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Rough Cuts: Refusal, Negation and Ineffability

Keywords

apology, forgiveness, Freud, Jankélévitch, ineffability, negation, refusal

Abstract

Vladimir Jankélévitch allows us to rethink the relation between negation and refusal as a rift where one is confronted by the repetition of *givenness* and where refusal upends negation by turning the object being refused into an ineffable question. Here we turn to Freud as a reader of Jankélévitch's refusal of German culture in order to consider his procedure of radical exclusion as a matter of idealistic temperament marking a transition from knowledge as "knowing how things are" to a different proposition which cultivates knowing "how things should be."

Grobi rezi: zavračanje, negacija in neizrekljivost

Ključne besede

opravičilo, odpuščanje, Freud, Jankélévitch, neizrekljivost, negacija, zavrnitev

Povzetek

Vladimir Jankélévitch nam omogoči, da ponovno premislimo razmerje med negacijo in zavrnitvijo kot razpoko, v kateri se soočimo s ponavljanjem *danosti* in v kateri zavrnitev prevrne negacijo, saj zavračani predmet spremeni v neizrekljivo vprašanje. Tu se obračamo k Freudu kot bralcu Jankélévitchove zavrnitve nemške kulture, da bi njegov postopek radikalne izključitve obravnavali kot stvar idealističnega temperamenta, ki označuje prehod od vednosti kot »vednosti, kako stvari so«, k drugačni propoziciji, ki goji vednost, »kako bi stvari morale biti«.

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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.
 —Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Should We Pardon Them?*

Vladimir Jankélévitch's idealism calls for a rational, ethical yet passionate temperament in the pursuit of the ineffable as a form of knowledge rather than lofty indulgence. The more one reads Jankélévitch, the more one realises that there *are* some fantasies worth fighting for, even those irreconcilable contradictions which haunt us. What Jankélévitch offers is a method in which one can be discerning regarding which fantasies are worthwhile. This is what distinguishes his independent intellectual trajectory, something he achieves through variations in his thought which gradually shift him away from his mentor, Henri Bergson.

Jankélévitch is usually read along humanist and deconstructionist lines; however, one cannot avoid his ongoing intellectual trauma in facing what it means to be a Jewish thinker. Therefore, in pondering Jankélévitch's position on refusal we should not, however questionably, separate the thinker from their thought, not least because such separation merely serves to fantasise the task of thinking as beyond both divided subjectivity and moreover, the thinker as master of this fantasy of wholeness. Furthermore, the thinker needs to be accountable for their thoughts. In addition to being a philosopher, Jankélévitch was also a dedicated composer and musicologist who positioned himself in the gap of the non-relation between the two fields which, although not cut from the same cloth, have something to offer one another. Here, the Jankélévitchian spirit deftly holds the reins to one's competing passions—a lesson for thinkers and creatives alike.

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While it has been posited that Jankélévitch's refusal of all things German is what marks his later work, I suggest that rather what here marks his eventual refusal of the *given* as a logical precept is his "intuitive knowing," which paradoxically embraces both stoicism and vulnerability. We might even say that he

treats the *given* as to some extent a fantasy which attempts to obfuscate the ineffable as intrinsic to knowledge, or at least to an “intuitive know-how.”

The trajectory of Jankélévitch’s idealism moves from *knowing how things are* to *knowing how things should be* and is therefore in part necessarily negation. His hyper-ethical position is that of the intellectual—one practices what one preaches as much as one can, all the while knowing that one may be acting in the name of its opposite. Here, such fidelity to act complicates Jankélévitch’s maxim when it comes to his “radical exclusion” of German culture¹ because this would seem to refuse what has always been a given in German intellectual culture, namely thinking itself.

Before getting into why and how Jankélévitch embraced refusal it is helpful first to conceptualise negation and refusal and how these are distinctive for him. He did not make such clear distinctions himself; the conceptualisation of these terms is therefore up to us, for which we have no option but to employ those very dialectical thinkers his positions actively refuse without losing sight of his will towards refusal. Thus the task of marking the trajectory of Jankélévitch’s thought is an atemporal process which is always intentionally out of time and slightly out of tune with the present. Nevertheless, this recursive manoeuvre remains true to his stoic refusal of German culture post Holocaust.² Furthermore, it leaves a space for the intellectual courage required in order to contemplate the ineffable.

In understanding Jankélévitch’s paradoxical refusal it is important to appreciate his background. He was born of Russian Jewish immigrants and went on to be a member of the French Resistance during World War II. Following the discovery of the Nazi extermination camps, Jankélévitch systematically removed from his work any reference to German art, thinking, and music, maintaining that the Nazis, together with all Germans, are never to be forgiven for the Holocaust. He maintained this protest against Germany and its culture consistently

¹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, “Should We Pardon Them?,” trans. Ann Hobart, *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 552–72, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448807>.

² I thank Rebecca Rose for here reminding me of Penelope, the Greek mythological figure whose courageous, repeated refusal of potential lovers in her husband’s absence and likely death during the Trojan War can be considered an ethical push-back against both social expectation and libidinal desire.

for the remainder of his life and has been much criticised for this radical and partisan position. Yet in 1948 he started publishing influential texts on the possibility of forgiveness as he felt duty-bound to scrutinise his refusal. In this he was meticulous. Although forgiveness held either no or perhaps too much meaning for him at the time, it was not ruled out as a possibility for the future: forgiveness might arise, but he surely was not counting on it because he could not imagine a scenario in which this could be possible. Then, twenty-three years after his initial texts on forgiveness, he stated that forgiveness was actually impossible and moreover should be actively refused. He even called such an act of forgiveness immoral because firstly it is impossible (along with immoral) and secondly, it does not take into consideration the will of the guilty. At this point we can refocus on the distinction between Jankélévitch's positions on negation and refusal as specific speech acts.

We generally think of negation as emanating from the contradiction or denial of something in order to make more apparent its absence. Freud puts it well when he says of negation that, "the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness on condition that it is negated."³ For Lacan trauma is characterised as traumatic via three distinctive features: the event itself, its affective baggage and its lack of complete "speakability." This entails that trauma is understood as both a psychic reality and inscription in which ordinary identifications are not wholly stabilised.

Negation reveals repression in partially lifting it. But the act of negation does not follow that any consciousness of what has been repressed entails an acceptance of it. Here, negation offers a strange certainty that there is nothing being asked in the revealing of repression, merely something, that which is left over, being repeated.⁴ Thus negation can never be a "no" proper. Refusal, on the oth-

³ To differentiate, in German *verneinen* means "to negate" and *verleugnen* means "to deny." It is worth reading on this point in Freud's "The Infantile Genital Organization: An Interpolation into the Theory of Sexuality (1923)," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 19:143.

⁴ While Freud provided the logic of the traumatic encounter in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (trans. James Strachey [New York: W. W. Norton, 1990]), Lacan furthered the effect of trauma as a specific compulsion one is driven to repeat. See Jacques Lacan, *On a Discourse that Might not be a Semblance*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).

er hand, preserves the matter at issue in order to present doubt through excess of meaning and *jouissance*. It preserves the neurotic fantasy whilst at the same time enjoying the transgression when confronted with the law of the Other.

Here we might say that Jankélévitch's refusal of German history and culture serves to make the necessity of them more apparent in, and relevant to his later work. He does not disagree that the function of refusal is to provoke and wrestle with the ambiguities of dealing with the trauma of the Real. For him war and killing invade the field of the Symbolic Order by providing ways in which objects are captured and integrated, mediated and justified into the formation of meaning. However, for Jankélévitch this is highly problematic because the justification for killing is often propped up by opaque and undifferentiated meanings that appeal signifiers such as divine violence or holy war. To this extent Jankélévitch is refusing a particular chain of signification; he is maintaining that one should not even linguistically create an opportunity to derive meaning from what is beyond meaning. We could even say that for Jankélévitch attributing meaning to war is delusional. After all, although killing as an act of co-optation forms part of Jankélévitch's critique, it also speaks to the dimension of the significant other as one which is also beyond comprehension. If the social bond means that one is capable of meeting the demands of everyday life, then co-optive killing is an act way beyond this.

When Jankélévitch says in his meditation on bad conscience that "moral consciousness does not exist," he is rather pointing towards the crisis of moral consciousness which occurs in the wake of contemplating its non-existence, even that there is joy in lamenting its loss. This is a typical Jankélévitchian manoeuvre whose end result is what Lacanians term *jouissance*. Jankélévitch asserts that for the Holocaust there can be no such thing as a sincere apology; any apology, when uttered, is meaningless, because once it is uttered it has already occurred or perhaps did not occur. For Jankélévitch one should already feel sorry before an apology can be signalled or articulated into the Symbolic of the social bond. Therefore, the apology, being now redundant should be either refused or treated with indifference. There is an amusing anecdote where a student at the Sorbonne arrives late for one of Jankélévitch's classes. Upon arrival the student apologises profusely to which Jankélévitch somewhat light-heartedly dismisses the apology, saying that the student chose to be late. For Jankélévitch since the lecture was already in progress regardless of the student's lateness, the stu-

dent's apology is irrelevant and not therefore subject to judgement (although Jankélévitch did facetiously say he forgave him!). For Jankélévitch, apology is not contingent on forgiveness. From a Freudian perspective, to negate is to exercise an intellectual judgement through having inserted what is negated into the judgement—this is precisely Jankélévitch's melancholic ethic. For Freud the function of judgement is concerned with two sorts of decisions; it affirms or disaffirms the possession of an attribute and it either asserts or disputes that the presentation of this attribute implies its existence.⁵ The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Yet, for Jankélévitch, there is always an intuition associated with judgement, an irrational quality underpinning rational judgement. Trying every which way, in the end one can only accept the destitution from the object rather than refuse it completely. Hence the Nazis cannot be negated whereas the Germans can be refused. Here, we can identify the subjectivity which inserts a gap in the rules and authority of the Symbolic.

It is important to note that Jankélévitch points out what is for him the ontological impossibility of negation since it breaks with *coincidentia oppositorum*, the unity of opposites which situate tension and release in a boundless field of force. As a literal example, Hippolytus states that “the road up and the road down are the same thing,”⁶ meaning that regardless of the direction one travels the road itself remains that same. Similarly, if we say that fire is hot and water is cold, we are nevertheless acknowledging that in so far as both belong to the field of the four elements both must also contain sameness as well as difference as a basis for change and transformation: for example, ice can melt in the sun. Or as Heraclitus says, “cold things become warm, and what is warm cools; what is wet dries, and the parched is moistened.”⁷ Here we have the contradiction of opposites used to reveal the oneness or unity of things previously believed to be different. This oneness and its circularity provide the unity principal to the very existence of any opposite: “And it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted and become the

⁵ See discussion in Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes (1915),” in *Standard Edition*, 14:136. Freud took up the question of judgement in the first chapter of “Civilization and its Discontents,” in *Standard Edition*, 21: 57–146.

⁶ Heraclitus, frag. 60 Diels-Kranz; quoted in Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 9.10.4.

⁷ Heraclitus, frag. 126 Diels-Kranz.

latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former.”⁸ One’s identity (whether singular or communal) is a contra-posing principal necessitating the Other which is however, simultaneously negated: in other words we are subjects only in so far as we subsume the phantasmatic status of the Other as intrinsic to our subjectivity. The criteria for what is opposite is therefore an *a priori* encounter with its oppositional force.

What sets Jankélévitch apart in his position on fields of force is that for him there is a distinction between the expression/elucidation of an idea and its ability to be possible both as a liveable idea and one which speaks to his conception of ineffability: that thinking must include affect because it directly implicates the ineffable. Any idea—for example, forgiveness—must necessarily remain a possible idea of fantasy which is not always fully realised. For Jankélévitch, it isn’t so much that something is now believed to be different from what it once was, but rather that it must be different now because of the intervening to-ing and fro-ing of repetition. With every cycle of repetition, some gesture of difference becomes more apparent in hinting at its own (im)possibility. Thus, if one takes up a personal idealistic position then one must at the same time contend with the opposite which is not living up to this. Here, one cannot simply be acting out a libidinal fantasy, because to be in the world one must also be contending with its contradictions and impossibilities.

In this way we can think of Jankélévitch’s ontology of refusal as distinct from that of negation. Refusal is an act of idealism where judgement is put on the line, where something unutterable must be at stake in the name of postulating that it is ineffable. Refusal is not indifference, nor a position of repetition (in) difference, as Deleuze might have us think.⁹ Rather, refusal is a moment in time when one participates in the knowledge one has beyond the mere repetition of it. If we return to the thinker/thought dichotomy, Jankélévitch is similar to

⁸ Heraclitus, frag. 88 Diels-Kranz.

⁹ I refer here to Deleuze’s thinking on representation, specifically in *Difference and Repetition*, in which he conceptualises difference as *in* itself and repetition as *for* itself, wherein both cannot be not tied to any given identity. He elaborates that the ontological status of repetition is best understood as “difference without a concept” and thus repetition is reliant upon difference. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 13.

Paul Ricoeur¹⁰ and Jacques Derrida¹¹ who also maintain that the subject cannot be separated from their thinking. By contrast, negation is the absorption of the uttered “no” in a wish fulfilment of complete knowledge. Here, Jankélévitch is often read alongside Emmanuel Levinas who suggests that for the other to be the Other means it cannot be subject to some form of relation because it is absolutely Other, a radical alterity. However, Jankélévitch stops short of this position, because in his ontology one is subsumed via negation into the radical alterity of the Other as an ineffable circumstance within the traumatic event which cannot be spoken about. We might say that the too-much-ness of the event deliberately flouts the rules of taking up refusal, which is precisely what Jankélévitch avows as his hyper-ethical position.

It is important to include in Jankélévitch’s impossible Other not only the Nazis but also the collective bodies of dead Jews, in order to present a unified object of overwhelming anxiety. This ineffable image is an encounter, on the borderline of the Symbolic and the Real, with resignation to one’s ultimate fate. We will die but death itself falls within a strangely ambiguous context of both tolerable and intolerable negation. Although he never said as much Jankélévitch had no time for fantasised collective mourning which he likely thought of as mere romantic resignation. But we can say that for him the uncanniness of death keeps alive the relation of the subject with the fantasy of the body. Perhaps part of Jankélévitch’s ethical re-authorship is to privilege the voiceless dead alongside the body which he shares with them.

Jankélévitch’s ethical subject is a profound reduction who, in living out an impossible relation to the Other in the face of the Other, is nevertheless guaran-

¹⁰ Specifically, Ricoeur’s passionate plea for what is possible in/as thought as an act of mutual recognition. In his *Memory, History, Forgetting*, he commences his text citing Jankélévitch as one who understands how memory of present is also something absent and lingering in the past: “He who has been, from then on cannot not have been: henceforth this mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been is his viaticum for all eternity.” Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), epigraph.

¹¹ Inverting Deleuze, Derrida privileges identity over *différance* as a metaphysics of presence in that differences are always located as in between identities. *Différance* refers to a spatiality, a space which is deferred and thus differentiated and from which “immediacy is derived.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 157.

teed maintenance of subjective refusal. However, that the Other is absolutely Other means that the impossibility of the relation to it is also absolute, which is at the same time both reassuring and problematic. Since the impossible cannot be thought outside present possibilities, it cannot be an ontological question beyond the linguistic turn. That nothing can supplement the existence of the impossible is because it cannot be conceived of. The most difficult challenge for thinking is the absence of a signifier on which to hinge a fantasy. Thus, Jankélévitch employs a signifier in order to refuse: the Nazis are never to be forgiven. We should refuse to forgive them regardless of whether or not forgiveness is requested. This is the kernel of Jankélévitch's refusal; it must transcend time and risk oblivion to emerge as an eventual given. On the other hand, for Jankélévitch negation takes place as a response to or promise of the inevitability of a given. The key thing here is this notion that there exists that which cannot be thought. For Jankélévitch this is the horror of the Holocaust which, being just too traumatic, exists in the realm of the ineffable where it should remain. Here we can say that through Jankélévitch's intuitive knowing, he is making a specific judgement.

In contrast to this position, for Alain Badiou, there is no ineffable preventing us from arriving at knowing what we do not. Rather, it is those concrete conditions which plug up the space of the ineffable. According to Badiou, the real predicate of an ethics of the Other is not the ineffable but interventionist truth which occurs in the domain of thought. Yet might not Badiou's ethic of truths represent a principal of operation not so far removed from ineffability? Like truth, the ineffable can present merely as fragmented abstract thought. For the ethical subject who cannot subsume the ineffable, the logical conclusion is indifference, refusal or negation of the so-called given, positions for which everyone has the capacity. We do it all the time, often without thinking, a social procedure which Jacques Rancière calls "the part of no part."¹² There is always a little enigmatic bit left in the regime of ethics which representation cannot touch; this illegible leftover comprises the ineffable and is what hystericizes. It is what

¹² For Rancière the dividing line between what is visible and invisible is where politics can be disrupted and recuperated by those who are excluded by the commons. Moreover, it is a space in which subjects can "exceed" symbolic authority in order to reinvent politics anew. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2010).

Badiou calls the void of a situation¹³ or what we might call the bit in every inclusion that does not belong. Every situation contains a void-part which cannot be represented, yet is what everyone shares equally, a generic capacity to not be known. We might even say this is what gives rise to the determination to participate in refusal and negation. While Badiou's refusal of the ineffable—that is, nothing itself is thinkable and nothing is unthinkable¹⁴—is a particular provocation for thinking the subject (and arguably one which is not entirely in line with psychoanalysis's position on the traumatic subject), he does resist the fully interpellated Althusserian subject by insisting that one can refuse to be such a subject. On this Badiou and Jankélévitch agree but for different intellectual and arguably, political reasons: both agree that the subject's ethical potential lies in the transformation of courage into justice.¹⁵ Although for both thinkers something remains which one needs to acknowledge, perhaps their difference lies in whether or not one decides to take up the reminder—the part of no part—as a specific charge of fidelity to truth. For Badiou, this is consistency to remain in a void constructed around his four conditions (art, love, politics, philosophy), while for Jankélévitch it is to stay loyal to truth conditions that can be spoken despite their apparent inconsistency.

¹³ I refer to Badiou's text *Ethics* included without necessarily belonging. That is, the ontology of a situation is understood as through the presentation of multiplicity, one is counted "at the heart of every situation, at the foundation of its being, there is a 'situated' void, around which is organised the plenitude [. . .] of the situation in question." Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 1993), 68.

¹⁴ Badiou insists that which cannot be thought must be represented as thought, even tormented thought should not be rejected. Adam Bartlett puts Badiou's positions succinctly: "Everything in contemporary ethics, Badiou argues, is built on this rejection of thought: simply that situations are thinkable, that real change is thinkable, that some truth of the collective exists *and* on this embrace of representation or even the pathos of representation: especially insofar as by the power of representation—myths, fiction, symbolism—the Other becomes the suffering other, the victim other of those with the limit power and the means of representation or knowledge." A. J. Bartlett, "Ethics, Riots and the Real: Badiou's Politics," *Forcings: Philosophical Writings*, April 6, 2024, <https://ajbartlett.substack.com/p/ethics-riots-and-the-real>.

¹⁵ Badiou is clear about this when he says, "decide consequently from the point of the undecidable" as a theory of affect contrasting the difference between fidelity and confidence. Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels, (London: Continuum, 2009), 287.

Jankélévitch's particular uptake of refusal is both as a condition of the ineffable (that which cannot be said) and as a condition in which the ineffable is necessarily included (that is, one refuses in part for reasons that cannot be spoken about). The ineffable is not the void which says nothing but simply something belonging to the category of *void*. For Jankélévitch negation enables the subject's indifference whereas refusal is indifferent to the process of negation. Even if taken for granted, negation does not disallow refusal to be claimed as a possible truth. The effects of the distinction between negation and refusal become clear in Jankélévitch's ineffability: negation allows us to know *how things are* and refusal allows a way into knowing *how things should be*. This distinction provides the basis for his hyper-ethical subjectivity.

Let us consider how this applies to Jankélévitch's position that forgiveness of the Nazis is not possible and should never occur. For Jankélévitch, 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 *Traité des Vertus*.¹⁶ His text *Forgiveness* was published in 1967, although he is far better known for dismissing forgiveness in essays like *Should we Pardon Them?* and the book, *L'Imprescriptible*.¹⁷ The event of the Holocaust says Jankélévitch must be stuck to us all the time and moreover we need to be stuck to the traumatic ineffability of it. With this in mind Jankélévitch distinguishes between forgiveness and pardon: what can be pardoned cannot in the case of the Holocaust be the object of forgiveness because this would require rejection of the ineffable. Jankélévitch's pondering the (im)possibility of forgiveness under the condition of ineffability marks his contradictory relationship to the linguistic turn. On the one hand, because one cannot say everything which captures evil, one should not struggle to say it in the name of forgiveness which can be granted only after an impossibly sincere scrutiny, in other words, never. On the other hand, even if forgiveness could be expressed with adequate eloquence and sincerity, it should be refused on the grounds that this would be entering into the territory of the given.

¹⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Mal* (Paris: Arthaud, 1947); Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Traité des Vertus* (Paris: Bordas, 1949).

¹⁷ Jankélévitch, "Should We Pardon Them?"; Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'Imprescriptible: Pardonner? Dans l'honneur et la dignité* (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

Part of the difficulty here is that Jankélévitch is not so much wary of offering an absolute theory on the conditions of forgiveness, he absolutely refuses any. This is not an oversight on his part but rather his understanding that any totalising ontologising of forgiveness misses the mark, being mere identification that may appear to be forgiveness, but in the end amounting to no more than superficial pseudo-forgiveness. Instead Jankélévitch discusses 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.”¹⁸ For Jankélévitch such impure forms include forgetting the transgression; generational integration, of trauma (transforming 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). Although these all bear a superficial resemblance to forgiveness, none include the intentional aspect necessary for forgiveness. None grapple with the importance of intending to forgive as a form of moral action on the part of the victim of transgression. For Jankélévitch, forgiveness must always be seen as an active moral choice which one stands by. Regarding the Holocaust, this is impossible.

Claiming that forgiveness is not instrumental redirects our attention to the importance of the ethical relation between individuals. Formulations that privilege reconciliation as a fundamental goal or rehabilitation subvert the importance of forgiveness by measuring its value on some external metric. Jankélévitch emphasizes that such a move does not result in forgiveness of the perpetrator since it seeks only to reach a new state of affairs and is thus merely a pragmatic response to the legacy of violations. For Jankélévitch when we direct forgiveness toward some end, such as overcoming bitterness, we are subordinating forgiveness to something and to this extent moving away from engagement with the violator. Here Jankélévitch redirects the difficult (non)ethical relationship between victim and transgressor back towards the centre of his theory of forgiveness. This situates forgiveness as an impossible extimate space in which the subject disappears because here forgiveness as an ethical object of satisfaction is privileged over the radicality of the subject’s struggle. However, this disappearance of the subject cannot suppress its reappearance as one truly traumatised. This is where Jankélévitch’s refusal allows the process of trauma to un-

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¹⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.

fold as a negation staging refusal of the perpetrator. We can conclude that for Jankélévitch forgiveness without ineffability is nothing more than another object to be grasped by the will.

In addition to ineffability, Jankélévitch places moral sincerity behind the instrumentality of forgiveness, which invites the question, how then can we ensure that forgiveness is ever pure and sincere and not merely some cheap semblance? We can't, says Jankélévitch. All we can do is turn the focus from transgression in general onto those horrific transgressions whose enormity falls outside the scope of what can be considered pardonable or forgivable. Unlike turning up late for one of his lectures, such transgressions cannot be ignored or excused, because, via negation, we are held captive by their barbarity, helpless to respond by harnessing the miraculous power of forgiveness. In this way forgiveness comes up against a symbolic limit beyond the reach of negation, ethical imperatives, and all reason. After all, one is not obliged to forgive, still less to give reasons for what is beyond reason to forgive. In order to understand from Jankélévitch's perspective the conditions for forgiveness in such cases we have to accept that in any scenario of forgiveness there no radical antithesis in the relation between subject and subject or subject and object. The relation should always be faithful and remain intact in the presence of the other, not become modified or distorted by omission. However, given that we are divided subjects caught within the repetition of the Symbolic order, Jankélévitch sets up an impossibly idealistic scenario for forgiveness to truly take place.

Jankélévitch's scenario is provocative when placed alongside other philosophical views which have gained currency. Although Hannah Arendt shares with Jankélévitch the belief that genuine forgiveness allows for the possibility of creating a new future relationship, thus escaping cycles of revenge, she also argues that forgiveness can be understood only within the realm of comprehensible, if banal human affairs. Thus forgiveness for what she calls radical evil is for her impossible, incoherent and beyond the realm of punishment. 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 to cast him symbolically from the community of humanity.¹⁹ Simply the task

¹⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 277–79. Arendt says: “Under conditions of terror most people will comply

of “doing one’s job” is insufficient to justify not acting in according to ethical reciprocity.²⁰ This logic of no agency is an active avoidance of responding to the other’s desire.

The difficulty with Jankelevitch’s philosophy of forgiveness stems from his refusal to allow any notion of fluid instrumentality, instead conceptualising forgiveness as a *gift* or form of *grace* and the one who forgives in the name of acceptance, a *given*.²¹ Such a refusal of instrumentality avoids symbolic capital being made out of the pretence of public forgiveness. In such cases instrumentality certainly poses a problem not least because it risks undermining the normative force of forgiveness, relegating it to the status of pseudo-forgiveness. If we adhere to Jankélévitch’s refusal, then the problem of pseudo-forgiveness might be sidestepped by allowing for the possibility of forgiveness outside the bounds of the Symbolic law, through requiring that forgiveness avoid public expression. It should therefore take place in secret, silently or anonymously notwithstanding the receiver of the gift of forgiveness might never be aware of it. However, this too is problematic because severing the relational nature of forgiveness (which Jankélévitch argues is fundamental to his philosophy) becomes one-sided, since only the forgiver is privy to this secret new relationship. Moreover, in this scenario, with just a single party present, forgiveness becomes viable only as an act of negation. It is perhaps possible that through the psychoanalytic procedure one might come to a place of forgiveness without the need to articulate publicly. Within the psychoanalytic space, forgiveness might take place notwithstanding the risk of becoming indifferent to forgiveness and its consequences; however, it is not usually the neurotic’s charge to be such a bystander to their symptom.

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A second way to avoid the problem of pseudo-forgiveness would be to insist on the absolute erasure of memory. However, such a *tabula rasa* response is also problematic. Jankélévitch insists that memory must be maintained following the impossible task of forgiveness: “Nothing could be more evident: in order to

but some people will not . . .” Arendt, 55.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998); Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. See also, Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust* (London: Verso, 1999).

²¹ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 9.

forgive, it is necessary to remember.”²² For Jankélévitch forgetting is the worst form of negation because what is given up is the very moral agency which situates conditions necessary for thinking and enacting forgiveness, negation or refusal. However, forgiveness is not automatic and cannot occur as either negation or refusal. Yet as Freud reminds us, conscious forgetting does occur; remembering is motivated by goals and unconscious processes wherein forgetting is a moment of repression presenting in the form of a symptom. It is important to understand the psychoanalytic function of repression: repression emerges in the shape of a symptom and what is refused will inevitably return. For the neurotic the return of the repressed requires managing love and hate. In this regard what Jankélévitch is offering the neurotic is that although foreclosure implies the possibility of outright refusal (which he advocates), he nevertheless allows such refusal an agency by leaving open a symbolic space in which its active and repeated affirmation must push towards a point of radical exclusion.

Memories are *par excellence* the memories of affects, “the persistent effect of an emotion experienced in the past” in the “memory chain.”²³ In Freud’s work there is much that belongs to the associative theory of memory—and as he famously attests, “unexpressed emotions will never die.” Memory, like mnemonic symbols, screens memories and fantasies to form a memory chain concept as part of the logic of the lost object. In *Mourning and Melancholia*,²⁴ Freud demonstrates how, in melancholia, the pathological memory fixes and fetishizes the idealized object, hated as much as loved, and how in the work of mourning, all memories about the object are illuminated in their smallest detail, so that remembering may facilitate release followed by cathexis. Importantly, Freud maintains that no memory is exempt from the influence of fantasy, and no fantasy can do without ideational elements borrowed from a perceived reality. Thus, it would seem that forgiveness can occur only as part of a fantasy scene, internally subsumed and externally enacted. It is in this context that Jankélévitch makes a plea for remembrance to be in service of his hyper-ethics.

²² Jankélévitch, 56.

²³ Sigmund Freud, “The Aetiology of Hysteria,” in *Standard Edition*, 3:187–221.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia (1917 [1915]),” in *Standard Edition*, 14:243–58.

In response to Jankélévitch, Derrida's essay *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* addresses similar problems.²⁵ He too locates forgiveness outside politics but unlike Jankélévitch claims that the function of forgiveness is to forgive "the unforgivable."²⁶ For Derrida, this is unconditional forgiveness, and it must forgive the guilty as guilty without a reference to any request for forgiveness or mitigation of guilt. He refuses Jankélévitch's position that "forgiveness died in the camps." It seems that Derrida conflates legal guilt with moral responsibility when claiming that forgiveness is neither a system of exchange nor an enabler of reconciliation. In attempting to name the impossible Derrida brings back the notion of "radical evil" as a singular articulation reduced to dimensions where forgiveness is possible in reconciling the universal with the particular, the public with the private. We might think of this as salvation translated into politics: only the ghastliest is worthy of forgiveness. But if forgiveness lies outside political action, what else is it good for? If, in Derrida's world, our humanity is distinguished by notions of transcendence and salvation, then even more than Arendt he is politicising the Christian roots of forgiveness. Yet, Derrida even proceeds to down-play Arendt's strict political separation between private sentiments and public action. This is because, for him, the demarcation between the private and the public spheres should ideally be abolished. Thus, for Derrida private and public forgiveness are one and the same. Similarly, for Jankélévitch, except that for him forgiveness is not possible and should be refused.

This in turn leads to the recognition of the individual as abstracted from their crimes and the ensuing processes. This is why judicial law is so problematic for Derrida, Arendt, and Jankélévitch. How can judicial procedures deal with big questions like humanity and crimes against it, a concern echoed in many of Arendt's deliberations. This concern also leaves open the precise nature of the transition from forgiveness, an affective quality, to restitution, which is a pragmatic undertaking. The judicial procedure may start with some recognition of transgression which reflects public outrage or regret and finish with restitution, arguably a political gesture of forgiveness. In so far as the act of forgiveness is here secondary, it leaves intact the paradox of individual autonomy and public moral conscience. This marks the transition from the metaphysical level to

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²⁵ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001).

²⁶ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 32.

the mundane where refusal is based on symbolic value and not ethical principle. Further, this is how forgiveness translates into remuneration, or the back and forth of currency negotiation as a procedure of negation. Looking at crimes against humanity, one can see how there is both the event, which may be beyond understanding, and the subsequent representation of the event by those not directly involved. Hence, Derrida talks about such crimes against humanity as ultimately crimes “we” committed against ourselves, meaning we are all to some degree, responsible.

In *Le Pardon*²⁷ Jankélévitch argues that forgiveness arises out of a need for love: he even claims that “forgiveness transfigures hatred into love.”²⁸ For him this shift signals his hyper-ethics as an “ethic beyond ethics,” that is, beyond the norms and laws which he found thoroughly unsatisfying. He says of forgiveness that it is not of the natural order of things but rather politically ratified to give it a sense of moral mastership and authority. Nor can we simply forget and thus be left in a void. Forgetting and forgiveness are for Jankélévitch totally incompatible and at the ontological level, mutually exclusive. To grant unconditional forgiveness locates the subject who is either untouched by guilt or hystericized by it, in territory so unfamiliar that it is perhaps more of a way to avoid struggling with injustice.

An example of Jankélévitch’s hyper-ethical refusal of Germany and German culture, in 1980 he received an invitation from German teacher Wiard Raveling to visit him in Berlin, which solidified his stance on refusal. In his letter, Raveling said that he suffered from “bad conscience” regarding certain events of the Holocaust, which kept him awake at night. Appalled by the actions of the Nazis and holding the entire German people responsible, Jankélévitch had relocated to Paris vowing never again to visit Germany. Raveling nevertheless wrote Jankélévitch a heartfelt invitation to stay with him and his family—they would listen to and converse about their favourite music, share food and wine and perhaps, Raveling hoped, Jankélévitch might discover that, together with his own remorse, a similar desire for separation from the Holocaust was to be found in

²⁷ Jankélévitch, “Should We Pardon Them?”

²⁸ In Lacanian terms, the opposite to love is not hate, but despair, destitution and eventually indifference. Perhaps this is where Jankélévitch’s claim on forgiveness falters slightly. In Lacanian terms his plea is not to be indifferent to but *in* the difference between love and hate.

the everyday people of Germany, many of whom still lived with bad conscience. Raveling says in his letter,

I, myself have not killed any Jews. Having been born German is not my fault. No one asked my permission. I am completely innocent of Nazi crimes, but this does not console me at all. My conscience is not clear, and I feel a mixture of shame, pity, resignation, sadness, revolt . . . I do not always sleep well . . .

Raveling goes on,

If ever, dear Monsier Jankélévitch, you pass through here, knock on our door and come in. You will be welcome. And be assured my parents won't be there. No one will speak to you of Hegel, or of Nietzsche, or of Jaspers, or of Heidegger or of any of the great teutonic thinkers. I will ask you about Descartes and Sartre. I like the music of Schubert and Schumann. But I will play a record of Chopin, or if you prefer, Debussy . . .²⁹

In his reply Jankélévitch writes,

I am moved by your letter. I have waited for this letter for 35 years . . . This the first time I have received a letter from a German, a letter that was not a letter of more or less disguised self-justification. You alone, you the first and no doubt the last, have found the necessary words outside the pious clichés. There is no mistaking it. Thank you.³⁰

However, Jankélévitch refused the hospitality of Raveling's invitation, instead inviting Raveling to visit him in Paris, proposing the same hospitality but on his terms:

No, I will not come to visit you in Germany. I will not go that far. I am too old to inaugurate a new era. Because for me it is a new era all the same . . . It is my turn

²⁹ Wiard Raveling, "Lettre de Wiard Raveling," June, 1980, *Magazine Littéraire* 333 (June 1995): 53.

³⁰ Raveling, 57.

to say to you: when you come to Paris, do as everyone does, knock on my door, we will sit down at the piano.³¹

Raveling obliged; he went to Paris. They listened to music, their shared passion and spoke of many things except the Holocaust, the very event which haunted them both. He then returned to Germany and resumed his teaching. Although they remained in contact, it was propelled by civility rather than a confrontation with the rage and anguish which permeated their mutual desire to separate themselves from the Holocaust. Jankélévitch was trying to achieve separation in any way he could, but his anguish was too great to give up. His insistence on the “nonunderstanding” of both the crime and its forgiveness is the reason why forgiveness is for him, truly impossible. Yet, perhaps this was not such an impasse because Jankélévitch also claims that the very impossibility of forgiveness offers a way to preserve the freedom of the transgressor to eventually ask for forgiveness. However, Jankélévitch states this should be refused anyway, since the Holocaust cannot be eclipsed by the mere speech-act, “we forgive you.” Here a strange mirroring takes place, what Jankélévitch calls a mad, spontaneous movement wherein one is not lost or assimilated by the fiction of forgiveness, because how could anyone want to identify with transgression of such incomprehensible magnitude?

What does it mean to truly refuse as an act of politics? It is possible to read Jankélévitch’s refusal as a fault in him: a stubbornness which absolutely refuses the possibility of reconciliation even at a transferential level of friendship and love. Raveling attempts to understand Jankélévitch’s position and offers that it is shared by other Germans. Nonetheless, the Holocaust is simply unforgivable from Jankélévitch’s position. He does not deny the grief and perplexity Raveling experiences, indeed he urges him to stay with it, but however traumatising this experience may be for Raveling, it is nowhere near that trauma experienced in and because of the Holocaust. In stating to Raveling that he is too old to inaugurate a new era Jankélévitch is testifying to a negation beyond his control and moreover, that only via negation can mourning of the Holocaust occur. This is where Jankélévitch as the subject in mourning resides, in resignation and submission to negation as an unhealable wound.

³¹ Raveling, 53.

One reading of Jankélévitch's refusal is that forgiveness can be thought of as pure tragedy. Like Derrida, Jankélévitch conceives forgiveness as an invention. However, whereas for Derrida the potential for forgiveness opens up something new, for Jankélévitch, in circumstances such as the Holocaust, it is impossible even to imagine any potential, which is why forgiveness should be refused. It would be too convenient to think of Jankélévitch's position on refusal as ideological: that is, as fully identifying with the position of refusal as a political gesture for its own sake. On the contrary, for Jankélévitch the will to forgive is thoroughly ideological because of the theatricality involved in the act of forgiving. Forgiveness here becomes an empty gesture, an imaginary exercise of false modesty, a liberal performative ritual and little more. Forgiving the Nazi's atrocities would require either unconscionable amnesia or the opposite, platforming them via perverse fascination. Jankélévitch rejects both positions.

At the same time Jankélévitch unwittingly leaves open a space akin to the analyst's discourse. His claim, "forgiveness died in the death camps" is an enunciation of *mi-dire* in an uncompleted sentence which neither elaborates anything implicit in it, nor invites any specific response. We can always refuse his refusal of forgiveness, argue against it or become hystericized; negation is strictly within the content of what has been said. For Jankélévitch the space of forgiveness is totally closed off, yet together with Raveling's declaration of his trauma, it is these very limits which prompt the invitation to meet. Jankélévitch's reply implies that this might be a good start in thinking about the unforgivable as a question of politics, and this thus provides a synthetic knotting, which is precisely the analyst's intervention allowing the analysand to differentiate between "to be" and "to do." By focusing on what has actually happened, the process of knotting and unknotting destabilises the wider field in which solutions are usually sought or facilitated. The radicality of negation in mediating horror mirrors the madness of killing. To this extent Jankélévitch's negation tells the truth: his refusal of Germany mirrors Germany's refusal of the Jews. His ultimate speech-act "forgiveness died in the death camps," in precluding forgiveness and reconciliation, thereby signals the end of rhetorical engagement with the politics of war. Jankélévitch's insistence on this intellectual castration of German thinking and culture began with his removal of all reference to it in his previous work, his one truly political act of refusal. This is the neurotic refusal of a fantasy-cure in which the social bond keeps politics alive through a commitment to hyper-eth-

ics. Attending to the singularity of trauma ensures that the subject must take responsibility for their subjectivity.

Freud's idea that within all memories there is always an element of fantasy, is something which Jankélévitch's refusal ambiguously preserves. Thus, remembering the bodies of the dead Jews brings with it the memory of people with the potential for a good life. It is this paradoxical nature of memory that for Jankélévitch holds a fantasy of the ineffable; the ineffable always contains something unreachable and more pertinently in the case of the Holocaust, the trauma of the event and its historical residues. Jankélévitch's plea to remember protects the dignity of the traumatised victims notwithstanding that the effects of trauma remain in the domain of the partially conscious and the uncertain.

In conclusion, those who take up the ineffable as an "intuitive knowing" enabling a new way of locating oneself cannot assume that private thought and public language are so intimate and interrelated as to be unproblematic. But they can acknowledge that what is truly human is sometimes hard to express in language lacking a cohesive grammar of suffering which connects *how things are* with *how things should be*. There is nothing that is given in language—it must necessarily make us anxious thus we must construct what can be taken for granted before coming to a position of negation or refusal. What we can speak of is the struggle to overcome what is difficult to express in language alone, as being beyond linguistic representation. It is what happens after the trauma of speaking which matters. But for the Lacanian subject who takes up the ineffable, there is always something else. It is not necessarily something deeper or profound. Yet, there is something so radical hiding in plain sight that once glimpsed reveals a hyper-ethics of *coincidentia oppositorum*, irreconcilable contradictions. This is the place in which the subject resides, the Lacanian void and perhaps also the very location of Jankélévitch's refusal. In this place we are bound to admit our complicity in the traumatic event and thereby be forced to reckon with how *how things should be*. Any such judgement as an ethical proposition evolves from a temperament exposed to the effects of bad conscience, a subject position one must live with. After all, in psychoanalysis we say that if one feels guilty, then one is guilty—of something. Therefore, one should (at least on the couch) act guilty so that it accords with the sensation of guilt and its accompanying anxiety. The very struggle with their articulations is an act of courage one simply should not refuse: the passage to a transformative act confronts the

impossible by also confronting the possibilities of any situation. We could say that bad conscience is an anxious philosophical state of mind and affect which puts to work how one might think about that which cannot be fully expressed in language; moreover, rather than rendering language more complete, accept that being rough cut, the affective inevitably ruptures the linguistic turn.

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