

Philosophers on forgiveness

Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-1983)

[Jankélévitch says we do not forgive someone because they do not know what they do (because then they are innocent and there's nothing to forgive), not because they didn't mean it (again, they're innocent), not for myself to eliminate resentment and to let go (but then it's self-interested, not really forgiving), not to create harmony (but then it's not forgiveness but simply a tool for making the situation better).] Instead, "the person who forgives forgives the guilty person because of the misdeed and loves the guilty person despite this misdeed" (Forgiveness, 144).

Forgiveness is "**love** as a spontaneity" and is "truly a **grace** accorded to the sinner of this sin." (Forgiveness, 143).

"Love for the wicked person is quite simply love of the man himself" (143). "[M]y love is addressed ...to the naked **ipseity** [selfness, singularity] of his person in general" (Forgiveness, 143)

"Not only is it not because the accused is innocent that forgiveness forgives him (rendering forgiveness superfluous), rather it is much more because forgiveness forgives that the guilty person becomes innocent." (Forgiveness, 145)

"forgiveness...**returning Good for Evil**" (Forgiveness, 142)

Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995)

"Judaism bears the magnificent message that remorse--the painful expression of a radical impotence to repair the irreparable--announces the repentance that generates the pardon that repairs. Man finds in the present the wherewithal to modify the past, to erase it. Time loses its irreversibility. Time, exasperated, collapses at man's feet like a wounded animal. And liberates him." ("Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," 1934, in Unforeseen History, 14)

[Interpreting the story of Rav and the butcher] "But Rav ignores the advice of his pupil. He finds the slaughterer at his professional occupation. He is seated and hammering an ox head. He nevertheless raises his eyes to insult once again the person coming humbly toward him. "Go away, Abba. I have nothing in common with you." The expression is marvelously precise and underlines one of the essential aspects of the situation. Mankind is spread out on different levels. It is made up of multiple worlds that are closed to one another because of their unequal heights. Men do not yet form one humanity. As the slaughterer keeps strictly to his level, he keeps on hammering the head; suddenly a bone beaks loose from it and kills him. It is certainly not of a miracle that the story wants to tell us but of this death within the systems in which humanity closes itself off. It also wants to speak to us of the purity which can kill in a mankind as yet

unequally evolved, and of the enormity of the responsibility which Ran took upon himself in his feature confidence in the humanity of the Other." "Toward the Other," 1965 [1963], in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 23.

Hannah Arendt (1906-1975)

"The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility--of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing--is the faculty of forgiving. ...forgiving serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose 'sins' hang like Damocles' sword over every new generation." (*The Human Condition*, 237)

"Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell." (*The Human Condition*, 237)

Jacob Taubes (1923-1987)

"Now it is my thesis that the Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, whose status in the Jewish calendar is the same as your Christmas, translates this controversy between God and Moses into ritual. The day itself forgives. It says in the Talmud: ha-yom mekhaper. Not everything, but it does forgive; it has the power of atonement." *The Political Theology of Paul*, 32

"God who loves man both before and after his sin, God whom man, in his need, may reproach, asking why he has forsaken him, God who is merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, who keeps his mercy unto the thousandth generation, who forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, and has mercy on him who returns. So that man to whom the divine countenance thus leaned bursts out into the exultant profession: this God of love, he alone is God!" Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) quoted by Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 36

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)

"Two Jews, long-standing enemies, meet at the synagogue on the Day of the Great Atonement. One says to the other [by way of forgiveness], "I wish you what you wish me." And the other replies, giving tit for tat, "See, you're doing it again." (Sarah Kofman's quotation of Theodore Reik quoted by Derrida in ".....," in *The Work of Mourning*, 184)

"what these two Jews come to experience and what makes us laugh is indeed the radical impossibility of forgiveness" (".....," in *The Work of Mourning*, 185)

"Nothing is given in advance for an act of forgiveness, no rule, no criterion, no norm. It is the chaos at the origin of the world." (".....," in *The Work of Mourning*, 188)