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# Memory and Forgiveness: Addressing the Legacy of the Dark Years in Contemporary French Politics

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July 2012 marked the seventieth anniversary of the Vél d'Hiv roundup—arguably one of the most painful chapters in France's modern history. On July 16 and 17, 1942, 13,152 Jews were rounded up by French police under German orders in the early morning hours and forcefully taken from their homes to both the Vélodrome d'Hiver, a winter cycling stadium in Paris, and to the Drancy internment camp. For five days, these men, women, and children—including the elderly, sick, expectant, and even newborns—were held in the most deplorable conditions, deprived of food, water and adequate toilets. They were ultimately deported to various Nazi concentration camps, from which most were never to return. The deportations occurred under the Vichy Regime of Marshall Philippe Pétain, which collaborated with Nazi Germany from July 1940 (following France's swift defeat by the Germans) through August 1944. In all, over 77,000 Jews were deported from France to Auschwitz and other death camps—of these around a third were French citizens and more than 8,000 were children under thirteen. By the end of the war, less than a quarter million remained of the 330,000 Jews living in France in June 1940.

Speaking at the anniversary of the Vél d'Hiv roundup on July 16, 1995, Jacques Chirac became the first president to publicly acknowledge the French Republic's shared responsibility in the persecution and deportation of Jews during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> In his speech, Chirac maintained that the errors committed during the war were a *faute collective* and thus the blame for the deportations had to be shouldered collectively by the French nation. Chirac's speech reconfigured the previous historical distinction made by most French politicians between the actions of the *illegitimate* Vichy government of wartime France and the separate, thereby *blameless*, entity of the Republic.

Où, la folie criminelle de l'occupant [l'Allemagne] a été secondée par des Français, par l'Etat français [...] La France, patrie des Lumières et des Droits de l'Homme, terre d'accueil et d'asile, la France, ce jour-là, accomplissait l'irréparable . . . Nous conservons à leur égard une dette imprescriptible [...] Cinquante ans après, fidèle à sa loi, mais sans esprit de haine ou de vengeance, la Communauté juive se souvient, et toute la France avec elle. Pour que vivent les six millions de martyrs de la Shoah. Pour que de telles atrocités ne se reproduisent jamais plus. Pour que le sang de l'holocauste devienne, selon le mot de Samuel Pizar, le 'sang de l'espoir'.<sup>2</sup>

Following Chirac's public apology and acknowledgement of collective national responsibility and complicity, a heated philosophical debate arose regarding the relationship between forgiveness and politics and the introduction of a third party. This article will explore the construct of forgiveness in relation to Jacques Derrida's aporia of forgiveness and the problematic of public apologies and requests for pardon when dealing with the distinction between forgiveness and imprescriptibility. By examining Derrida's deconstruction of the concept of forgiveness, I shall look at the relationship between forgiveness and politics in the context of Derrida's response to Vladimir Jankélévitch's essay, "Should We Pardon Them?"<sup>3</sup> In his essay, Jankélévitch presents an argument similar to that echoed in Chirac's speech—that if no punishment proportionate to a crime can be found, the crime remains indeed unforgivable. Opposing this notion of a necessary symmetry between punishing and forgiving, Derrida repeatedly calls for a serious reflection on the concept of forgiveness and the ways in which it has been employed in various historical and cultural contexts.

In order to elucidate further the complex and paradoxical concept of forgiveness, one must explore its genealogical history primarily through the work of Derrida. In the latter part of his life, Derrida analyzed several conceptual structures, including forgiveness, hospitality, the gift, and mourning, and uncovered many paradoxes and aporiae that will be relevant to this analysis of the contradictory nature of forgiveness. By exposing the duality of forgiveness and the inability to reconcile two opposing, yet inextricably linked prisms: unconditional forgiveness and a conditional variation of forgiveness—which often seeks an apology—Derrida sheds light on the problematic and conflicted nature of public apologies and requests for pardon as well as the important distinctions that must be made between imprescriptibility and forgiveness.

The distinction that Derrida makes between the two types of forgiveness, pure, *unconditional* forgiveness that forgives the unforgivable without conditions and *conditional* forgiveness, serves to reaffirm the dissociable relationship between these two poles (*Questioning God* 45). Any manifestation of forgiveness transforms essentially unconditional possibilities into conditional ones, and so the unconditional or purely conceptual cannot be approached apart from its historical manifestation. The conditional and the unconditional are two sharply separate yet corollary meanings of forgiveness. Conditional forgiveness belongs to the order of law and politics, of pragmatic negotiations and calculable debts. Unconditional forgiveness cannot be reconciled with law and politics because it allows no pragmatic negotiations or equal exchange (*Questioning God* 144). This doubling means that pure forgiveness remains impossible, and it is the thought of the possibility of the impossible that Derrida demonstrates.

Before we go any further, it is important to look at this internal contradiction that resides within the notion of forgiveness. The aporia that stands at the heart of forgiveness is a much more elusive and complex ideological construct that must be broken down in order to truly begin to understand the underlying structure of forgiveness. According to Derrida, forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself (*On Cosmopolitanism* 33). This very possibility of the impossible is what will be specifically explored throughout this analysis. In *On Forgiveness*, Derrida states that:

[. . .] each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normalcy (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of the memory, then the 'forgiveness' is not pure [. . .]. There is always a strategic or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty [. . .]. As soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense. (31-32, 40,42)

Thus, Chirac's public apology on behalf of the French state would open the door for reconciliation and healing, but not pure forgiveness, strictly speaking. For Derrida, a public apology, recognition of a crime, and so forth all cast the event into the economy of exchange, thus dissolving its purity with an unavoidable set of conditions placed upon the act of forgiveness itself.

Vladimir Jankélévitch explicitly places such a condition on forgiveness by arguing that forgiveness cannot come without the perpetrator “giving” back to the victim by admitting responsibility for the crime committed. He sites this dual exchange (the victim’s expression of a need for an apology from the perpetrator and an admission of guilt by the perpetrator to the victim) as necessary in order for the possibility of forgiveness to occur; however, even if there had been a public apology by the Germans, he still leaves it up to the victims to forgive—impossible since the absolute victims perished in Auschwitz and other camps. Thus he says that forgiveness/pardoning died in the death camps (*Should We Pardon Them?* 567). Nobody, no political official, no relative of a survivor, not even someone who survived the camps, can forgive the Nazis:

[I]t is for the victims to pardon. What qualifies the survivors to pardon in the place of the victims or in the name of their relatives, their families? No, it is not our place to pardon on behalf of the little children whom the brutes tortured to amuse themselves. The little children must pardon them themselves. While we turn to the brutes, and to the friends of the brutes, and tell them, Ask the little children to pardon you yourselves. (569)

In Jankélévitch’s essay “Should We Pardon Them?” he passionately and forcefully argues that the atrocious deeds committed by the Germans during the Holocaust are unforgivable—the product of pure wickedness outside of any human scale of measurement. They are crimes against humanity, against the very essence of a human—imprescriptible and thus outside of temporality. Written in the context of the 1964 debates about the imprescriptibility of Hitler’s crimes and the concept of crimes against humanity, Jankélévitch argues that the infinite horror and evil of the acts committed by the Germans render them irreparable and inexpiable—therefore, unforgivable. This essay deviates from his first book, *Le Pardon* (1967), in which Jankélévitch expressed a powerful philosophical treatment of a forgiveness that is infinite, endless and ongoing.

Conversely, in “Should We Pardon Them?” Jankélévitch argues that the history of forgiveness ended with the event of the Shoah. He reaffirms the singularity of the Shoah by making the distinction between an “atrociousness of war” (like Hiroshima) and a “work of hatred” (pure, calculated, incomparable evil like the Shoah) (561). Auschwitz was “directed, methodical, and selective” (563). A Jew did “not have the right ‘to be’ for his sin was to exist” and thus the crime of being a Jew was “inexpiable” (563, 555–556).

A crime that surpasses any human measure or proportion is thus unforgivable following this logic.

In his analysis, Jankélévitch takes two things as given: first, forgiveness must rest on a human possibility, and second, this human possibility is the correlate to the possibility of punishment. Thus, in order for forgiveness to occur, there needs to be a symmetry between punishment and forgiving—impossible in the case of a crime that is inexpiable. “There are no damages that can compensate for the execution of six million; there are no reparations for the irreparable,” Jankélévitch concludes (571). He goes on to argue that forgiveness must have a meaning attached to it—since the criminals did not recognize their fault nor manifest any degree of repentance, there is no meaning and thus forgiveness cannot be granted: “To pardon! But who ever asked us for a pardon? It is only the distress and the dereliction of the guilty that would make a pardon sensible and right [. . .] To presume to be pardoned, one must admit to being guilty, without conditions or alleging extenuating circumstances” (567).

Derrida agrees with Jankélévitch that forgiveness is impossible, but sees this very impossibility as the heart of the aporia of forgiveness. Derrida pushes Jankélévitch’s argument further by challenging us to move outside the conceptual comfort zone and imagine a forgiveness that defies all logic and historical boundaries: “Jankélévitch says that forgiveness has come to an end, died in the death camps. I oppose this. It is exactly the opposite. It is because forgiveness seems to become impossible that forgiveness finds a starting point, a new starting-point” (*Questioning God* 55). Forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. If it is already possible, then pure forgiveness will not occur—only a conditional forgiveness, which is not true forgiveness. According to Derrida, in order for pure unconditional forgiveness to have meaning, there must be no meaning, no finality, nor even any intelligibility (*On Cosmopolitanism* 45).

As noted earlier, pure forgiveness must be an ongoing process with no attempt at establishing any type of finality or normalcy: “If when I forgive, the wrongdoing, the injury, the wound, the offense become forgivable because I’ve forgiven, then it’s over; there’s no forgiveness anymore. The unforgivable must remain unforgivable in forgiveness, the impossibility of forgiving must continue to haunt forgiveness” (Derrida *A Certain Impossible Possibility* 452–453). By asking for an apology, as Jankélévitch does, forgiveness, therefore, loses its meaning in the absolute and sets a condition between giving and receiving. As Derrida says, forgiveness “must be a gracious gift, without exchange and without condition” (*On*

*Cosmopolitanism* 44). When one asks for an apology and asks for the guilty to identify themselves as so, a process of normalization is established and thus only conditional forgiveness is possible. Whereas Jankélévitch argues that those responsible for the Shoah cannot be forgiven because they have not asked for forgiveness, Derrida points out that the process of repentance and admission of guilt always transforms the “guilty” person into something other than their original state when the crime took place. Thus one can never forgive the person who committed the misdeed since they inevitably become a different person after going through the process of repenting.

This is, by no means, an easy concept for people to grasp. The process of forgiveness that Derrida envisions requires that people confront and accept the indissociability of these two poles of forgiveness. One is asked to take responsibility, a difficult responsibility, to negotiate the best response in an impossible situation (*Questioning God* 58). It becomes a task without an end—a limitless process, a redefinition of our ontological “heritage”, a web of contradictions, an unconditionality made possible, and therefore impossible, through this indissociability.

Let us turn now to this heritage of which Derrida speaks in order to further examine its implications for the political dimension of forgiveness. To understand forgiveness as a political concept, Derrida says that we must examine the genealogical meaning and character of forgiveness through a thorough deconstruction of its conceptual and historical basis. He points to the role that religion—specifically the combination of Judaism, the Christianities and the Islams—has played in the production of discourses on forgiveness. These religious discourses, referred to by Derrida as “Abrahamic” are rooted in the notion of forgiveness leading to the possibility of expiation. This religious foundation has been modified and expanded by several political discourses and has manifested in various political leaders and high profile figures asking for forgiveness on behalf of “guilty” parties. The relationship between forgiveness and this Abrahamic religious heritage has led to, what Derrida calls, a certain “theatre of forgiveness” in which “the very dimension of forgiveness tends to efface itself” (*On Cosmopolitanism* 28). When third parties—like the government or a mediator—intervene, this act of seeking/asking for forgiveness, pardon, redemption, or salvation becomes intertwined with the desire for recognition, payment in the figurative sense, and erasure of debt.

This performative event of the public apology/repentance loses its purity for it absolves the radically singular confrontation between self and other that Derrida believes pure forgiveness requires. The truth proclaimed

by Chirac has from now on the status, that is, both the stability and the authority, of a public, national, and international truth (*Without Alibi* 46). By declaring a historical truth of state in the form of a public apology and thus recognizing the act of transgression itself, Chirac unavoidably ties forgiveness to the order of law and politic and infuses it with a meaning and temporal place of existence.

By apologizing for those in the Vichy government who committed crimes against the Jews, a process of reconciliation—not forgiveness—is generated. As David H. Strassler, Anti-Defamation League (ADL) national chairman, and Abraham H. Foxman, ADL national director, wrote in the immediate aftermath of Chirac's speech, "Your unqualified message to the French people and the world that France must share the burden of the responsibility has been long overdue." Former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin echoed this sentiment: "In the name of the Jewish people and the state of Israel, I voice my thanks to you [Chirac] for the historical position you have taken [. . .]. Your words, acknowledging the responsibility of the French state, bear witness that France is a country of freedom and human rights."<sup>4</sup>

This "exchange" which takes place with Chirac's public apology and acceptance of responsibility for the past crimes of the French state is precisely what Derrida is referring to when he sights the need for a private form of forgiveness that requires nothing from the guilty party. By identifying the crime, it loses its meaning and enters into this economy of exchange in which pure forgiveness becomes tainted. Through this attempt at normalization and closure via the entrance of a third party, the victim loses his/her agency as well as his/her right to choose whether to forgive or not to forgive.

Forgiveness in this contemporary arena of "globalatinisation" (Derrida's play on the overused term of globalization) becomes a tool of normalizing and closure—a means of finality. It is in this relationship with normality that Derrida sees a contradiction: "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 [. . .] Forgiveness is mad, and [. . .] it must remain a madness of the impossible [. . .]" (*On Cosmopolitanism* 32, 39; emphasis in the original). Pure forgiveness is not a regulating apparatus to be used for restoring order and normalcy. There should be no purpose, no exchange, no debt, and no calculations. Forgiveness must arrive out of sheer "madness" and impossibility by rejecting any conditionality.



The enigmatic concept of forgiveness remains a historically abused and misused political tool that is often employed as a means of political and personal advancement and power. Forgiveness, in the case of a third party apology like that of Chirac (even if the intention behind it is “noble” and “good”), denies the victim of the right to speech—the right to choose to forgive or not. According to Derrida, forgiveness must engage two parties: the guilty (perpetrator) and the victim (self and other). If a third party intervenes, like a commission or government, pure forgiveness is no longer possible since it has now become a conditional forgiveness in which a “meaning” has been established. Pure forgiveness remains separate from tertiary institutions—they do not have the right or power to grant forgiveness since it remains “heterogeneous to the order of politics or of the juridical as they are ordinarily understood” (*On Cosmopolitanism* 39). With the insertion of a mediating party, the transgression at stake enters into an economy of forgiveness as power and debt instill meaning.

This practical, political demand for peace and reconciliation—though it effaces pure forgiveness in the strict sense—nevertheless, leaves Derrida torn (*partagé*) between the division and yet inescapable linkage of ethics and politics: “I remain ‘torn’ (between a ‘hyperbolic’ ethical vision of forgiveness, pure forgiveness, and the reality of a society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation). But without power, desire, or need to decide. The two poles are irreducible to one another, certainly, but they remain indissociable” (*On Cosmopolitanism* 51). Hence, pure forgiveness remains inseparable from the realm of conditionality since, in order to “arrive,” pure forgiveness must engage in a series of conditions, be it social, psychological, and so forth. According to Derrida, it is between these two poles that decisions and responsibilities should take place in the realization of his vision of a “forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty” (*On Cosmopolitanism* 59).

The territory of forgiveness goes beyond the realm of history, politics and law and thus remains outside the structure of the sovereign. Pure forgiveness stands outside the religious, social, and political boundaries imposed on it by its heritage. It belongs to the realm of the impossible, the incalculable, and the immeasurable. Like the coming of the event, forgiveness must appear as a surprise and “must never be something that is predicted or planned, or even really decided upon” (*A Certain Impossible Possibility* 441). In this case, only a conditional forgiveness is presented.

Through a closer analysis of Derrida’s exploration of the aporia of forgiveness, I have attempted to establish an open-ended dialogue

surrounding the deceptively simple, yet infinitely complex utterance, “I forgive you,” and how this can affect the shifts in French memory transformations concerning the Second World War. By commencing with the “event” of Chirac’s public apology and admission of responsibility on behalf of the French state for the deeds committed during the Shoah more than fifty years prior, it is my aim to contrast this prevailing politically limited doctrine of forgiveness with Derrida’s notion of pure, unconditional forgiveness. Entering the realm of illogicality and ambiguity that Derrida invokes can be difficult, as many people strive to keep a certain false sense of order and purpose in the face of ambiguity.

What does this mean for the process of reconciliation? Derrida ultimately demonstrates to us that the “gift” of forgiveness is a sheer “madness of the impossible” that only the victim can arrive at. By doing the impossible, it becomes possible. Whether to truly forgive or not remains a decision that the victim must make. No one else can forgive—that means no head of State, no members of the Church, and so forth. No matter how much an apology/public recognition by the French state of the crimes committed under the Vichy government were asked for; no matter how much Chirac was praised for his public confession and admission of the collective guilt of France; and no matter how much this apology helped contribute to the difficult healing and reconciliation process of the survivors and the emotionally afflicted, pure forgiveness still remains impossible. But, it is within this possibility of doing the impossible that the *aporia* of forgiveness rests.

## Notes

1. For a transcript of the entire speech, see <http://fresques.ina.fr/jalons/fiche-media/InaEdu01248/discours-de-jacques-chirac-sur-la-responsabilite-de-vichy-dans-la-deportation-1995.html>.

2. Because of its religious origins, there has been considerable debate among English speakers on the use of the term Holocaust (originating from the ancient Greek) to describe the Nazi campaign of genocide against the Jews, since it gained common use in the mid-1950s. In ancient times, the priests of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem offered animal sacrifices to God in a ritual whose name is translated in Greek as *asholokauston*, which means, “wholly burned.” Thus with this religious connotation, the Jews during World War II became a sacrifice offered up to God by the Nazis. As a result, the Hebrew word *shoah* (meaning “ruin” or “destruction”) is often preferred. I will be using Shoah throughout this article.

3. First published as “Pardonner?” in Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L’Imprescriptible*, 1986.

4. See “Israel Thanks France for Admitting Role in Round-Up of Jews.” *Agence France Press*, July 18, 1995.

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