

Radical Evil and the Im/Possibility of Forgiveness: A hyperbolic Ethic

I. The Problematic Horizon

Hannah Arendt in the *Human Condition* considers the irreversibility of human agency in time, that seemingly what is done cannot be undone, and the act of forgiveness as its redemptive possibility. Is it possible, and if so, ought one, undo what, seemingly irrevocable, has been done by forgiveness?

II. The Project

In Kasper's *Mercy*, he briefly considers the recent philosophical conversation on the question of forgiveness, its human enactment, as a propaedeutic to his Christian theological development. The purpose of my contribution to this discussion of his work will be to elaborate on his schematic survey of the major contemporary thinkers on forgiveness, Vladimir Jankelevitch, Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur.

III. Yankelevitch's Challenge

Yankelevitch in his remarkable work, *Forgiveness*, states that forgiveness is not a forgetting due to temporal decay, the attenuation of memory traces over time, a gradual, imperceptible receding into the unconscious; nor an excusing due to ignorance, a not-knowing what one was doing, the absence of an evil intent; nor a liquidating, a passing over the misdeed and not holding it against the guilty person, a willful dismissal of the offense in a blatant disregard of justice. Only the unforgettable, the inexcusable and the acknowledged injustice is forgivable...

Forgiveness is an event that happens in an instant of historical becoming, an eruption/interval in the duration of time, a gracious gift, an unconditional and unlimited free bestowal, in a personal relation of one to another, the offender and the offended, the perpetrator and the victim, in an intimate interaction with one another in light of an ultimate reconciliation. The event of forgiveness is ineffable, inexplicable, incomprehensible, irrational, without reason, without cause, hyperbolic...

The inclination to, and the motivation for, forgiveness is compassion, a transcendent sense of solidarity in human sinfulness, the other as a mirror image of oneself. Forgiveness extends to infinity and is always possible. It is the miracle of forgiveness that in a burst of exhilaration annihilates the having been and the having done. As love is as strong as death, so forgiveness is as strong as evil; where misdeeds flow, grace overflows... and how much more so.

Yankelevich, however, in a subsequent paper, "Shall We Pardon Them," seems severely to qualify, if not completely contradict, his former depiction of forgiveness.

Confronted with the Nazi atrocities, the Holocaust, no expiation, no forgiveness is possible. The Shoah, the deliberate and systematic extermination of the Jews was a crime against the human essence, an appalling manifestation of ontological evil. Father do not forgive them, they knew precisely what they did! The possibility of pardoning died in the death camps...

Furthermore, there is an obligation not to forget in this absolute resistance to forgive. The appropriate sentiment is insurmountable horror, horror over what happened, horror of the fanatics that perpetrated it, of the passive who accepted it, the indifferent who have already forgotten it and the perverse who have dismissed, denied it... The perpetual indignation of the inexpiable and the imprescriptible rightly protects against a moral amnesty that would be nothing but a shameful amnesia. To forget the massacred, to forgive their slaughters would complete their extermination and ensure their annihilation. To forgive and forget would add abject insult to abysmal injury...

IV. Derrida's Response

Derrida addresses the two axioms grounding Jankelevich's absolute refusal to grant forgiveness to the executioners of the Holocaust: (1) Forgiveness cannot be granted unless asked for and then only proffered by the victim; and (2) the crime is absolutely abominable, monstrously evil.

Derrida asks, Is forgiveness only possible, with its meaning as forgiveness, on condition that it be asked for? He answers, There is in forgiveness, in the very meaning of forgiveness, a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal, even to someone who does not ask for it, who does not repent or confess or improve or redeem oneself, beyond, consequently, even all expiation.

Derrida then asks, Does not forgiveness only acquire its meaning and its possibility where it is called on to do the Impossible, to forgive the Unforgivable even for the worst radical evil? He answers, At the heart of forgiveness is the nature of a gift, unrestricted in its generosity, a magnitude exceeding all calculation and surpassing all limitations, Impossible in its ideal, essential purity, albeit its sublimity compromised in its historical conditionality within an existential economy of exchange. For Derrida, the history of forgiveness does not come to an end in the Final Solution, but therein precisely confronts its greatest challenge, the Impossible, to forgive the unforgivable and imprescriptible...

V. Ricoeur's Reaction

For Ricoeur, asking for, giving and receiving a word of forgiveness is possible in a trajectory, the Odyssey of which is admittedly inherently difficult, replete with treacherous twists and turns. Memory, remembering and recollecting, meets recalcitrant hindrances and resistances in repressed experiences, acting out, melancholia and denial that make the work of mourning a strenuous process of negotiating with irreparable loss. Forgetting may be compounded by the inexorable fading of the mnemonic traces in the brain, in our mind, in our archives, our documents and our monuments or by repressed memories, strategies of illusion and evasion in protecting the self from the return of the unbearable repressed. Guilt, inextricably bound within one's selfhood, may be inseparable, the guilt become ineradicable by a binding of person and evil act that cannot be unbound. Guilt, implying not just a blow to one's own self-esteem, but an infliction of wounds on others, irreparable damage done to others, demands vindication, retribution for the sake of civic peace in which forgiveness would be a violation of justice. Collective memories, the history of injuries and hatreds stretched out over interminable time, the inescapable, haunting memories of endless grievances, constitute a veritable culture of death in the ever, on-going prevailing willful intent for the destruction of the enemy, an impenetrable, irreversible descent into endless strife, enmity in perpetuity.

It is at this point in the abyss of evil that, for Ricoeur, an eschatological dimension breaks through: a voice is heard from the heavens, a canticle of love, that says: *There is, il y a, es gibt...* Forgiveness is possible, a forgiveness that is unconditional, before any petition, beyond all expectation, a gracious gift, a gift without return, an undeserved and unreserved gift, unowed and unexacted...

Nonetheless, the possibility calls for a response, *metanoia*, conversion, repentance...a repentance that is not an a priori condition nor expected consequence, but a happening within an overarching forgiveness, a forgiveness without either before or after, in a paradoxical inclusion of repentance.

This miraculous happening is enacted in the uncoupling of the deed, what one has done, from the doer, the person who did the deed, effectively breaking the bond binding the action with the agent. This radical uncoupling, necessary in lifting the burden of guilt, remittable as a debt, implies that the capacity of personal commitment belonging to the moral subject is not exhausted by its various inscriptions in the affairs of the world, that the person is more than his/her actions in a proffered affirmation that, although the evil one may do be

radical, the predisposition to the good is primordial... This willingness to separate the person from his action, which does not condone the evil done, but nonetheless absorbs the harm done without vindictive reprisal, requires an act of faith, the courage to trust another again in overcoming the fear of recidivism, that is operative in the reciprocal interaction of forgiveness and repentance, of asking for, granting and receiving forgiveness.

In being unbound to the past act by forgiveness, one may bind oneself to the future by promises, bringing the trajectory of forgiveness to completion in reconciliation, the renewal of being and life together...

VI. Conclusion

Arendt in her *Human Condition* claims and credits Jesus of Nazareth in being a singular pre-eminent proponent of the practice of forgiveness. It now remains to ask in what way Christian forgiveness may be distinctive from its ordinary human enactment. I will relegate this response to the provenance of theologians, but might here venture to suggest that the inexplicable grace of forgiveness as a vital human capability points to, and is grounded in, a transcendent Mystery of life abundant in mercy that enables the possibility of the otherwise Impossible, the human event of forgiveness surpassing in healing all harm, an exceeding extravagance of love, in the perpetual renaissance of integrity to the wholeness of consummate being and life...

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