

### Forgiving the unforgivable: Derrida on forgiveness

Dr. Marguerite La Caze, University of Queensland

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the concept of forgiveness, particularly in relation to injustices against groups, such as apartheid and genocide. Philosophical work focuses on the conceptual and normative questions concerning the nature of forgiveness and the question of whether we have obligations to forgive. French Philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) links the notion of extreme evil to forgiveness through the idea of the unforgivable. Extreme evil, or wrongdoing that is without justification or excuse, is the unforgivable, and Derrida argues that *true* or genuine forgiveness is forgiveness of the unforgivable. His account, therefore, appears to be one of the logic of forgiveness, rather than the ethics of forgiveness. Yet, I argue, Derrida also believes we *should* forgive the unforgivable and that is a view I believe should be questioned.

Derrida takes up the question of forgiveness in “On Forgiveness” (2001) and “To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible” (Caputo, 2001). The imprescriptible concerns crimes that have no statute of limitations – they can always be tried, such as the crimes of the perpetrators of the holocaust. Just as he argues that true hospitality is unconditional and limitless, Derrida maintains that we can only *truly* forgive the unforgivable crime or harm.<sup>1</sup> (2001, 32) True forgiveness is unconditional, or in other words, can be forgiveness of the most extreme evil or wrongdoing. Pure forgiveness is aneconomic or noneconomic; it is beyond repentance, atonement, or any account of the weight of the crime, Derrida says. Once we begin to think of repentance and negotiation, healing and reconciliation, Derrida claims that we have entered the realm of impure or conditional forgiveness that is too simple. True forgiveness is a kind of madness, beyond such considerations. True forgiveness is forgiveness of the “*guilty as guilty*”. (2001, 34) In his view, forgiveness cannot be of those who have atoned or repented, because then they are no longer guilty, no longer unforgivable.

Furthermore, conditional forgiveness does not exemplify the open generosity of true forgiveness. Such forgiveness is “corrupted” by the calculation of the value of the crime and of repentance. (Caputo, 2001, 46) Derrida traces the idea of unconditional forgiveness to what he calls the Abrahamic religious tradition in order to include Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, yet argues that such forgiveness goes beyond that tradition, in so far as the tradition contains the contradictory [or auto-deconstructive] call for forgiveness only in proportion to repentance. (2001, 35) He concludes that the unconditional and conditional forms of forgiveness are different in kind, irreducible, and yet nonetheless cannot be dissociated, as are unconditional and conditional hospitality. (2001, 44-45) Unconditional forgiveness is to forgive the unforgivable, a possibility that other moral philosophers such as Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) reject. She argues that we cannot forgive such crimes.

While Derrida briefly refers to Arendt’s view of forgiveness (to note she does not claim that forgiveness has a legal dimension, although it is correlated to punishment), he considers Vladimir Jankélévitch’s (1930-1980) argument that the perpetrators of the Shoah cannot be forgiven because “forgiveness died in the death camps” (Jankélévitch, 1996, 567) in some detail in both “To forgive” and “On Forgiveness”. (Caputo, 2001; 2001)<sup>2</sup> Jankélévitch first published his essay “Should We Pardon Them?” in 1966, when there was debate concerning the decision in France in 1964 to have no statutory limitations on crimes against humanity such as the deeds of the Nazis. The essay was republished in English in 1996. Jankélévitch argues that there should not be any legal statute of limitations on those crimes: they are imprescriptible. One reason he gives is that any particular cut-off point in time is

arbitrary. Another is that the full horrors of the crimes are not realized immediately but over time. More importantly, they are crimes against humanity, on a different scale from ordinary crimes; therefore they should be regarded differently. Jankélévitch says that it contradicts morality to consider pardoning such crimes. (1996, 556)

Furthermore, those crimes are so great they cannot be redressed: they are “inexpiable” and for the inexpiable forgiveness can have no meaning. Jankélévitch’s argument here is similar to Arendt’s, in that he believes that once punishment cannot be proportionate and is almost irrelevant, the crime is inexpiable — it cannot be expiated or atoned for through punishment. (1996, 558)<sup>3</sup> He is clearly thinking of the crimes of the Shoah (holocaust) as radical or extreme evil. Jankélévitch says that the Shoah is a “crime out of all proportion to everyday wrongdoing” and “an unnamable, unmentionable, and terrifying thing”. (1996, 553; 554) He also refers to “ontological wickedness” or “the most diabolical and gratuitous wickedness that history has ever known.” (1996, 556) Because their crimes were unmotivated, he says, the perpetrators were monsters. The crimes of the extermination camps are different from other war crimes, such as terror bombing, due to their “directed, methodical, and *selective* character.” (1996, 563)<sup>4</sup> The unforgivability proceeds from the knowingness of the criminal acts which were directed at the humanness of human beings. Moreover, no-one ever asked to be pardoned, so they should not be.<sup>5</sup> Jankélévitch argues that a pardon could only be justified by the “distress and dereliction of the guilty” but he finds them complacent and unconcerned, (1996, 567) writing elsewhere “They killed six million Jews. But they sleep well. They eat well and the Mark is doing well.” (Caputo, 2001, 38)

Derrida counters Jankélévitch’s claim that there is a need for forgiveness to be asked for in “To Forgive” by saying that there is

in the very meaning of forgiveness 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. (Caputo, 2001, 28)

The notion of forgiveness here is one of reaching out to the other, extending our forgiveness, without being asked to do so or expecting anything in return.<sup>6</sup> Derrida says it is hard to follow Jankélévitch’s logic and is surprised that he has changed his mind from an earlier work, *Le Pardon* (1967) where he was more sympathetic to the idea of unconditional forgiveness.<sup>7</sup>

The gaps Derrida sees in Jankélévitch’s logic are between the inexpiable and the unforgivable and between finding a crime unforgivable and concluding that we cannot forgive it. For Derrida, this conclusion cannot follow because the unforgivable calls for our forgiveness and “because this logic continues to imply that forgiveness remains the correlate of a judgment and the counterpart to a *possible* punishment, to a possible expiation, to the ‘expiable’.” (2001, 36) Derrida questions such a correlation since he sees punishment and forgiveness as quite separate and distinct, and sees forgiveness as not tied to judgment.<sup>8</sup> He finds the idea of the imprescriptible points beyond the law to the concept of the unforgivable, and therefore, true forgiveness. (2001, 53) Furthermore, Jankélévitch is only alleging that pardon has not been asked for. (2001, 35) What Derrida finds most problematic in Jankélévitch’s account is the idea that “*forgiveness must have a meaning.*” (2001, 36) He finds no reason to assume that forgiveness depends on a human possibility. Derrida challenges both Arendt’s and Jankélévitch’s view that forgiveness is “a human thing” or on a human scale, (Caputo, 2001, 30-31) suggesting that pure forgiveness somehow goes beyond the human. What he perhaps has in mind is that a God seems able to forgive because such a being would be beyond the particular entanglements of guilt and harm. (Caputo, 2001, 46)

Derrida implies that forgiveness points in this way beyond the human or is divine, as in the cliché about erring and forgiveness.

Derrida questions the idea that forgiveness cannot be a response to radical or extreme evil or the “inexpiable” in the name of a hyperbolic ethics, an ethics which is exaggerated, which goes beyond an exchange of demands, and expectations. The unforgivable is radical evil for Derrida or perhaps even something worse (if that was possible). He says that such evil involves “an absolute hatred” and “destructive hostility”. (2001, 49) This ethics “therefore, [that] carries itself beyond laws, norms, or any obligation. Ethics beyond ethics, there perhaps is the undiscoverable place of forgiveness.” (2001, 36) According to Derrida, Jankélévitch’s view concerning the unforgivability of the Shoah falls into the economic logic of exchange. In contrast, hyperbolic ethics concerns itself with the impossible, therefore the unforgivable.

Surprisingly, Derrida “privatises” forgiveness even more than Arendt, because Arendt connects forgiveness with judgment and punishment (1998, 241), whereas Derrida argues that pure forgiveness has nothing to do with judgment. For him, forgiveness is between two people only, the victim and the perpetrator. (2001, 42) He accepts that some people cannot bring themselves to forgive and that such a decision is a private matter, citing the example of a woman who said at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa that only she, the victim, could forgive and she was not ready to forgive. Derrida’s idea is that a “democracy to come” would allow for the secret and the inaccessible, and experiences such as those of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission demonstrate the importance of allowing for such secrets. (2001, 55) It is important that there is a space for private decisions concerning whether or not and when to forgive. However, there is a strain in Derrida’s thought on forgiveness which goes against his acceptance of non-forgiveness.

While Derrida’s account of true forgiveness may be of a forgiveness that does not, cannot exist, he claims it is essential to provide us with a means to think about the nature of forgiveness, to understand acts which fall short of true forgiveness. The impossibility of pure forgiveness should guide our thinking about forgiveness based on repentance, mourning, and exchange. Ultimately, we will negotiate between pure forgiveness and its impure forms. Derrida’s characterization of forgiveness addresses the logic of forgiveness, rather than the ethics or psychology of forgiveness. He does not make a claim as to when we should forgive and when not.<sup>9</sup> However, I argue that we must read his view of forgiveness as implicitly arguing for the madness of pure forgiveness, for two reasons.

First, Derrida’s criticisms of Jankélévitch and Arendt suggest not only that their account of forgiveness is conditional but also that their particular views about whom and when we should forgive are objects of his disapproval. For example, Derrida seems scandalized by Jankélévitch’s angry tone in writing about the Shoah. Derrida quotes a passage from Jankélévitch’s essay, and then warns “What follows are remarks of such polemical violence and such anger against the Germans that I do not even want to read them or cite them.” (Caputo, 2001, 28)<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Derrida links Jankélévitch’s waiting for a word of sympathy from the perpetrators and his criticisms of German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) with Paul Celan’s (1920-1970) poem, *Todtnauberg*, often interpreted as an expression of disappointment that Heidegger did not ask for forgiveness when he went to visit him at Todtnauberg. He quotes the first verse from the poem: “Arnica, eyebright, the /draft from the well with the starred die above it, / in the/hut, / the line/ — whose name did the book/ register before mine? —, / the line inscribed/ in that book about/ a hope, today/ of a thinking man’s coming/ word/ in the heart, [...]” (Celan, 1989, 292-293) Derrida sets aside the question of the poem’s interpretation and makes the point that Celan’s poem itself is a gift, an expression of forgiveness: “*Todtnauberg* remains thus to be read, to be received — as gift or forgiveness themselves, a gift and a forgiveness which are the poem before being, possibly, its themes or the theme of the poet’s disappointed expectation.” (Caputo, 2001, 38)

(Apparently, Celan sent it to Heidegger, who loved it.) (Joris, 1988, 5) This interesting interpretation contrasts Celan's generous forgiveness (he was not asked for forgiveness by Heidegger) with Jankélévitch's view that without a request for forgiveness he cannot and should not forgive. Implicitly, Jankélévitch is unfavorably compared to Celan because he is less forgiving. This also occurs when Derrida analyses an exchange of letters in 1980 and 1981 between Jankélévitch and a young German man, Wiard Raveling, who comes to visit him in Paris. Jankélévitch writes in response to Raveling's prior invitation to visit him in Germany "No, I will not come to see you in Germany. I will not go that far. I am too old to inaugurate this new era. Because for me it is a new era all the same. For which I have waited too long. But you are young, you do not have the same reasons as I. You do not have this uncrossable barrier to cross." (Caputo, 2001, 40) Derrida reads Jankélévitch's response as self-contradictory —as wanting forgiveness and reconciliation but not wanting it for himself.<sup>11</sup> Again, this reading appears less than fully compassionate to Jankélévitch's position as a man of 77 who does not wish to go to Germany to discuss a young man's guilt with him.

Second, Derrida's positive account of true forgiveness implies that it is an ideal that we should try to live up to insofar as it is possible. We should aspire to true forgiveness, that is, to forgiving the unforgivable. He uses normative language in defining pure forgiveness, for example, "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." (2001, 32) Derrida also says that a hyperbolic ethics "would command precisely ... that forgiveness be granted where it is neither asked for nor deserved, and even for the worst radical evil." (Caputo, 2001, 29) Conversely, Derrida's association of impure forgiveness with calculation and corruption implies that we should avoid this impurity by not considering the conditions for forgiveness, such as repentance and atonement, (2001, 27; Caputo, 2001, 46) although he notes that once we have to make a decision in a particular case, forgiveness must "engage in a series of conditions of all kinds (psycho-sociological, political, etc.)" (2001, 45) Conditional forgiveness concerns the feelings of the victim and the possible implications of forgiveness, for example.

In the sense of holding out impossible ideals, Derrida is a stern moralist. When exactly Derrida believes we should give way to the madness of pure forgiveness is another question. His remarks concerning the South African Truth and Reconciliation commission accord with Jankélévitch's point that others cannot forgive on behalf of the dead: "The survivor is not ready to substitute herself, abusively, for the dead." (2001, 44; Jankélévitch, 1996, 569) Here the impossibility of forgiveness is a pragmatic one, in that the survivor is not in a position to forgive. Derrida also says that "I always risk perjuring myself by forgiving, of betraying someone else by forgiving, for one is always doomed to forgive (thus abusively) in the name of another." (Caputo, 2001, 49) However, it appears that he is willing to accept that risk in the name of forgiveness.

Derrida says "It is between these two poles, *irreconcilable but indissociable*, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken." (2001, 45)<sup>12</sup> But there is no list of the dangers of pure forgiveness, of the harms which might arise from its untrammelled progress. Derrida makes one point concerning the possible arrogance and assertion of sovereignty in presuming to forgive. (2001, 58)<sup>13</sup> Not everyone wishes to be forgiven. Nevertheless, he adds that forgiveness that is unconditional but without sovereignty is possible.<sup>14</sup> There is no 'right to forgiveness'. I believe that is appropriate, but perhaps lurking there is a tension in that Derrida is taking supererogatory concepts and pushing their logic, so there is a kind of implicit expectation that if unconditional forgiveness is an ideal, then it is a good that we should expect of ourselves and that others may expect of us.

A possible implication of Derrida's account is that we should be less forgiving of the unforgiving, for they do not aspire to true forgiveness, a paradoxical outcome. He quotes G.

W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) as saying that “all is forgivable except the crime against spirit, that is, against the reconciling power of forgiveness.” (2001, 34) Derrida’s view seems to imply that the perpetrators must be forgiven no matter what they did. Furthermore, his account of forgiveness puts the onus on the victims to forgive rather than the oppressors to atone. This point could be a little unjust, as Derrida says that his concern is what he calls the comedy of forgiveness and what he has in mind are those who presume to forgive on behalf of others, such as heads of state. (2001, 50)<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, he claims, he remains torn between the purity of forgiveness and the pragmatism of reconciliation. However, the weight of his argument lies on the potential forgivers. This presumption adds a further burden to the victims of radical evil, and cannot constitute an ethical injunction in every case.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Derrida’s idea that there is a call for forgiveness even of the unforgivable is an appealing one. He does not define forgiveness psychologically, but it is generally understood as the giving up of thoughts of revenge and resentment, or our ‘sense of grievance’.<sup>17</sup> Such forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we will trust again or reconcile in the sense of restoring or developing a relationship with the wrongdoer.

What would an ethic of forgiveness that takes into account both these insights and these difficulties look like? *Why* should we forgive the unforgivable, if we ever should? I argue that we cannot expect or demand forgiveness as a right. We can only hope for it or try to bring about the conditions for it. Respect for others brings the beginning of the possibility of forgiveness, but doesn’t provide a sufficient reason for forgiveness. Extreme wrongdoing means the possibility of forgiveness is more difficult. If forgiveness is related to the acknowledgement of responsibility for one’s acts and genuine regret and remorse, then forgiveness may be possible. If there is a direct request from forgiveness from the perpetrator, which is rare, it is unjust to expect forgiveness or criticise victims for withholding it. Forgiveness may be worthwhile for the victim because it shows they are coming to terms with the past. However, no-one can dictate the terms under which someone should reach the point of forgiveness. Being forgiving may be a human good but not one that can be forced on people. Nor should we judge others for not being forgiving enough in these extreme cases. We might say they are being impractical or making things worse for themselves by not forgiving, but we should not condemn them by holding them to impossible ideals.

That said, forgiveness is a valuable ethical action, as long as it does not entail condoning wrongdoing. Lack of forgiving as a consistent trait and in relation to trivial transgressions is problematic, but not particular instances of in relation to extreme ill treatment. In the end, forgiveness is a leap even when it is related to repentance and apology. The attitude of the perpetrator and their relation to the victim makes a basic difference to whether forgiveness is possible. We may be able to forgive, but we cannot ethically demand that victims forgive. The victim may have their own reasons for forgiveness as part of the process of recovery. But only they can decide whether to forgive the unforgivable.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Caputo, John D, Dooley, Mark, and Scanlon, Michael J. (Eds.) 2001. *Questioning God*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Celan, Paul. 1989. "Todtนาberg." *Poems of Paul Celan*. Trans. Michael Hamburger. New York: Persea Books.
- Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*. Eds. Simon Critchley and Richard Kearney. London: Routledge.
- Garrard, Eve. 2002. "Forgiveness and the Holocaust." *Ethical theory and Moral Practice* 5: 147-175.
- Jankélévitch, Vladimir. 1996. "Should we Pardon them?" *Critical Inquiry* 22. 552-572.
- . 1967. *Le Pardon*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Joris, Pierre. 1988. "Celan/ Heidegger: Translation at the Mountain of Death." <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/joris/t...>
- Light, Steve. 1997. "Vladimir Jankélévitch and the *Imprescriptible*." *International Studies in Philosophy*. 29: 4. 51-57.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. 1993. *The Experience of Freedom*. Trans. Bridget McDonald. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Uma Narayan, 1997. 'Forgiveness, Moral Reassessment and Reconciliation.' *Explorations of Value*. Ed. T. Mangell. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 169-178.
- Oliver, Kelly. 2003. "Forgiveness and Subjectivity." *Philosophy Today*. Vol.47, No.3. 280-
- Papastephanou, Marianna. 2003. "Forgiving and Requesting Forgiveness." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*. Vol. 37, No.3. 503- 524.
- Potter, Nancy. 2001. "Is Refusing to Forgive a Vice?" *Feminists Doing Ethics*. Eds. Peggy DesAutels and Joanne Waugh. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. 135-150.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Other authors, such as Garrard (2002) have argued that we should forgive the unforgivable, such as the crimes of the Shoah. Derrida also compares forgiveness (*le pardon, un pardon*) to the unconditionality of the gift and its relation to time, but notes that forgiveness is related to the past, so cannot be reduced to the gift. (Caputo, 2001, 22)

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1980) was Professor of Moral Philosophy, University of Paris.

<sup>3</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (1998).

<sup>4</sup> Jankélévitch refers to the “refined sadism” of the perpetrators of the Shoah (1996, 563), but Arendt argues that even sadism was usually not a motive for the crimes. (1948, 758-9)

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy also argues that evil is “unbearable and unpardonable” (1993, 123) and defines evil as “*the hatred of existence as such.*” (1993, 128)

<sup>6</sup> Dooley characterizes Derrida’s view thus: “To have a passion for the impossible or the unconditional means that you desire what you know to be impossible — due to the claim which language and tradition make upon you — so as to prevent the conditional from becoming *too* conditional.” (Caputo, 2001, 143) There is something worrying about having a passion or desire for the impossible because the impossible, as Derrida describes it, is dangerous and undesirable. In the case of hospitality and forgiveness, they are ideals of self-destruction.

<sup>7</sup> Light (1997, 54) claims that Jankélévitch’s view is that the imprescriptible is of a different and worse, order, than the unpardonable, but he does not provide textual evidence.

<sup>8</sup> One exception that Derrida notes is the *right of grace*, where a sovereign can pardon a criminal, in other words forgive them in a way that goes beyond the law. (2001, 46)

<sup>9</sup> Because Derrida defines forgiveness as forgiving the unforgivable, Papastephanou appears to assume that he believes we should forgive the unforgivable. (2003, 507) Oliver argues that we can only supply the constant interrogation of the search for pure forgiveness by taking into account the unconscious. (2003)

<sup>10</sup> Of Jankélévitch’s view of Heidegger, Derrida writes “And a little further on, as often elsewhere, Jankélévitch violently attacks Heidegger.” (Caputo, 2001, 36) Jankélévitch does make a number of remarks about Heidegger, for example “The pedantic tone of German racism reminds me of ... the gibberish of Heidegger.” (1996, 564) These remarks are certainly unsympathetic to Heidegger, but there are several rather than many and the reference to “violent attacks” build up a picture of Jankélévitch as an irresponsible writer, at least in this piece. There is a disturbing note in Jankélévitch’s essay when he says that juridical norms such as human rights can be dismissed when considering capturing and punishing Eichmann. (1996, 557) One could argue that just as one should not trample the rule of law no matter what the crime, one must not forget ethics, no matter how radical the evil.

<sup>11</sup> A letter a friend of Jankélévitch’s, a priest, writes to the young man contains the sentence “The fanatical Jew is just as bad as the Nazi.” (Caputo, 2001, 39) This letter seems highly worthy of analysis.

<sup>12</sup> However, there is an important difference between Derrida’s accounts of unconditional hospitality and forgiveness. Both are impossible, but in the case of hospitality, Derrida warns of a number of specific, catastrophic dangers of hospitality. The visitor can become an invader or colonist. Conquest is an abuse of hospitality. And so on.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida even says we may have to be “forgiven forgiveness” because of that assertion. (Caputo, 2001, 22)

<sup>14</sup> Another difference is that Derrida speaks of the right to hospitality, but he does not speak of a right to forgiveness.

<sup>15</sup> Papastephanou observes that “there is no compelling argument supporting the view that forgiveness conditional on repentance is inescapably or exclusively committed to this kind of

---

strategicility and exchange.” (2003, 515) On the contrary, the victim’s struggle to decide whether to forgive is independent of any strategic maneuvers, as Derrida himself implies by separating forgiveness from justice and politics.

<sup>16</sup> Potter notes that often the oppressed are expected to forgive the oppressors. (2001, 145)

<sup>17</sup> Uma Narayan, ‘Forgiveness, Moral reassessment and reconciliation.’ *Explorations of Value*. Ed. T. Mangell. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 1997, 71.