Should We Pardon Them?’ are quite a departure from *Forgiveness*, as Jankélévitch immediately announces in his foreword of the former (defining *Forgiveness* as purely philosophical).³¹ The obvious opposition between the stances of the two texts can be understood by regarding

³⁰ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 164. Forgiveness is as strong as evil, but evil is as strong as forgiveness (V. Jankélévitch, ‘Should We Pardon Them?’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, 1996, p. 553. It was first published as *Pardonner?*, in which there is the same formulation, in 1971, and along with *Dans l’honneur et la dignité*, is part of *L’imprescriptible*. Further in the text, the English version will be used).

³¹ V. Jankélévitch, ‘Should We Pardon Them?’, p. 553.

Jankélévitch's philosophy in a broader contexts, especially the instant-interval distinction. According to Kelley (in his 'Translator's Introduction' to *Forgiveness*), a more attenuated approach to the idea that forgiveness died in the camps, would be to argue that since forgiveness only occurs in the instant and in relation with the other, there can be no such thing as a systematic forgiveness for the Nazis, for that would negate its very essence. One might forgive a Nazi who has done a wrong, but it is impossible to generalise for all Jews to forgive all Nazis. This seems plausible: even apart from the strong admonitions and pleas for remembrance and loyalty to the victims and acknowledgment for the survivors from 'Should We Pardon Them?', such an act seems absurd, if Jankélévitch's definition of forgiveness as an instantaneous gratuitous event that erases resentment is consistently considered.

In the Holocaust Absolute Evil overwhelms Absolute Good, it is impossible for the Jews to forgive the Nazis, claims Jankélévitch. It was a process of ontological wickedness, a pure, unrelentless evil, "of the most diabolical and gratuitous wickedness that history has ever known".³² The Holocaust is often considered as an eclipse of God. Jankélévitch finds that the Good seemed to have vanished. He calls the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis "ontological wickedness" because they were against not just systems of what were perceived as erroneous beliefs or pernicious doctrines, but against the very being of humanity; this was Evil greater than any other. But, although this would seem as the Absolute Evil he finds forgivable by absolute instant of forgiveness in the poignant points of *Forgiveness*, it is not the case: this is also an annihilation of the possibility of Good, which is why he is so adamant that the option of pardon dies in the death camps.³³ The Nazi crimes are exceptional because of their enor-

³² V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 556.

³³ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 567. Of course, this discrepancy of opinions can be interpreted as a clear conflict of how forgiveness seems in theory and how it works in practice. It is easy to draw a dialectical pattern of complementary succession of Absolute Evil and pure forgiveness, and of Good and possibility for Evil, but not so easy to get the actual paramount evil and imagine it forgiven, for such an extent and intensity of evil surely means that good is nowhere near.

mity, their unbelievable sadism, but more importantly, they are crimes against humanity in the proper sense of the term, crimes against the human essence, the “hominity” of human beings in general.³⁴ For the anti-Semite, the crime of being a Jew is inexpiable, the immense insult perpetrated by the Germans is also a purely gratuitous insult, its purpose is to debase, degrade, and thus, annihilate, so it is not contemptuous inasmuch as it is wicked.³⁵ The crime, muses Jankélévitch, was not motivated by “villainous” motives, but it was unmotivated. It was a crime against nature, a metaphysical crime to the letter. The offenders of it are not fanatics blindly following a doctrine, nor merely abominable dogmatists, they are monsters in the proper sense.³⁶ Forgiveness

³⁴ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 555. He explains that the major problem with racist crimes is that they are an assault against the human being as human being (not such and such person, this or that) – they are aimed at the beingness of the being, the human of every human being.

³⁵ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 554. Derrida analyses this in the following: conveyed by the same word, ‘inexpiable’, there are two antagonistic and complementary movements: as if it were because the Nazis treated the being of their victim, the Jew, as an *inexpiable* crime (it is not *forgivable* to be Jewish), that they behaved in a way that was itself *inexpiable*, beyond all possible forgiveness. The crime of the Nazis seems inexpiable because they themselves considered their victims to be guilty of the (inexpiable) sin of existing or of claiming to exist as men (J. Derrida, ‘To Forgive: the Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible’, In J. D. Caputo, M. Dooley and M. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2001, p. 44). As showing how Derrida refers to Jankélévitch in footnotes would add an unnecessary duality to the text, most relevant passages will be included later in the text.

³⁶ He also built on the idea of the abstract evil as expiatory from *Forgiveness*: it is easy to accuse the devil, the eternal principle that existed even before humanity, and is there to pervert it. The inculpation of the devil is not a monstrous absurdity, but rather a providential convenience, he can take it. And the second it is the devil, its not the fault of Eichmann, or anyone at all (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 559). In order to unburden of the problem of Auschwitz, shrewd brilliant thinkers invoke other crimes, he scoffs, like those of Stalin, but they are not an answer, nor are other exculpations, like those that Hitler was inspired by the sultan who organised the massacre of Armenians, which would mean that the extermination of Jews was really Abdulhaml fault, if anything (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 562). This “А у вас негров линчуют” tu quoque tactic is meaningless, it is a carte blanche of deflecting blame, or tracing evil to its sometimes metaphysical, sometimes earthly, political roots.

is impossible, insists Jankélévitch, because when it comes to acts that deny the essence of humans, the statutory limitations that, in the name of morality, would lead one to absolve those acts contradict morality. In this case it is not only contradictory, but absurd to pardon. To forget such a gigantic crime against humanity is itself a crime against the human species.³⁷

Horrified at how the everyone remained silent,³⁸ especially the intellectuals one would have expected to speak up, he mentions that the pedantic tone of German racism reminds him of both the communiqués of the Wehrmacht and the gibberish of Heidegger, what has since become part of the signs of philosophical profundity.³⁹ With forgiving as *fait accompli*, there are no

If we assume that the more the devil is guilty, the more Adam is innocent (see footnote 22), the more people are guilty in a historical regressus ad Adam - we can blame him, really, and unburden everyone else.

³⁷ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 556. There is no punishment proportional to the crime, as what happened is inexpiable (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 558). The camps are incommensurable with anything else, a metaphysical abomination (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 563). He is aware that millions of others died terrible deaths during the war, but thinks that Auschwitz (and the like) add a new dimension of the horrific bombing of cities during the war, as they have a directed, methodical, elective character, a “monstrous masterpiece of hate“ (Ibid.). For everyone who perpetrated the terrible crimes, and for everyone who stood idly and disinterestedly watched them happen, he would willingly reverse the terms of Jesus’ prayer to God – do not forgive them, for they know precisely what they did (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 564).

³⁸ (Inevitably) see Elie Wiesel’s *And the World Stayed Silent* (Yiddish testimony) from 1956, published as *Night* in English in 1960, as first of the subsequent *Dawn* and *Day* of the Holocaust transition trilogy.

³⁹ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 564. He feels like everyone seems to prefer to pretend like what happened, happened, and there is no point in dwelling on it. Easy disregard of crimes, because it is easier to go back to a lighter existence makes forgiving and forgetting simple. Thanks to indifference, moral amnesia, and general superficiality that seem to abound, pardoning seems like a *fait accompli*, he claims, everything is pardoned and settled (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 566).

Derrida includes at length the example of Paul Celan’s ‘*Todtnauberg*’, written in memory and in testimony to his visit to Heidegger, that numerous interpreters have read as the trace of a disappointed expectation of a plea (or merely a word) for pardon, but he refrains from venturing to confirm or deny the circumstance or the meaning of the poem, along with many others of Celan’s opus (J. Derrida, op. cit., pp. 36-38).

solemn gestures of reparation, as far as he knows, no disavowal of the terrible moral responsibility imposed on German intellectuals, professors, philosophers, “moralists”; they have nothing to say, too busy with their “Dasein” and “the existential project”.⁴⁰ The Jews were absolutely alone, and he underlines this poignant solitude as one of the scariest aspects of the suffering: no international solidarity, and the silence by everyone who perhaps could have helped, the press, the church, Roosevelt, the Poles. Everyone is more or less guilty of nonassistance in the face of millions threatened with torture, humiliation and death (which goes along with the famous idea, attributed to many authors, that all it takes for evil to prevail, is for the non-evil to do nothing about it).

What the survivors experience (and what humanity should experience, since humanity was jeopardised in the eradication of the being of human beings) is not rancour, but horror, he claims, horror of the perpetrators, of the neutrals, of the indifferent who have almost immediately forgotten, it is resentment, for it “... can also be the renewed and intensely lived feeling of the inexplicable thing; it protests against a moral amnesty that is nothing but

⁴⁰ V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 568. And while these keep silent, former collaborators, “the most frivolous and egotistical of men“, who neither suffered nor fought, recommend to forget the offences, invoking a charitable duty to be preached to the victims about “a pardon that the torturers themselves never asked for“ (V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 569). In disbelief, and without expecting an answer, he asks “but isn’t caring for the victims, acknowledging their injuries, also a charitable duty?“. He mentions O. Clement, and Eastern Orthodox Christian, who in admirable terms wrote that it is for the victims to pardon. But, he asks, what qualifies a survivor to pardon in the place of the victims, or their loved ones? It is not the place of the survivor to pardon on behalf of the “little children whom the brutes tortured to amuse themselves“. The children must pardon the torturers themselves, while the survivors turn to the brutes and their friends and tell them to ask themselves the children for pardon (V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 569). One of the problems with light-hearted letting go of both the terror, and the attitudes towards the terror, is that it does not give justice to the dead, he affirms. The dead depend entirely on the loyalty of the living - should we cease to think of the victims, we complete their extermination, they would be definitively annihilated (V. Jankélévitch, *op. cit.*, p. 571).

shameful amnesia; it maintains the sacred flame of disquiet and faith to invisible things”⁴¹

⁴¹ V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 572. When the neutrals and sophists recommend forgetfulness, the survivors’ mute and impotent horror, Jankélévitch poetically adds, will forcefully be marked before the hands of hatred - we will think about the agony of the deportees and children who did not come back, for it is an agony that will last until the end of the world (V. Jankélévitch, op. cit., p. 572).

In 1980-81, a letter exchange between a German and Jankélévitch prompted by the strong words in ‘Should we pardon them?’ (as published in *L’imprescriptible*), shows a disgruntled, passionate admonition – the German reacts to the formulation that they killed six million Jews, but still sleep well, insisting that he does not, albeit not having killed any Jews himself, he is totally innocent of Nazi crimes and yet his conscience is not clear, and he feels a mixture of shame, pity, resignation, sadness, incredulity, revolt, and no, does not sleep well. He invites Jankélévitch in his home in Germany, consoling him that no one will speak to him of Hegel, Nietzsche, Jaspers or Heidegger, but instead of Descartes and Sartre, nor will play the music of Schubert and Schumann, but instead of Chopin or Debussy (although this is unfair in itself, and puts innocent composers in Heidegger’s rank of guilt, for example). Jankélévitch replies that he had been waiting for thirty five years for such a letter, since, apparently, German philosophers, “his colleagues” have nothing to say to him, nothing to explain. See the exchange from *Magazine Littéraire* devoted to Vladimir Jankélévitch in June 1995 (no. 333), and a summary in J. Derrida, op. cit., 38-41. Jankélévitch seems to ignore Willy Brandt’s expression of profound guilt in asking for forgiveness (December 1970), kneeling at the abyss of German history and feeling the burden of millions of murders (as he later formulates it in his memoirs), and similar gestures of repentance that were not done by philosophers.

A lot of apologising and sharing of stories of survival and coping with loss was prompted by ‘Yolokaust’, a controversial project by Shahak Shapira, which was up on-line for merely a week, having swiftly served its purpose: exploring our commemorative culture by combining selfies found on Facebook, Instagram, Tinder and Grindr, made at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, with footage from Nazi extermination camps. The project, reached 2, 5 million people, and all 12 people whose selfies were presented, almost all of whom understood the message, apologized and decided to remove their selfies from their personal Facebook and Instagram profiles (<https://yolokaust.de>). Shapira lists many reactions and exchanges prompted by the project, and underlines the reaction of the young man from the first photo of the project, as the most interesting: “I am the guy that inspired you to make Yolokaust, so I’ve read at least. I am the “jumping on de...” (sic!) [he means the concrete slabs, a photo he had captioned “Jumping on dead Jews @ Holocaust Memorial“]. “I cant even write it, kind of sick of looking at it. I didn’t mean to offend anyone. Now I just keep

Pure forgiveness and reconciliation in Derrida

At a lecture to a group of students at a South African university, Derrida raises the issue of forgiving the unforgivable, when one student, identifying herself as a “potential object of forgiveness” (as is everyone, because everyone does some wrong) asks how unconditional forgiveness was even possible in a country like South Africa, and wonders whether Derrida was less concerned with the practical effects of forgiveness than with the “purity” of the concept of forgiveness.⁴² Derrida underlines the distinction between reconciliation and the idea of excuse and the process it requires, and the pure concept of forgiveness. He expresses the belief that as soon as you mix the concept of forgiveness with all the related concepts at work in the current process underway, you introduce confusion and obscurity in something which has to be as clear as possible.⁴³

seeing my words in the headlines. I have seen what kind of impact those words have and it's crazy and it's not what I wanted (...) . The photo was meant for my friends as a joke. I am known to make out of line jokes, stupid jokes, sarcastic jokes. And they get it. If you knew me you would too. But when it gets shared, and comes to strangers who have no idea who I am, they just see someone disrespecting something important to someone else or them. That was not my intention. And I am sorry. I truly am. (...)“ . Most of these were apologies for the insensitivity to the massive tragedy, to this collective trauma, burden and shame of humanity, but some were exactly what Jankélévitch would have wanted, this time 62 years too late.

⁴² See Derrida, dir. K. Dick and A. Ziering, USA, Jane Doe Films, 2003 [dvd]; also a version, ‘Derrida on Forgiveness’, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDrU1jtt_fl.

⁴³ Also in the video, when asked to summarise his views, he reiterates that forgiveness that is demanded or accorded only in order to achieve some type of reconciliation is not forgiveness, not if it is done only to change the situation, to heal wounds. If it is only for a therapeutic, or a psychoanalytical or an ecological purpose, so that a society heals or that peace is restored, it is a calculation. It is a good calculation, one that must be done, but it is not forgiveness, he stresses. It is surely part of a process of mourning, and politically necessary, and he approves of the processes attempted in many parts of the world, but in order to be philosophically precise and consistent, he refrains from considering this forgiveness.

Derrida repeatedly argues that forgiveness, in its pure form, is not reconciliation, but a pure act “beyond the law”.⁴⁴ Along the lines of Jankélévitch, Derrida is concerned with elucidating pseudo forms of forgiveness (excuses, decay, etc.) and distinguishing them from what true forgiveness is. Unlike Jankélévitch’s radical shift of opinion in ‘Should We Pardon Them?’ (forgiveness died in the death camps), Derrida is on the opinion that it is only in the face of the unforgivable that true forgiveness is possible. But it somehow only becomes a possibility in attempts at forgiving the unforgivable, which is impossible (hence the seeming contradiction). While for Jankélévitch the possibility of anything is in the instant, for Derrida it is not yet possible, but lingers on the edge of the ethical horizon. Crimes against humanity and monstrous crimes are modern examples of the unforgivable,⁴⁵ they are so terrible that they cannot have fitting punishments, the situation goes beyond the law. There cannot be reasons given for why such heinous monstrosities happened – only the unforgivable cannot be explained away. Forgiveness falls into ruin as soon as it is deprived of its pole of absolute reference, namely, its unconditional purity.⁴⁶ For Derrida, the “pure” forgiveness is always in a sense outside the empirical realm, but it is simultaneously bound to it, as it can happen only within the empirical, social world. However, the obvious aporetic structure of forgiveness prevents “pure” forgiveness from ever truly happening, it will always get corrupt in a way, once it is in practice (and it can only take place in practice).

He emphasises that forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible, as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality.⁴⁷ By differentiating be-

⁴⁴ J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 53.

⁴⁵ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴⁶ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 44. However, it is tied up to, and inseparable from the empirical world - “... it remains inseparable from what is heterogeneous to it, namely the order of conditions, repentance, transformation, as many things as allow it to inscribe itself in history, law, politics, existence itself.”

⁴⁷ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 31.

tween the empirical and ideal, forgiveness is possible for Derrida. Following Jankélévitch (although from a different perspective), his concept of forgiveness eliminates the dangerous and pervasive language that implies unconditional or pure forgiveness has been achieved, when, in reality, merely a form of pseudo-forgiveness has taken place.⁴⁸

The tension between the ideal and the empirical is impossible to relieve. Derrida argues that unconditional or ideal forgiveness exists as external to the judicial law. It can be unconditional in two ways, according to Derrida: when granted by a sovereign (an instance of power forgives – as sovereignty has traditionally been established from an exception to the law, that operates outside of the law, even when it established it itself); and through individual sovereignty (issuing, granting forgiveness from a position of power).⁴⁹ However, Derrida wants to move towards ver-

⁴⁸ Like in Desmond Tutu's case, when he problematically Christianised the truth and reconciliation project in South Africa, essentially (yet subtly) forcing victims to claim they had completely forgiven the offenders, while some lingering resentment probably persisted. They had perhaps only experienced some empirical form of forgiveness, doubts Derrida, but were claiming to have achieved pure forgiveness (J. Derrida, op. cit., pp. 42-43).

⁴⁹ At the end of 'On Forgiveness' (as part of *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*) Derrida claims that forgiveness without sovereignty and forgiveness without power are the most desirable "Abrahamic" ethical conceptions of forgiveness. He finds these forms most desirable because they avoid the violence often associated with sovereignty. When a sovereign state power establishes itself, it hides the fact that it has made an exception to the law. Forgiveness, when issued by the sovereign, is also an illegal act. The problem with this approach to forgiveness, Derrida seems to be suggesting, is that it does not put into question the power issuing the forgiveness, the power that could just as easily distribute harsh punishment. For Derrida, if forgiveness is to move away from this problem, it must be dissociated from sovereignty (see J. Derrida, op. cit., pp. 57-59).

In order to follow a vein of the Abrahamic tradition, forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty and the victim. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense (J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 42). The representative of the State can judge, but forgiveness has precisely nothing to do with judgement, nor with the public or political sphere, "even if it were 'just', forgiveness would be just of a justice which had nothing to do with judicial justice (op. cit., p. 43). Derrida diagnoses the sovereign's (the king's)

sions of “purity“ independent of sovereign acts. In these cases the forgiven individual acts outside of the law as well,⁵⁰ not in the sense that legal constraints cease to be applicable, but in the sense that the punishment by the law is irrelevant in resolving the resentment. The individual who forgives does not base it on retributive justice, but on ethics beyond the law, and precisely this is the most promising version of forgiveness.⁵¹

right to grant clemency, that places the right to forgive above the law, as in no doubt the most political or juridical feature of the right to forgive as the right to punish; at the same time interrupting, in the juridical-political itself, the order of the juridical-political. It is the exception to the juridical-political *within* the juridical-political. This logic of the exception, of forgiveness as absolute, infinite exception, should be pondered repeatedly – “One should not be able to say “pardon“, ask for, or grant forgiveness, except in an infinitely exceptional way (J. Derrida, ‘To Forgive’, p. 31). Derrida reminds us of Kant’s stance in the first part of *Metaphysics of morals* on the right to grant clemency, the right to lessen or remit the penalty of a criminal: it is, of all sovereign rights, the most delicate, the slipperiest, the most equivocal. It gives the most splendour to greatness, to sovereignty, but the sovereign thereby runs the risk of being unjust, of acting unjustly in the highest degree, as nothing can be more unjust than clemency. Also, Kant adds an important caveat, underlines Derrida, by marking an inner limit to the sovereign’s right to grant clemency: he should not, under any circumstance, have the right to grant clemency in instances where he is not the victim, because, if this was clemency for crimes committed to subjects by subjects, it would be a great injustice (J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 33; also see C. Lotz, ‘The Events of Morality and Forgiveness: From Kant to Derrida’, *Research in Phenomenology* 36:1, 2006, pp. 255-73).

⁵⁰ J. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, p. 59.

⁵¹ One can ask for official legal resolution and still forget in one’s heart (J. Derrida, op. cit., 54), for it is a secret, outside the law, it cannot be measured in legal terms (“... it is necessary also in politics to respect the secret, that which exceeds the political or that which is no longer in the juridical domain. This is what I would call ‘democracy to come’“, J. Derrida, op. cit., 55). He notes (in passing) that the juridical concept of the *imprescriptible* is in no way equivalent to the non-juridical concept of the unforgivable, since one can maintain the imprescriptibility of a crime, give no limit to the duration of an indictment, and still forgive the guilty (and vice-versa, one can acquit or suspend judgement and nevertheless refuse to forgive). It remains, suggests Derrida, that “the singularity of the concept of imprescriptibility stems perhaps from what it also introduces, like forgiveness or the unforgivable, a sort of eternity or transcendence, the apocalyptic horizon of a final judgement: in the law beyond the law, in history beyond history“ (J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 33).

Derrida feels tempted to contest Jankélévitch's conditional logic of the exchange, the conviction that forgiveness can only be considered on the condition that it be asked, in an act of repentance, of atonement, of future avoidance of the return of evil, which would be an economic transaction.⁵² The core of the argument in *Pardonner?* ('Should We Pardon Them?'), he summarises, is that the singularity of the Shoah attains the dimension of the *inexpiable*. However, for Jankélévitch there is no possible forgiveness for the *inexpiable*, at least not any forgiveness that would make sense, that would have a meaning. To Derrida the dominant axiom, and for him, the most problematic, is that forgiveness must have meaning, which must determine itself on the basis of redemption, reconciliation, salvation, even sacrifice.⁵³ Pure and unconditional forgiveness, according to Derrida, in order to have its own meaning, must have no meaning, no finality, even no intelligibility, but to be madness of the impossible.⁵⁴ He pinpoints two things that Jankélévitch seems to take as given (as does Arendt, for example, in *The Human Condition*): that forgiveness must rest on a human possibility, and that this human possibility is the correlate to the possibility of punishment – not to avenge oneself, which is something different, to which forgiveness is even more foreign, but to punish according to the law.⁵⁵ Among all of Jankélévitch's arguments, he also puts into light two axioms that are, he believes, far from self-evident (although they seem pretty obvious in 'Should We Pardon Them?'): that forgiveness cannot be granted, or at least one cannot imagine the possibility of granting it, unless explicitly or implicitly *asked* for (this would mean that one will never forgive someone who has

⁵² J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 34.

This is a problem in comparison to his ideas of the gratuitousness and graciousness of forgiveness from his previous take on the subject. He either changes this completely, and it is why he is so embittered by no one asking for forgiveness for the Nazi crimes and the negligence of the all the rest, or he thinks that only lesser evils are pardonable by a gratuitous instantaneous gesture, something that cannot possibly be expected of the horrors and burdens of the Holocaust.

⁵³ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 36.

⁵⁴ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 45.

⁵⁵ J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 37.

not repented and asked for it); when the crime crosses the line of radical evil, when it becomes monstrous, it can no longer be a question of forgiveness (forgiveness must remain, so to speak, between men, on a human scale—which to Derrida seems as problematic, although very powerful and very classical).⁵⁶ Derrida remarks that the violence towards the Germans, the offenders, the generalisation of it, is unjust and unworthy of what Jankélévitch has elsewhere written on forgiveness, but also recognizes that he was himself aware of it, knowing that he was carried away, guiltily, by (righteous) anger and indignation.⁵⁷

Derrida is careful in subtly and rigorously discerning between the unforgivable and the imprescriptible, but also related, yet different notions, like *the irreparable, the ineffaceable, the*

⁵⁶ He reiterates the question that is vexing him - Is forgiveness only possible, with its meaning as forgiveness, on condition that it be asked for? (J. Derrida, 'To Forgive', p. 28). He feels constantly tempted to contest this, on the grounds that there is in forgiveness, in its very meaning, a "force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will) that demands that forgiveness be granted, if it can be, even to someone who does not ask for it, who does not repent or confess or improve or redeem himself, beyond, consequently, an entire identificatory, spiritual, whether sublime or not, economy, beyond all expiation even" (J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 29).

⁵⁷ In an interview he gave several years later, in 1977, Jankélévitch compares his two rather different works on forgiveness, the "pamphlet-like" one, and the philosophical one, and Derrida finds this as an expression that serves the purpose of understanding the idea of 'hyperbolic ethics', or an ethics beyond ethics, as well of underlining the tension (one we must admit to and try to be forgiven), between the hyperbolic ethics that pushes the exigency to the limit and beyond the limit of the possible, and the everyday economy of forgiveness held in the anthropo-theological limits of confession, repentance, expiation, reconciliation.

Jankélévitch explains that he draws out an ethics that could be qualified a hyperbolic, for which forgiveness is the highest commandment; but that he thinks that evil always appears beyond (he repeats the often used 'Forgiveness is stronger than evil and evil is stronger than forgiveness'), a dialectical oscillation, which to him seems infinite. He believes in the immensity of forgiveness, in its supernaturality (which, again, he repeats quite often elsewhere), but, on the other hand, he believes in wickedness (see this in J. Derrida, 'To Forgive', p. 29, from a citation in Alain Gouhier, 'Le temps de l'impardonnable et le temps du pardon selon Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness, Proceedings of the Colloquium organized by the Centre Histoire des Idées*, Université de Picardie, ed. Michel Perrin, Beauchesnes, Paris, 1987.

irremediable, the irreversible, the unforgettable, the irrevocable, the inexpiable, all of which have in common a negativity, a “do not“, an “im-possible“, be it “impossible because one cannot“ or “impossible because one should not“,⁵⁸ in all of them, a strong belief that one should/could not go back over a past, whose memory remains uncompromising.⁵⁹

What Derrida finds troubling in Jankélévitch’s wavering (and illustrates also with his bittersweet answer to the letter from the German), is that on one side he welcomes the idea of a process, a history that continues, the passage from one generation to another, and with that, the work of memory as a process of mourning that renders forgiveness possible in the future, and yet, at the same time he makes it known, even more than he explicitly states it, that this barrier that will perhaps be crossed by generations to come, remains to him uncrossable; for him, the history of forgiveness has stopped forever.⁶⁰

There is only forgiveness, if there is such a thing, of the unforgivable. If there is such a thing as forgiveness, if it is possible, is not possible, it does not exist as possible, it only exists by exempting itself from the law of the possible, by impossibilizing

⁵⁸ J. Derrida, op. cit., 31. M. Evans includes examples of failures to come to grips with Derrida’s takes on forgiveness, among which E. Verdeja’s “Derrida and the Impossibility of Forgiveness“, *Contemporary Political Theory* 3, 2004, who objects to the way that Derrida allegedly “requires forgetfulness“ (p. 40), a line of argument (without even proceeding to examine others) which is, completely invalidated by Derrida’s explicit statement in ‘To Forgive’ (2002) that “forgiving is not forgetting (another enormous problem)“, see M. Evans, ‘Derrida and Forgiveness’, in E. Alam (ed.), *Compassion and Forgiveness*, University of Notre Dame Press, Beirut, 2013, p. 15.

⁵⁹ Forgiveness (and forgiveness – la pardonéité) is time, the being of time, as it involves this indisputable and unmodifiable past, which is not enough to ground the concept of “forgiveness“ (whether asked for or granted), but the fact, deed, that happened, for there to be a scene of forgiveness, there must be a misdeed, a wrongdoing, an author responsible, and a victim (which he repeats, although it seems pretty straightforward, J. Derrida, ‘To Forgive’, pp. 31-32).

⁶⁰ One feels, remarks Derrida, this double self-contradictory conviction. Jankélévitch sincerely hopes that history will continue, and that forgiveness and reconciliation will be possible for the next generations, but he simultaneously does not want it for himself (J. Derrida, op. cit., p. 41).

itself.⁶¹ We can never say that forgiveness has truly happened in the empirical world, which means that forgiveness remains impossible. We forgive the unforgivable (so only the unforgivable is forgivable), and because the unforgivable and forgiveness operate beyond the scope of judicial parameters, forgiveness is exceptional.

Negative and positive forgiveness in Milbank

For both Derrida and Jankélévitch the law is the means to achieve justice, which is why forgiveness is exceptional to the ordinary established justice. Unlike them, in John Milbank's opinion, forgiveness is fully possible in the world we live in, with a simple shift of paradigmatic setting from secular to Christian. Communal forgiveness is a practical act for the good of the group. While Jankélévitch and Derrida focus on the individual will of an autonomous individual, Milbank stresses the role of the collective. The premodern Christian community entailed the free exchange of gifts,⁶² and shared a value-system that articulated and prescribed the Good. True forgiveness is possible, only if one shifts toward the common Good articulated by the church and relates to others, forgiving on an inter-subjective level and keeping the bigger picture in mind, which would eventually even lead to greater long-term satisfaction. Negative forgiveness, which Milbank attributes to the musings of Jankélévitch and Derrida, is attempting to erase or negate the past, whilst positive forgiveness, strives to (re)narrate the past and build upon it. Milbank claims that Derrida's and Jankélévitch's negative notion of forgiveness is rooted in Greek and oriental (associated with the ancient Egyptians) empires. This forgiveness "was very much an act of sovereign whim, a gesture of pure negative cancellation, and an act

⁶¹ J. Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

⁶² For the sake of brevity, Derrida's ideas on the exchange of gifts, and the relation between granting forgiveness and giving gifts were not part of this account. For a succinct overview see M. Evans, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-23.

quite prepared to violate justice“.⁶³ The Christian practice of forgiveness, characteristic of St. Thomas Aquinas, for example, has been lost in modernity, finds Milbank.⁶⁴

In an attempt to express why the only plausible concept of forgiveness is “theological“, Milbank suggests that forgiveness is impossible without God. He identifies several aporias. One of them is the problem of who grants forgiveness (he finds this as an issue in Jankélévitch, since he believes that the effects of wrongdoing committed are incalculable objectively, and wonders who should be responsible to forgive in the name of a victimised group, as it is not plausible to forgive truly in someone else’s name). Then there is the problem of time (which, according to Jankélévitch lacks the élan of forgiveness and is morally neutral, which is why what happened in the past must remain a reality), to which Milbank retorts using saint Augustine, claiming that “the past ... only *is* through memory, and while this does not abolish the ontological inviolability and irreversibility of pastness, it does mean that the event in its very originality is open to alteration and mutation, and even further, claiming that the remembered past is itself the ontologically real past.⁶⁵ Another problem is that of for-

⁶³ J. Milbank, ‘Forgiveness and Incarnation’, In J. D. Caputo, M. Dooley and M. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, p. 96.

⁶⁴ For Aquinas, who saw forgiveness as work of restoration (and Milbank mostly follows St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* III Q. 68), and the Middle Ages in general, divine forgiveness was mediated by the Church through the sacrament of penance; to forgive someone was to bring about reconciliation through the provision of a positive means of recompense to the other. Forgiveness and Incarnation“, (J. Milbank, op. cit., p. 94). Forgiveness within the religious communities could be imagined as mutual work of members devoted to God, having in mind that in the collective, one has a responsibility to work through the issues with others, exhibiting and finding forgiveness in the empirical world, by attempting to recompense or by making amends through forms of restitution.

⁶⁵ J. Milbank, op. cit., p. 101. By remembering the past, in a particular way, one begins to see that the misdeeds committed against oneself previously really were nothing, literally non-being. For Milbank, as time moves forward and one begins to reconcile oneself to the event of the misdeed, hatred subsides, and at the heart of his hatred, love for one’s own and others’ real good is rediscovered, and that what was really hated was the negative impairment of

getting (assuming that in the “secular“ view the past is immutable, one is ready to forgive once they have forgotten the pain of the offence),⁶⁶ and if to forgive is to forget, forgiveness is superfluous; he also suggests there be identified a problem of exchange, or the returning of that which is owed by what has been received (conceptualising forgiveness only on an inter-human basis, there will always be a lingering doubt as to the intentions of the for-giver – they might only be interested in personal disinterested benevolence),⁶⁷ while in true forgiving, one is not selfishly pursuing personal satisfaction, but is instead focused on restoration in relation to the other members of the collective. A final aporia is the problem of finality (Jankélévitch is concerned with the possibility of re-emerging of evil, the possibility for which is always on the brink of resurfacing), a worry that “to forgive one must utterly forget, as if this alone guarantees an ultimate and irreversible reconciliation, and yet in forgetting one is blinding oneself to an actual or possible absence of reconciliation.⁶⁸ Milbank insists

love and the good (J. Milbank, *op. cit.*, p. 102), which means that what once was deemed evil is just privation of the good (see Milbank’s disagreement with the “radical evil“ camp, and his own argument for a “privation“ theory of evil, in “Evil“ in J. Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, pp. 1–25).

⁶⁶ J. Milbank, *op. cit.*, 104.

⁶⁷ J. Milbank, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105.

⁶⁸ J. Milbank, *op. cit.*, p. 107. Therapeutic forgiveness aims to make one “feel better“ rather than work through the difficult task of reconciliation, which requires judgment and sacrifice (for this see L. G. Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1995 p. 44; for the “Triumph of the therapeutic“ see pp. 39-47). The grammar of Christian forgiveness has been largely co-opted by a therapeutic grammar, Jones finds, which is a problem because when forgiveness is seen in primarily individualistic and privatistic terms, we lose sight of its central role in establishing a way of life – not only with our “inner“ selves but also in our relations with others. He allows for this contrast to be a matter of emphasis, with “therapeutic“ forgiveness emphasizing the intrapersonal dimension and what he has been calling “theological“ language – the interpersonal dimension (L. G. Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 39). Unlike Milbank, Jones maintains that the past exists as an ontological reality, and cannot not be merely narrated away. He writes, “This is the problem with John Milbank’s formulation, according to which Christian forgiveness and reconciliation involve acting ‘as if [people’s] sin was not there.’ By contrast, it is only by acknowledging that sin *is* there,

on collective-oriented restoration and focus on the good of the community, as well as on finding shared value-systems, and of good, even when it is not utterly conspicuous, funding this on the faith in God and the Incarnation as only viable options for genuine forgiveness.

but dealing with it through a judgment of grace, that we can genuinely achieve reconciliation“ (L. G. Jones, op. cit., p. 146).

The most obvious concern which Milbank's analysis provokes has to do with whether or not those who do not believe in the Incarnation can be saved, suggests M. Dooley (M. Dooley, 'The Catastrophe of Memory: Derrida, Milbank and the (Im)possibility of Forgiveness', In J. D. Caputo, M. Dooley and M. Scanlon (eds.), *Questioning God*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2001, p. 136). It never seems to occur to Milbank, that it is not simply a matter of a stark choice between credal Christianity, on the one hand, and secularism, nihilism, and postmodernism (all of which are, notes Dooley, synonymous for Milbank) on the other. The logical upshot of this extreme Christocentric position is that forgiveness and reconciliation appear to be impossible not only for those of a secular or nihilistic frame of mind, but also for those of a non-Christian religious disposition. This may not be what Milbank intends to suggest, but Dooley confesses that he cannot locate anything in his argument to lead him to any other conclusion (M. Dooley, op. cit., p. 135). The pure positive forgiveness of which Milbank speaks is rejected in modernity in favour of a purely human form of forgiveness which resolves in negativity, insecurity, despair, and alienation, but to accuse Derrida of propounding such a view is quite simply a mistake, Dooley affirms, for Derrida has never spoken in these negative terms; he has never, that is, declared himself on the side of those who champion either neo-Nietzschean nihilism or postmodern relativism, and instead repeatedly insists that deconstruction is neither nihilism nor negativity, but affirmation and hope (M. Dooley, op. cit., p. 136). Derrida's impossible dream is the hope that one day justice for all the ghosts who summon us to mourn them will be realized (*impossible* because the work of mourning is interminable, M. Dooley, op. cit., p. 144). In saying that we can avail of pure or divine forgiveness, Milbank is overlooking the fact that what we call "the divine" is no less contextual, or less historical, or less deconstructable than anything else. Derrida dreams and hopes that there might be a saviour, but he cannot say for sure that there is one. To do so would be to destroy faith, to confuse it with knowledge (M. Dooley, op. cit., p. 143). On Derrida, he warns us against thinking of the distinction between unconditional and conditional forgiveness in terms of a simple opposition, as they are indissociable. Like unconditional hospitality or justice beyond the law, in Shakespearean terms Dooley sees Derrida's pure forgiveness as the stuff that dreams are made of (M. Dooley, op. cit., p. 146).

Ressentiment in Améry

Since an account on the (im)possibilities to forgive would be sorely incomplete⁶⁹ without at least a mention of Jean Améry, his ideas on resentment will be tackled briefly. In his collection of essays, *At the Mind's Limits* (in its previous translation known as *Beyond Guilt and Atonement*): *Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (first published as *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne: Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigte* in 1966), Améry exhibits efforts to preserve memory of the Holocaust, of the sadism and torture, and the terror and horror of the victims. His argument was that in victims of such severe traumas, the refusal to accept the reality that history has moved on since the Holocaust, is a valid ethical stance, a position that is its own categorical imperative. Améry held his ethical position as part of his claim that his resentment, as he called it, is a rational response to inhuman treatment, not the reaction of a wounded or traumatized soul who needs treatment being politically competent to be heard on his or her own terms. He delimits “resentments on two sides and shields them against two explications: that of Nietzsche, who morally condemned resentment, and that of modern psychology, which is able to picture it only as a disturbing conflict”.⁷⁰ He writes, in this famous “Zustand” passage: “it did

⁶⁹ Although this one has already omitted Paul Ricoeur’s ideas on forgiveness, unfortunately. See, for example, his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2004, especially the ‘Epilogue’, pp. 458-506; L. M. Garcia, “Paul Ricoeur’s Happy Memory: Remembering, Forgetting, Forgiving”, In E. J. E. Calasanz, J. Chua, and R. G. Brion, (Eds.), *Thought the Harder; Heart the Keener: A Festschrift for Soledad S. Reyes*, Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 2008, pp. 1-14; H. I. Venema, “Twice Difficult Forgiveness” In F. Erfani, (ed.), *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2011, pp. 35-46; and G. R. Dionisio, “Paul Ricoeur’s Anthropology of Forgiveness”, *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, 20.2, 2016, pp. 118-44.

⁷⁰ J. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits – Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Relations*, University of Indiana Press, Bloomington, 1980, p. 68. But hasn’t Nietzsche shown us, asks C. F. Alford, that all resentment is bad, the morality of the weak, the last man, one whose soul squints? Adorno’s (*Minima moralia*, pp. 97-98) startling assertion is that Nietzsche’s wish to love

not escape me that resentment is not only an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition [Zustand]. It nails everyone of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future⁷¹. The anamnesis of the beginning of his resentment is curious: sometimes Améry wrote as if his resentment began only a couple of years after the war, when he became aware that the Germans were trying to overcome their past by ignoring it, forgiving themselves, and moving on, looking only to the future. Prompted by this lack of heavy-heartedness, his resentment, a bitter and begrudging clinging to the insults and suffering of the past, was a protest against a new Germany that seemed to pretend like the Holocaust had not happened, or had happened long ago, enough for it to be time to move on.⁷² Having submitted to torture

his fate, amor fati, is little more than “ignominious adaptation” to one’s prison (C. F. Alford, ‘Jean Améry: Resentment as Ethic and Ontology’, *Topoi*, 31, 2011, p. 231).

⁷¹ J. Améry, op. cit., p. 68. In testing the relation between resentment and passion, Brudholm describes *ressentiment* as not rash, but sluggish; a mood or a low-energy state in opposition to the vehement nature of violent rage, horror, or grief (T. Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue - Jean Améry and the Refusal to Forget*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2008, p. 105). Trauma and forgiveness are both about rage, a subject that gets mentioned infrequently when talking about either, and the Zustand passage sounds like a definition of trauma, suggest Alford (op. cit., pp. 230-31).

⁷² In German there is the word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the German title reads *Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten*, which could not have been properly translated into English, lacking the subtle wordplay), an overcoming of the past, though the connotation is stronger, as in forcefully overcoming or overthrowing the past (J. Améry, op. cit., pp. 66–67). This does not seem an entirely adequate explanation of the sources of Améry’s resentment, thinks Alford (see op. cit., p. 232). Brudholm’s opinion is that Améry presents to us a *ressentiment* resulting from the failure of a state and a society to reassure its victims that the past has been acknowledged and that the appropriate responsibilities have been assumed, and that his resentment was so strong because as a prisoner he could not express his anger and outrage, or feel his horror. Resentment, he writes, was the result of rage and horror that were repressed in the name of survival at the time they were originally experienced (T. Brudholm, op. cit., pp. 98-100). This could be true (so could almost any

ineluctably burns into the victim, insists Améry, and as a result, he or she can no longer feel at home in the world, and, along with that, has inequitably lost his/her trust in humanity; one understands that one lives in a world where fellow men would not lift a finger to help when one is carted off towards torture and death, a world harbouring “antimen“, tormenters and torturers, and the rest, who would not care what would be done to whom.⁷³ Améry considered those who forgive true conformists, for he who willingly submerges his individuality to society, basically allowing what happened to remain what it was; when he, desindividualised, forgives, his behaviour is analogous to the social reaction.⁷⁴ In careful introspection, and an awareness of the experience of being furiously victimised, he asks himself what would cause him to abandon the resentment, and answers it with the (impossible) wish that his tormentors, as well as those Germans who came after, wished as much as he that the Holocaust and all that went with it never happened, that time could be erased, that the past could be unmade, remade, done over. Resentment would not be needed, if what were impossible were to be wished as deeply by the victims, and by the offenders, the bystanders, and the subsequent generations.⁷⁵

It seems that reconciliation would be vain and impossible to him, that he would forever hold onto his resentment, unable to see the world as acceptably good. However, the “Resentments” essay at the end of *At the mind's limits* shows him seeking a type of reconciliation, reparation, even wholeness of some sort.⁷⁶ He still clings to his fears that Hitler's Reich would come to be regarded as no better or worse than any other historical epoch, only perhaps a little bloodier, though. Resentment remained for Améry a form of forgiveness that has not yet found a worthy object. Con-

psychological hypothesis), thinks Alford, but he also suggests that it is unnecessary to explain (the origin of) Améry's resentment at all (op. cit., p. 232).

⁷³ Améry does list exceptions, but leaves the line between the SS or the Nazis and the rest untouched, see op. cit., pp. 40, 72–76, 94–96.

⁷⁴ J. Amery, op. cit., p. 71.

⁷⁵ J. Amery, op. cit., p. 78.

⁷⁶ See this impression also in C. F. Alford, op. cit., p. 233.

ceptualising the possibility for genuine forgiveness was difficult for him, in his struggle to remain true to his ordeals.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?, we might ask, echoing T. S. Eliot's 'Gerontion'. What do we forgive – simply and impossibly, only the unforgivable, or do we decide that some things are beyond the possibility of forgiveness? The aim of this paper was not to prescribe ways of coping with offenses, nor to profess enormous lightness of having let go of rancour and achieved a contended peace of mind, it was, rather, to show that philosophical ideas of forgiveness lack easy applicability when faced with immense wickedness, with non-justifiable, absolute evil. Some views on pseudo-forgiveness were shown, and in what ways pure forgiveness differs from them in being instantaneous, gratuitous, gracious, inter-personal; as well as some differences between pure forgiveness and reconciliation for the sake of restoration. Forgiveness is a form of bittersweet madness, a secret, an intimate leap of faith, an almost ineffable option beyond those of retributive justice; always (on the brink of) appearing, either to be embraced, as a gift to be bestowed, to be granted, to be asked for, sought after, or to be discarded, for being impossible.

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THE (IM)POSSIBILITY TO FORGIVE – SOME ASPECTS OF FORGIVENESS AND RESENTMENT

The paper offers an overview of the (im)possibility to forgive in Vladimir Jankélévitch and Jacques Derrida, and quite briefly tackles some of the criticisms of John Milbank, as well as some aspects of resentment in Jean Améry. Jankélévitch's conception of pure forgiveness as an instantaneous, inter-personal, gratuitous, gracious gift, ineffable and beyond the established systems in comparison to pseudo-forms of forgiveness is shown, along with his divergence from the idea that Evil is forgivable, towards his insistence that some instances of supreme evil abolish the possibility for forgiveness. Derrida's distinction between true forgiveness and reconciliation for the sake of healing is tackled, with his ideas of forgiveness as beyond the range of justice, and possible because of being impossible (as only the unforgivable is forgivable). Milbank's ideas on negative and positive forgiveness are related to his emphasis on the importance of the collective good of a value-sharing community, and Améry's stance on the impossibility to forgive as a result of profound, ever-lasting trauma is mentioned.