

Is forgiveness possible?

Ladies and gentlemen,

When we talk about the possibility of a humanity in which human beings could finally live happily and in peace, some of our critics do not hesitate to accuse us of naïve optimism, asserting loud and clear that violence, and sometimes even barbarity, are intractable characteristics of human beings. Fortunately there are many of us who believe the contrary and refuse to fall into the vicious cycle of gloom and doom that prevails. We do not for a moment doubt that human beings can change for the better. However, we also know that we must be able to let time take its course and go along with it as best we can. So this evening, once more, it is life that we will talk about. Thus the theme of my talk is: “Is forgiveness possible?”

Forgiveness is a huge question on which many great minds have focused. So I hope you will forgive me if I am cautious with what I am about to say.

Forgiveness, this strange feeling, is it possible, is it attainable for human beings? Or is it not only in the realms of our imagination, like some kind of fanciful idea, always sought, always hoped for, but never attained?

When I have spoken of the study of this concept, I have been struck by official declarations of remorse, often with great public fanfare, sometimes greatly exaggerated, it has to be said, turning into a kind of ‘fad’.

To mention just a few of the most high-profile ones, remember these:

- the West German Chancellor, Willy Brandt, who in December 1970, knelt before the monument erected to the memory of victims of the Warsaw Uprising, officially asking for forgiveness from the Polish Jewish community in the name of his people.
- Boris Yeltsin, on 7 November 1998, asked the people to ‘understand’ and to ‘forgive’ for the victims of the October 1917 Revolution
- Japan, on 8 October 1998, apologised for the suffering inflicted on the Korean people during colonisation
- and even Pope John-Paul II, on 12 March 2000, asked God’s forgiveness for all the “wrongdoing, cheating, inconsistencies and tardiness” of which Catholics were guilty over the centuries

and I also quickly mention still more apologies, such as those of the bishops of the Catholic Church, in 1997 before the monument to the dead of the Camp at Drancy. Or the more recent, one of Kaing Guek Eav, alias Douch, a former monster of the Khmer Rouge.

Without being especially sceptical, I cannot help but think that it is not really a question here of sincere acts of contrition, but rather an official stance which exonerates them for wrongdoing and past crimes. So weren't they just seeking some cleansing, mentally, psychologically and socially? A kind of "Ecology of remembrance" as Jacques Derrida rightly called it?

The requests for a pardon from all these authorities, do they not seem like just a kind of socio-economic-political marketing? But whether they are sincere or not, I would still rather they happened, than just sweep these things under the carpet. They are preferable what were frequent and deafening silence at a time when it would have been comforting to hear denouncements of what was humanly unacceptable.

Einstein said, "The world is too dangerous to live in, not just because of those who commit evil, but because of those who stand by and let it happen."

So, what should we think about forgiveness? Is it possible, or is it a philosophical illusion? A kind of approach that in the end only soothes one's conscience?

Despite the fact that this stance appears to be so complex and the often passionate, and sometimes entrenched positions taken by some, I am, nevertheless, in general terms, going to deal with some aspects of it so that we can improve our understanding during this discussion. To this end I suggest using the following plan:

After having attempted to define the concept, I am going to briefly outline certain philosophical studies, among the most meaningful. And although I don't really enjoy it, since I am still reticent to draw the attention to myself, I will then talk to you more personally about myself, my life story and how, in some ways I have been able to be resilient.

To forgive, from the Latin 'per donare', suggests the idea 'to give completely', the notion of extreme generosity. Then the word evolved over time to now mean in popular language, 'to punish someone for their transgression'. And in the Judeo-Christian context in which we are evolving, it is associated more with the idea of absolution, as God, in his extreme goodness, pardons human beings for their sins.

Desmond Tutu, the South African Archbishop and Noble Peace Prize Winner, when talking about the racial brutality unleashed in his country under their authoritarian regime, said, "We must go further than getting justice, we must come to forgiveness, because without forgiveness there can be no future" *End of quote*. What did he mean by 'a future'? Was it the political future of South Africa? Or a more spiritual future for those who grant forgiveness? That is to say, since it is concerning a Catholic priest, and also his relationship with his God and his eternal rest? He did not specify. Each of us will grant forgiveness according to their own feelings and the interpretation that suits them best.

The Christian saying the prayer "Our Father" implores God to help them with what they need:

- to sanctify his name
- to carry out his will
- to give them their daily bread
- to forgive the trespasses they have committed
- and finishes their prayer with a declaration of faith “**as** we forgive those who have trespassed against us.”

The word ‘**as**’ is important here, because they are forgiving those who have trespassed against them, not because they belong to the community of humankind, and as people we forgive others, but because it is part of their relationship with God, part of the teachings of Christ who said: “You will be perfect, **as** your celestial Father is perfect.”

“You will be merciful **as** the Father is merciful”
 “Love others **as** I have loved you.”

Is this religious idea thus a response to the concept of forgiveness, or does it not rather become part of the rationale of a Abrahamic tradition, common to all three religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity and Islam? It would therefore be associated with confession, repentance or regret, rather than forgiveness.

It follows, as a human being, forgiveness to another seems to me to actually be another thing completely.

Neither should we confuse forgiveness with a whole range of concepts such as: forgetting, time-limitations, leniency, amnesty, reconciliation, weakness and immunity. Neither should we confuse it with false pardons, so well explained in the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’, where some parents have confused adoption with forgiveness, by adopting the murderer of their daughter! That is obviously not about authentic forgiveness, but an especially dangerous unconscious transference. To preserve a link with a treasured being, one tries to find it, in the absence of anything else, by going as far as embracing the perpetrator of a crime.

We should not confuse genuine forgiveness with, if you’ll allow me to call it, a ‘transactional forgiveness’. A process in which forgiveness is only granted to derive a certain benefit. To make some kind of transaction, a good deal. Let us remember Corneille’s play in which Livie, the wife of the Emperor, encourages him to forgive Cinna with the sole aim of gaining favour and so that he then becomes a loyal defender of the Emperor. With the granting of such clemency, because that is what it is more about, Livie affirms her design at the end of the play, saying to the Emperor:

“After this deed you will have nothing to fear. From now on they will carry any burden without complaint, and even the most resistant will abandon their schemes and seek glory to die as one of your subjects.”

Let us also abandon the term “the forgiveness of surrender”, which according to the theological dictionary by Louis Bouyer, is the act of absolving those who have committed the crime.

Forgiveness, granted by one to another person is, I think, nothing of the kind.

So what do the philosophers think, who have studied this concept for many long months, coming at it from every angle? Seen from the in-depth nature of their analysis and to not betray their thinking, you can understand that I cannot just skim over their analysis!

What immediately comes to us is Jankélévitch, the incomparable philosopher of forgiveness. To summarise his thoughts in just a few sentences would be dangerous, and I will not attempt to do so. However I note that his analysis has evolved quite significantly over time.

In one of his first works, written before the Holocaust, which he himself calls 'a book of philosophy', he is quite open to the idea of absolute forgiveness. He claims that his inspiration for this is Jewish and even Christian. He speaks of the imperative of love, *and I quote*, "ethical hyperbole". And according to the analysis that Jacques Derrida has made of this philosophy, he says, "an ethic which goes beyond laws, rules and obligations. Ethics beyond ethics, there is perhaps, the unattainable source of forgiveness" *End of quote*.

Then, since the Holocaust, the ideas of Jankélévitch evolve in a significant way. When he talks about the possibility of pardon for the perpetrators of genocide, *I quote*: "If they had began to repent by seeking forgiveness, we should be able to consider granting it to them, but this was not the case." *End of quote*. He then points out that the uniqueness of the Holocaust reaches dimensions of the

unforgiveable. However, for the unforgiveable, no forgiveness is possible. At least no forgiveness that has any meaning, which makes any sense, because for Jankélévitch, forgiveness must have some meaning and provide salvation, reconciliation, redemption, atonement and even sacrifice. For him, the unforgiveable exists when one can no longer punish the perpetrator with a "punishment commensurate with the crime". He also says "irredeemable", the word used by Jacques Chirac on 16 July 1995, in his famous declaration on the responsibility of the French Vichy Government for crimes against the Jews: "That day, France committed the irredeemable." Unforgiveable or irredeemable? Jankélévitch concludes unforgiveable according to his now-famous argument, "Forgiveness died in the death camps."

As for the great Levinas, I do not wish to be an iconoclast, but allow me, with great respect, to be in some disagreement with him when he says, *and I quote*, "he can forgive the evil done to him, but for others he demands justice" *end of quote*. Let us make a small elucidation of the text. If, in the first part of his statement, he does not demand justice for the evil he has suffered, what he is saying in this case is that it can be forgiven. So, then it is not about forgiveness, but about leniency, as he absolves the perpetrator without seeking the justice of punishment.

Moreover, he follows the stance taken by Jankélévitch, thinking like him, that only the victims can forgive those who carried out the crimes. And as they are no longer here to be able to do so, forgiveness is beyond the realms of possibility."

As with Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, Jankélévitch thinks that one can imagine granting forgiveness if punishment is possible. Arendt says, "Punishment has this in common with forgiveness in that it attempts to put an end to something which, without any intervention, could go on indefinitely." Thus, in a way, punishment supports the long process of grief.

In keeping with the thoughts of Hannah Arendt, Jankélévitch, explains very clearly from his point of view *and I quote*, "There is the inexcusable, but there is nothing that is unforgivable. Forgiveness is there precisely to forgive what a thousand apologies cannot excuse, because there is no crime so evil that one cannot ultimately forgive." *End of quote*. So far so good. But he immediately adds, and this to my mind is a complete game changer, that it is crucial to be able to forgive if two conditions are met, and *I quote again*:

- "the angst and sleeplessness of the guilty person. His remorse and recognition of guilt and his plea for forgiveness"
- and there we come back to the previous problem as he can ONLY grant forgiveness IF these conditions are met !!

You will think, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends, that I am impossible, because with much humility again, I believe that the great Jankélévitch himself often confuses forgetting and forgiveness, especially when he writes, *and I quote*, "The past, like the dead, needs us. The past only exists to the extent we commemorate it. If we start to forget the militants in the ghetto, they will be obliterated again a second time. So we will speak of those who were murdered so they are not obliterated. We will remember them, as the Christians say, so they will not fall into the depths of obscurity, so they will never be swallowed up by the darkness. That is why 'survivors' can not forgive on behalf of those who have died." *End of quote*. Here, there is an undeniable confusion between forgetting and forgiveness.

Remember the end of a story told by Simon Wiesenthal of a young SS man at Lemberg. He was on his death bed and confessed his crimes against the Jews, pleading with Wiesenthal for forgiveness so he might die at peace with his conscience. He did not want to die before a Jew had forgiven him. Wiesenthal refused to grant him forgiveness. Wiesenthal remained haunted by his refusal, always asking himself the philosophical-religious question, "was I right or was I wrong to refuse to grant him my forgiveness?"

For several years Jacques Derrida has conducted seminars at the Sorbonne in which forgiveness and repentance have been central.

Derrida has a more nuanced position than Jankélévitch. I will summarise his philosophical position with some key ideas:

- firstly, whenever forgiveness is for reasons of 'closure', be it noble or spiritual, every time it is in an effort to establish normalcy. (For example between nations, as was the case with the repentance of Japan towards Korea, or between communities as in the repentance of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish community following the Holocaust.) In these cases forgiveness is not genuine. I quote Derrida, "Forgiveness is not, or should not, be either normal or normalising. It should remain exceptional and

out of the ordinary, and almost impossible, as if it were upsetting the usual course of events throughout the course of history.” *End of quote.*

- He also summarises the core of his thoughts on this subject with this excellent formula – “Yes, there are things that are unforgiveable.” He further explains, “there is only forgiveness, if there is any at all, where there is the unforgiveable.” ... as... “what would forgiveness be if we only forgave the forgivable.” (*End of quote*)
- For him, the legal concept of having no statute of limitations (concerning among others, the crimes against humanity) should not be confused with the non-legal concept of the unforgiveable. While maintaining the notion of a crime with no statute of limitations from prosecution, one can bring the perpetrators of these crimes to trail and apply a sentence whilst still granting forgiveness.
- He is opposed to one of Jankélévitch’s positions confirming that: “if one must only forgive those who repent that would be too easy, as one would therefore be forgiving someone other than the person who has committed the crime. One would be forgiving someone who has changed. On the contrary, in order for there to be forgiveness we must forgive both the crime and the guilty party such as they are.
- Finally, allow me to quote him once again, “Genuine forgiveness must be unconditional. And to have its own sense, it must make no sense, have no time limit, even to be incomprehensible. Forgiveness is the lunacy of the impossible.” *End of quote.*

So, as a quick overview, the reflections of a few of the great thinkers who have studied this concept in particular, whose challenges can be summarise thus: “is forgiveness part of human nature? And if it is, is it possible to grant one’s forgiveness to people who have committed crimes so terrible as to be called ‘crimes against humanity’?”

I have said to you, Ladies and Gentlemen, that in the third part of my talk, I would highlight certain events in my life which I hope will clarify for you what I personally think about forgiveness.

So the fateful moment has arrived, and now I seek your forgiveness before I relate these stories to you.

After the ‘death march’ which dramatically brought my time at Auschwitz to an end, I was liberated in Prague. I was then extremely ill and was looked after for many long weeks in the Boulovka Hospital, before being well enough to be taken back to France on a medical flight.

As soon as I could get out of bed, Vera, the nurse who was looking after me, made me go out for a walk with her around her city. As we ventured out, slowly, into the streets, we came to a bombed-out square. There were some German prisoners collecting the broken masonry that littered the square. The prisoners were naked from the waist up. It was the end of June 1945

and it was a hot day. I joined the bystanders who were watching the scene smiling, as they were now the victors. Then the guard who was supervising the prisoners saw me. With my still-shaven head, my skeletal frame, in my ill-fitting 'civvie' clothes borrowed from the hospital, it was pretty obvious that I had not just returned from a holiday at a beach-resort. So, perhaps the guard thought with the action he was about to carry out he would symbolically avenge all the victims of Nazism and somehow soothe my suffering ... he took off his belt and beat those poor guys. He looked straight at me as he did this, as if to say, "See, my boy, I am getting even for you, for all they did to you." Surprisingly I could not calmly watch this violence, it was unbearable. My eyes filled with tears, for reasons I couldn't explain at the time. I got out of there as fast as my still-weakened legs could carry me. I just felt like it was starting all over again. Sure, it was not the same prisoners, they were Germans. It was not the same guards, they were Allies. But the weapons were the same, even if they were not in the hands of the SS or the kapos. I had only just emerged from an ordeal where violence had reigned.

At the tender age of eighteen, I had become a fully-grown man, having learned in the camp what several lives back-to-back could not have taught me. But I was still a kid, with his illusions, his naivety, still understanding nothing of what is called a normal life. I believed that after the collapse of the insanity of Nazism, the world would be beautiful and harmonious. I thought it could not be otherwise, that the terrible beast was no longer. And then I saw that it was not. Furthermore, it was almost my fault that those prisoners were being beaten as their guard had done it, looking directly at me, as if he was speaking to me and he would not have done it if I had not been there.

Later on, once I had returned to France, I often replayed that scene, which is what I must call it. Sometimes an idea, or rather a nasty inner voice, whispered in my ear, "Why did you run away so quickly? Wasn't it good that those who had destroyed your family and had treated you like an animal, as a subhuman, should have their turn to suffer?" Every time, as soon as it came, I chased that thought away, as I found it monstrous. The "*it's their turn*" was unbearable to me. To see those German prisoners brutalised did not bring back the dead, my shattered family remained shattered.

As I have so often discussed, I then lived for forty years in silence about that which was Auschwitz. I tried, not to forget, because as Jankélévitch says, to forget would mean all the victims would die a second time. But I kept the day-to-day brutality of surviving in the camp in a hidden corner of my memory, so that I could lead the normal life of an ordinary man.

And then, 26 years ago, at the suggestion and affectionate insistence of one of our friends, a history teacher at a major senior high school in Paris, I started what I call my "Work of Remembrance" with school students. Like a companion of the Tour de France*, I took my

*Tour de France in this context describes a tradition in the Middle Ages when apprentice artisans would travel all around France to practise and improve their skills in their trades.

pilgrim's staff and with all I had learned in the camps, I went to the kids, in their classrooms, in the quest for a dialogue in which I tried to bring answers to all their many and varied questions. Each time one of them asked if I had forgiven my torturers, from the very beginning and without hesitation, I have always answered, yes I have. However, what I must now confess is, that for the last few

years, as I understand more of what forgiveness was for me, I thought my answer was stupid and baseless. How can I pardon history? It is absurd!! It was what it was, and nobody can change anything.

However, without understanding why, it was impossible for me to respond in any other way.

If I had had the comfort of being a believer, everything would have been clear and simple. In religious certainties I would have found the answers to my doubts, but I was not a believer!

Had I gone mad, since for Jacques Derrida, “the notion of forgiveness is a kind of madness.”

So I turned once again to the writers, the ones I have quoted, and despite feeling quite close to the ideas of some, like Jacques Derrida, I did not find satisfactory answers to my own questioning.

Neither to a kind of personal distress when faced with my certainty in having forgiven, when faced with neither knowing or understanding the nature of my forgiveness.

Is forgiveness in the realm of feeling rather than being explicable? In a realm where reason and logic cannot enter. And why, after all, is there not within human beings a realm that does not have a philosophical explanation? A place which would be ethically hyperbolic, which according to Jacques Derrida, as we have seen, is beyond laws and standards and why not philosophical laws as well?

According to Jankélévitch, it is only the victims themselves who can forgive. Can I not count myself as also a victim? The murder of my parents and my little sister, was that not also my murder?

Really, what can such forgiveness be and what does it cover, since to forgive is not to understand or to excuse. To understand would be to say that the crime had reached the level of a necessity, as a matter of rationality. It would provide justifications and thus reduce the culpability of the guilty.

Does forgiveness respond to this basic scenario “Whatever you may ask, I will forgive you for what you have done and we will leave it there.” Is that forgiveness? Of course not, it cannot be like that.

Is it thus, as Edgar Morin explains, to forgive is to allow the guilty to make amends. To forgive is to remain a human being. To forgive is to defy the cruelty of the world. To forgive is to break the eternal cycle of ‘revenge-punishment’.

No matter how important all they are, to forgive cannot ONLY be for those reasons.

Could it not instead be that to forgive, being a reflection of the heart, is in a way suppressing the bestiality within all of us. It allows us to be Human Beings, as we were when we came into this world, to become true Human Beings.

So, let us remain modest and humble when we talk about the responses of others and put aside those of our own reactions, let us not become, as Mahatma Gandhi said, both light and shadows at the same time. The darkness that can turn us into the brute if we let our guard down. Our vigilance is the main thing that will protect us from ourselves.

To forgive, as Paul Ricoeur believes, is to profoundly heal and soothe memory.

So, to symbolically lie down on the couch of all those with whom I have shared my story of the horror of Auschwitz. Those who have become my unsuspecting psychologists. Thanks to their attentiveness I have ended up finding real peace. And, despite the fact that I feel I will never be able to completely understand with any satisfaction why I am certain that I have can forgive, despite this kind of relative lack of satisfaction I live with, despite the conviction that in the end we must stop wanting, always wanting an explanation, I have tried, nevertheless to find, for myself, a rationale for genuine forgiveness. That which, beyond all reckoning, is given without thinking, without even realising one has granted it.

Thus without any certainty, as one always has doubts, I would say for me, to forgive is to have no hatred. Hatred which is the source of intolerance and fanaticism and breeds violence. To forgive is to be calm, to be at peace with oneself. To forgive is to not be overwhelmed by vengeance. It is to want no revenge. According to Edgar Morin it is break that eternal cycle of “revenge-punishment”.

To forgive is to give oneself a true gift, attempting to put oneself above the negative melee of men.

To forgive is so far away from weakness. It becomes a strength, as it is much easier to hate than to forgive those who have done you harm.

As far as I am concerned, forgiveness is the foundation of my resilience. Because to forgive means to finally get over the camps, to immerse oneself in a normal life with others.

To forgive the perpetrators of the unspeakable crimes of the Nazis is also to show them that we are no longer the victims, nor the sub-humans they would have wanted us to remain.

To forgive in the end, and what will be my conclusion, is bring to life the message of Mahatma Gandhi, “if you take an eye for an eye, the world will be blind”.

I thank you for your attention.

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