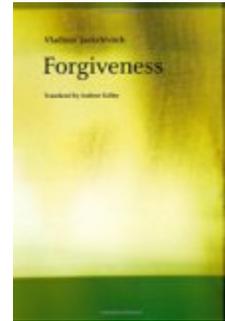


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The Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness

During the latter half of the twentieth century, as nations around the world emerged from authoritarianism, war, or massive political violence, societies were confronted with the difficult challenge of how to face pasts riddled with violations and abuse. The responses have been varied: truth commissions to investigate and publicize crimes; trials or purges of perpetrators as a form of retribution; victim-centered policies that aim to restore the dignity and status of those most affected; or, social amnesia, a rejection of any engagement with the past as a way of overcoming bitterness and poisonous hatreds. In some cases, these responses have been combined, though in few, if any cases, have the solutions been morally satisfying. While these debates have been particularly pronounced at political and policy levels, their normative underpinnings—the moral architecture on which these claims rest—have often been rather inadequate. Particularly inadequate have been many, though certainly not all, attempts at delineating a theory of forgiveness. Many popular discussions have shown little more than pious or trite defenses of the need to “move on” with little reflection of what this would entail.

This elegant translation of Vladimir Jankelevitch’s *Forgiveness* does not fall into that camp. Rather, it gives a rigorous, complex, and suggestive account of forgiveness that forces the reader to reflect on what the faculty means. For Jankelevitch, the problem of forgiveness arose in response to the Second World War, as he dealt with the ontology of evil and ethics in books like *Le Mal* and *Traite des Vertus*. *Forgiveness* was published in 1967, though Jankelevitch is far better known for his dismissal

of forgiving in essays like “Should we Pardon Them?” and the book *L’Imprescriptible*, also from that era. The book under review marks a departure from those works because it attempts to defend the possibility of forgiving, though in a novel way.

Part of the difficulty with this text, and the general theoretical position it takes, is that Jankelevitch is wary of offering a substantive theory of forgiveness. He sees such attempts as missing their mark, identifying actions that may appear to be forgiveness but in the end amount to no more than a kind of pseudo-forgiveness. As such, much of the book is a discussion of what forgiveness is not. “Indeed, the more forgiveness is impure and opaque, the more it lends itself to description. As a matter of fact, only an apophatic or negative philosophy is truly possible” (p. 5). Such impure forms include forgetting the transgression; “integration,” transforming the memory into a painless element of a person’s past; and “intellection,” where the efforts to understand the transgression result in the perpetrator’s pardon. While these all bear a superficial resemblance to forgiveness, none includes the “intentional” aspect of this faculty, according to Jankelevitch. None grapples with the importance of intending to forgive as a form of moral action on the part of the victim. For him, forgiveness must always be seen as an active moral choice.

For the author, forgiveness is akin to a divine act of which humans are capable. It is “initial, sudden, spontaneous” (p. 3). While it can never rewrite the past, forgiveness nevertheless springs from the possibility of creat-

ing a new future miraculously, and in this sense rewrites our relation to the past and the violator. “Forgiveness itself forgives in one fell swoop and in a single, indivisible \AA lan, and it pardons undividedly; in a single, radical, and incomprehensible movement, forgiveness effaces all, sweeps away all, and forgets all” (p. 153). It is a wholly unique intervention into the present, not dependent on certain criteria (remorse, repentance, etc.), nor directed toward some goal (reconciliation, overcoming anger, moving on, etc.). It is, in other words, neither conditional on the perpetrator’s subsequent actions nor an instrument to achieve certain ends.

To say that it is not instrumental is to redirect our attention to the importance of the ethical relation between individuals. Formulations that privilege reconciliation as a fundamental goal—such as Desmond Tutu’s *No Future without Forgiveness*—or rehabilitation subvert the importance of forgiveness by measuring its value on some external metric.[1] Jankelevitch emphasizes that such a move does not result in forgiveness of the perpetrator, but only seeks to reach a new state of affairs and is thus a pragmatic response to a legacy of violations. When we direct forgiveness toward some end, such as overcoming bitterness, we are in effect moving away from any engagement with the violator and subordinating forgiveness to something outside of itself. He wishes to situate the difficult ethical relationship between victim and transgressor at the center of his theory of forgiveness.

If instrumentality is such a concern, then how can we ensure that forgiveness is ever pure? How do we assure ourselves that any particular instance of forgiving is in fact forgiveness, and not simply a cheap or pale semblance of the faculty? One way, Jankelevitch suggests, is to focus on those transgressions that fall outside the purview of what can normally be considered pardonable or forgettable. Such transgressions cannot be ignored or excused, and they confront us with their barbarity. It is precisely those violations that exceed such responses which force us to reflect on the truly miraculous power of forgiveness. Forgiveness, properly conceived, represents a limit point—somewhere beyond ethical imperatives (for one is not obliged to forgive) and beyond reason (for there can be no reasons to forgive, since this would risk making it instrumental, or at the very least reducing it to a balance test of reasons and counter-reasons). Pure forgiveness is always an act of grace; it points toward true freedom, unbound by utilitarian calculation or moral law, beyond the dictates of justice.

Such an understanding is provocative, and surely dif-

ferent from other philosophical views that have gained currency. Hannah Arendt shares with Jankelevitch the belief that forgiveness allows for the possibility of creating a new future relationship, thus escaping cycles of revenge. Nevertheless, she argues that forgiveness can only be understood within the realm of human affairs; forgiveness for the unforgivable, as Jankelevitch would have it, is impossible and incoherent.[2] For Arendt, one can only forgive (or punish) those transgressions which are in some sense comprehensible. Radical evil, as she terms it, is by definition beyond the realm of forgiveness or punishment. Indeed, in the final section of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* she calls for Eichmann’s death not as a form of punishment (no punishment could ever be appropriate for his crimes) but rather as a way to cast him symbolically out of the community of humanity.[3]

Given such a view, we could simply dismiss Jankelevitch’s theory as fundamentally incoherent or at any rate impossible to execute in the world. We could argue that forgiving the unforgivable makes no sense or that such a pure forgiveness will never exist in the real world. I will resist such temptations in my critique, largely because I think his understanding of forgiveness has much to teach us and because the charge that it is unworldly is beside the point (he would probably agree, and emphasize that he thinks of forgiveness as a theoretical limit point of free, unencumbered action).

The difficulty with Jankelevitch’s theory stems from his adamant refusal to allow any notion of instrumentality. Recall that he sees forgiveness as a “gift” or form of “grace” (p. 9). Such a fear of instrumentality may also include situations where the victim could use forgiveness to amass symbolic capital—to show her beneficence or grace by forgiving publicly, and thus enjoy the social esteem that would come with this. Certainly, in this case instrumentality poses a problem: it risks undermining the normative force of forgiveness and relegating it to the status of pseudo-forgiveness. There are only two ways to avoid this problem, it seems to me, though neither is satisfactory if we stay within Jankelevitch’s theory. The first is to argue that forgiveness should avoid publicity (public expression), since publicity is an invitation to instrumentality. It should be, therefore, secret—like a gift one gives anonymously, though in this case the receiver of the gift does not know he received it. This is problematic because it severs the relational nature of forgiveness, which Jankelevitch argues is fundamental to the theory. It turns what is an expression of a new relationship between erstwhile enemies into a secret act that only the forgiver knows has occurred.

The second alternative would be to argue that forgiveness ought to be followed with the absolute erasure of memory, since this way the victim could not capitalize on any symbolic capital that accrues from forgiving a particularly heinous violator. It would be a *tabula rasa*. Such a response, of course, is also problematic from within the theory. Jankelevitch is explicit that memory must be maintained after forgiveness. “Nothing could be more evident: in order to forgive, it is necessary to remember” (p. 56). While I am sympathetic to this view, it does not solve the vexing challenge of instrumentality identified above. The only viable solution seems to be to allow for a theory of forgiveness that admits of instrumentality, and then proceed to identify what types of ends are morally legitimate and what types are not (one could also add that conditionality should be accepted as well, requiring further elaboration of what conditions are acceptable and what conditions are not. One can do this and still emphasize that forgiveness is not automatic after such conditions have been met, but only possible, thus retaining the moral agency of the victim).

A second general concern rests with the scope of the relationships covered in the book. Jankelevitch is clearly concerned with forgiveness between victim and perpetrator. But he says practically nothing of what forgiveness would look like (or whether it is possible) between a victim and a bystander, the latter understood here to be a person whose inaction was morally problematic but nevertheless not legally criminal. What of people who turn the other way to gross harm yet had some chance of stopping it, or at least denouncing it (this is less relevant for people who are so constrained that they can do nothing to prevent harm)? This, it seems to me, is a morally complex area that deserves more attention, but receives little consideration here.[4]

What is particularly interesting about Jankelevitch’s discussion is how he situates forgiveness in relation to love and justice. He notes that both may be legitimate responses to past violations, at least on their own terms, but they do not speak to one another and may in fact come into conflict. To demand (retributive) justice and punishment is in conflict with the desire to love and forgive. There is something deeper here, however. For Jankelevitch is a radical decisionist. That is, he sees the human condition as one where we are always faced with making moral choices whose proper answers cannot be gen-

erated from some prior moral arithmetic, such as Mill or Kant would have it.[5] Rather, when faced with a moral challenge we must decide what to do, and our decision is never (merely) the product of some a priori moral theory, be it either retributive or fraternal. In the last section of the book, Jankelevitch emphasizes the enormity of such moral decision making in order to underscore the stakes at hand and the unique character of forgiveness. While he ends by saying that the tension between love and justice is irresolvable and that moral action is always, in some sense, spontaneous, the way he frames the question remains provocative.

We may disagree with much of what Jankelevitch says, but he undoubtedly provides a powerful philosophical treatment of forgiveness, one that cannot be dismissed easily. It has had a profound, if not always acknowledged, impact on other thinkers and remains a potent alternative to many contemporary theories that consider forgiveness conditional and instrumental.[6] *Forgiveness* is a book that demands careful reading and reflection. The prose is often dense and difficult, but repays upon rereading. I hope that this book will develop the reputation and receive the attention it deserves, not only from philosophers but all readers who wish to delve into this problem more deeply.

Notes

[1]. Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

[2]. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998).

[3]. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 1994).

[4]. See, for example, Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (London: Verso, 1999).

[5]. I ignore here whether this is an accurate description of these thinkers.

[6]. For an important contemporary version of Jankelevitch’s theory, see Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

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