

Forgiving the Unforgivable: Kierkegaard, Derrida and the Scandal of Forgiveness¹

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Two months to the day before Kierkegaard's death on November 11, 1855, a terrifying article of his on »Divine Justice« appeared in *The Moment* no. 8. In it, Kierkegaard addresses the problem of the apparent triumph of tyranny, injustice and evil in the world. How is this to be reconciled with the justice of God? Kierkegaard's argument is that divine justice appears precisely in allowing great sinners to go unpunished within time, so that their crimes can fully mature:

Yes, tremble that there are crimes that need all of time in order to come into existence, that occasionally, perhaps out of consideration for the rest of us, cannot be punished in this life. Tremble, but do not accuse God's justice; no, tremble at the thought of this (how frightful it sounds when said this way!) dreadful advantage of only being punished in eternity. (...) But the criminal whose distinction was that he cannot be punished in this world consequently cannot be saved; by not being punished within time, he cannot be saved for eternity (*MLW* 306; *SV* 3 19, 278).

This echo of a theology to be found in the psalms² is highly disturbing for our modern sensibilities, conscious as we are of the hideous record of genocide and crimes against humanity of the twentieth century. It combines two possibilities of outrage. The first is the notion that God consciously permits these criminals to commit monstrous crimes against innocent victims. Despite Kierkegaard's assurances, this seems like gross injustice. The second, perhaps contradictory, one is that this formulation seems to leave no space for forgiveness either by God or the victims.

In both respects this passage points to the problematic concept of the unforgivable. Can the perpetrators of crimes on this scale be forgiven for them? If not, does the existence of unforgivable acts mean there is a limit to God's forgiveness and, if so, what are the consequences for his love? More problematic still, this may lead to the further question: Is it forgivable that God has permitted these acts? In this paper, I want to examine the place of the category of the unforgivable in Kierkegaard's work and how his insights relate to current debates on the issue.

One author who has written influentially on the question of the unforgivable in relation to the holocaust and other crimes against humanity is Vladimir Jankélévitch.³ For Jankélévitch, as for many other writers,⁴ the word 'unforgivable' is entirely appropriate for these crimes because of their scale and the fact that those most directly affected are by their death in no position to offer forgiveness. Forgiveness, he argues, cannot be granted unless asked for; forgiveness is not »for swine;« it depends on the residual humanity and some identification with the victim by the guilty party. With reference to the *Shoah*, Jankélévitch argues further that no finite penalty can meet such a crime and, following Hannah Arendt,⁵ asserts that human beings cannot forgive what they cannot punish. For this reason, too, these crimes are unforgivable. Indeed, Jankélévitch insists that it is a duty *not* to forgive in the name of the dead. To do so may lead to the unforgivable crime and its victims being forgotten.

Jankélévitch's work finds a respectful but critical response in Jacques Derrida's essay »Le Siècle et le Pardon.«⁶ Derrida both acknowledges and directly counters Jankélévitch's position. Such crimes are indeed unforgivable, but this does not rule out forgiveness. On the contrary, Derrida holds to the paradoxical assertion that »forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable.«⁷ To forgive what is forgivable, after all, is tautologous. The very act of deciding that a given situation is forgivable is tantamount to forgiving it. It is only when faced with the unforgivable that the work of forgiveness becomes appropriate or required. Indeed, it is the existence of the unforgivable which is the condition for forgiveness. »One neither can nor should forgive, there is no forgiveness, if there is any such thing, except where there is the unforgivable.«⁸ Derrida takes impossibility as the condition of pure forgiveness.

Pure, unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its proper meaning, should have no 'meaning,' no finality, no intelligibility, even. It is a folly of the impossible [*une folie de l'impossible*]. It would be necessary

to follow without weakening the consequence of this paradox or aporia.⁹

Or, as he puts it earlier in the same essay, »Forgiveness ought to proclaim itself as the impossible itself.«¹⁰ But the impossibility of forgiveness, humanly speaking, does not mean that it never happens. On the contrary, »it is perhaps the only thing that happens, which surprises, like a revolution, the ordinary course of history, politics and law.«¹¹ Forgiveness is the exceptional interruption.

This paradoxical formulation, that forgiveness can only forgive the unforgivable, has a Kierkegaardian ring to it and the argument in this paper will be that Derrida's account has striking similarities to elements of Kierkegaard's understanding of the matter, even though the quotation above might suggest that Kierkegaard has more affinities with Jankélévitch.

It is at the point of the possible impossibility that Derrida's account coincides with a fundamental category in Kierkegaard's thought. »What is decisive,« according to Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness unto Death*, »is that with God everything is possible« (SD 38: SV3 15, 95) echoing the words of Jesus in Matthew 19:26.¹² If there is one phrase that is pivotal to Kierkegaard, it is this statement that »with God everything is possible« – not merely that possible things are possible. This is the essence of the scandal, which is the characteristic of the incarnation, the impossible meeting point of the absolutely other categories of God and man, the scandal which provokes a response either of offence or faith. Only by encountering the impossible is the true scope of divine possibility opened up.¹³

Kierkegaard's account is rooted in his profound engagement with Christian theology as is to be expected. For his part, Derrida also is highly conscious of the fundamental importance of the biblical tradition to any contemporary discussion of forgiveness and indeed discusses the problems of importing this 'abrahamic' category into international politics in relation to non-Christian cultures. This makes it all the more interesting that he takes such a high view of forgiveness.

Derrida characterises the Christian tradition as one that has at its heart a tension between conditional and unconditional forgiveness. Forgiveness is sometimes presented as a free and unconditional act, offered to guilty and innocent alike, which takes no account of repentance. At other times, repentance is presented as the necessary condition for forgiveness. Derrida does not try to reconcile these positions. Instead, he

insists that the importance of the tradition lies in the fact that it holds these two together as »irreconcilable and indissociable« strands.¹⁴ Both the irreconcilability and the indissociability have to be taken on board.

1. Forgiveness in the Gospels

These assertions about the paradoxicality of the Christian tradition can certainly be verified from the New Testament. On the one hand, we find a demand for unconditional forgiveness of one's enemies: »Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you« (Luke 6:27). No repentance is here implied. On the other hand, we find passages which require repentance as the condition for forgiveness. Take for instance, Luke 17:3: »Take heed to yourselves: if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says 'I repent,' you must forgive him.« Here the forgiveness, although freely offered, is clearly conditional on repentance.

Furthermore Matthew 6:1-15 makes it absolutely clear that one's own forgiveness is conditional not just on repentance, but on one's willingness to forgive others: »For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.« Luke 6:37 puts the point even more succinctly: »Forgive and you will be forgiven.« Here there is a reciprocity in forgiveness, not just a conditionality, which seems to sit uneasily with the proclamation of free forgiveness.

These paradoxes of forgiveness in the New Testament go further than Derrida takes us. It is in the New Testament, after all, where the disturbing concept of the unforgivable sin is first found. For all its talk of sin, punishment and the withholding of divine forgiveness, the Old Testament knows no category of sin which is in principle unforgivable. Jesus sets out the parameters of the unforgivable sin in Matt 12:31-32 (see also Mark 3:29, Luke 12:10):

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The exact nature of the sin against the Holy Spirit has been anxiously debated by those who fear they may have unwittingly fallen into it, as if by avoiding that one sin, they assure themselves of divine forgiveness. In *Sickness unto Death*, Anti-Climacus defines it in terms of the willful opposition to the truth of Christianity and the person of the God man. In this, he seems to contradict the biblical teaching, which is clear that the sin which is unforgivable is speaking against the Holy Spirit. Matthew and Luke explicitly state that 'whoever says a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven.' This conflation is typical of Kierkegaard's tendency to elevate Christ at the expense, so to speak, of the spirit. The unforgivable sin thus becomes related to the denial of the truth of Christianity. This runs the risk of being interpreted as a matter of doctrinal assent, and is perhaps a distraction from a more fruitful definition to be found elsewhere in his work.

Kierkegaard recounts an anecdote about a person who had become convinced that he had sinned against the Holy Spirit and that for him there was no mercy. Kierkegaard suggests, »Perhaps the sin against the Holy Spirit was rather the pride with which he would not forgive himself. There is also a severity in condemning oneself and not wanting to hear about grace which is nothing but sin« (*Pap. X 2 A 429; JP 4029*). The unforgivable sin, then, is not to forgive oneself, or not to acknowledge that one is forgiven: the two come to the same thing in Kierkegaard's eyes. In *Sickness unto Death* there is an entire section entitled »The Sin of Despairing of the Forgiveness of Sins (Offense)« [Part Two B.B] (*SD 113-124; SV3 15, 163-173*). In the final paragraph of the section, we find the matter expressed as follows: »(...) despair of the forgiveness of sins is offense. And offense is the intensification of sin« (*SD 124; SV3 15, 173*). In the conclusion of the book which immediately follows, Anti-Climacus characterizes the sin against the Holy Spirit as »the positive form of being offended« (*SD 125; SV3 15, 174*).

The offence of forgiveness is brought to a head when the same Jesus who warns of the unforgivable sin speaks the following words from the cross, as Luke records them: »Father, forgive them: they know not what they do« (Luke 23:34). On the understanding of forgiveness put forward by Jankélévitch, for instance, this speech contains not one but several absurdities. Jesus, who speaks the words, does not directly mention himself or his situation, nor is the speech addressed to the ones who need forgiveness, those who are crucifying him. Instead he evokes the Father to forgive on his behalf. To put this another way, what Jesus does *not* say is

'I forgive you.' In fact, he never once speaks these words in the gospels. »Your sins are forgiven« is what he customarily says. Forgiveness here is referred to God as the third party. The New Testament's model is consistently contrary to the common view that forgiveness has to be a transaction between one who asks forgiveness and the offended party. What sense does it make to invite another to forgive?

Furthermore, the speech itself indicates that those crucifying him would not understand or see its application because »they know not what they do.« This forgiveness is in no sense a response to repentance. Not only are the crucifiers unrepentant, they are not even aware what it is they have to repent for. Nor do they cease doing what they are doing. As we have seen, Jankélévitch takes it as read that those who do not seek forgiveness cannot be forgiven, and the gospels themselves speak of the need for repentance.

2. Kierkegaard and Forgiveness

It is on these paradoxes that Kierkegaard's account of forgiveness stakes its validity. The sin which defines sin is to lack faith in divine possibility, but as *Anti-Climacus* is so careful to explain, possibility without necessity is no possibility at all. The notion of the unforgivable sin, which would seem to justify despair of forgiveness, marks the necessity which faith must acknowledge while still maintaining that »with God all things are possible.« The denial of possibility is the unforgivable. All sin is sin against the Holy Spirit, because all sin is a failure, in one way or another, to live in the light of the incomprehensible fact that »with God all things are possible.«

Meditating on Paul's hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13, Paul Ricoeur reflects that, »if love excuses everything, then that everything includes the unforgivable.«¹⁵ The paradox is that it is the Holy Spirit which is the bearer of possibility. This includes the impossible possibility that the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit can be and is forgiven. But if this is true, who can forgive except God? Derrida himself raises, but then explicitly leaves open, the question of whether pardoning a person, as opposed to an act, needs what he calls 'some absolute witness, God, for example, that God who required that one forgives the other in order to deserve to be forgiven in one's turn.'¹⁶

We may turn here to the account of forgiveness implied by the

rubric that dominates the end of *Works of Love*, what Kierkegaard calls the »divine like for like.« This is not a discussion of the *lex talionis*, equal retribution, but of a »vertical« conception of »like for like« deriving from Christ's words to the centurion from Capernaum: »Be it done to you as you have believed« (Matt 8:13). Christianity is a God-relationship and relations to others are relations in, through and under God. Indeed Kierkegaard goes so far as to say,

God is actually himself this pure like for like, the pure rendition of how you yourself are. If there is anger in you, then God is anger in you; if there is leniency and mercifulness in you, then God is merciful in you (...) God's relation to a human being is at every moment to infinitize what that human being is at every moment (*WL* 384; *SV* 3 12, 365-366).

But if every human being is a sinner, this locks us into an inescapable reciprocity of being visited with our sins. Yet, what is impossible for man is possible for God who can act as 'absolute witness' in Derrida's phrase.

For the unrepentant sinner, forgiveness is subjectively not seen as possible, because there is no awareness of sin. Either the sinner considers her conduct irreproachable, or else the sinner takes the view that the sin is forgivable, and therefore, feels no need to be forgiven. Indeed, if forgiveness is withheld in these conditions, the sinner is the one who will feel aggrieved. It is only once that one is convinced of one's sin that forgiveness arises as a need, and then it seems to be an impossibility. The mediation between divine love and the sense of forgiveness is the category of the unforgivable. On this view, it is the fact that the sin against the Holy Spirit is unforgivable that makes Jesus' words of forgiveness during the crucifixion possible. Far from being a contradiction, the two are paradoxically bound together. Only because there is unforgivable sin is forgiveness meaningful, as only a God who does not forgive can forgive. Only in being forgiven can we discover our need to be forgiven. Only when we become convinced of our unforgivableness can we understand why we need to be forgiven.

3. Forgiving and Forgetting

But what of the consequences of this forgiveness? How does Kierkegaard deal with the charge raised by Jankélévitch and others that forgiveness leads to the unacceptable possibility of forgetting the crime and its victims? Kierkegaard's most nuanced reading of the relationship between forgiveness and forgetting comes in the section towards the end of *Works of Love* on 'Love hides a Multitude of Sins.' Forgiveness is not the same as ignorance, which is blind to sin. Rather, »forgiveness removes what cannot be denied to be sin« (*WL* 294; *SV3* 12, 281). Forgiveness here is like faith, in that it concerns the unseen in the seen. However, it is the opposite motion from faith. Faith holds to the unseen in the seen. The faithful and unfaithful may experience the same event, but the faithful testify to the presence and activity of the unseen, of the eternal, in the momentary event. By a reverse analogy, forgiveness does not cease to see the sinful act, but believes that forgiveness takes sin away:

The one who loves sees the sin he forgives, but he believes that forgiveness takes it away. This cannot be seen, whereas the sin can indeed be seen; on the other hand, if the sin did not exist to be seen, it could not be forgiven either. (...) Blessed is the believer, he believes what he cannot see; blessed is the one who loves, he believes away that which he indeed can see! (*WL* 295; *SV3* 12, 282).

Far from the evil being negated, it never ceases to be the object of attention. The one who forgives does not blind himself to sin but in fact sees more than the unforgiving: he sees not just the sin but the sin *and* the forgiveness it entails.

Does this then give us as human beings the license to act as if sin had never occurred? Kierkegaard's answer is a clear »no.« From the human standpoint, as opposed to the divine, Kierkegaard is clear that forgetting is itself sin. In *The Gospel of Sufferings* II [But How Can the Burden Be Light If the Suffering Is Heavy?] (*UD* 230-247; *SV3* 11, 215-230) Kierkegaard makes it absolutely clear that forgiveness does *not* involve forgetting that sin has occurred. In this discourse, Kierkegaard explicitly condemns the desire for all to be forgiven and forgotten as the characteristic of the 'light-minded' person. However, it is no solution to go to the other extreme as does the 'heavy-minded' person who cannot let go of his sin and so cannot believe.

For the believer, Kierkegaard explains, everything is *not* forgotten, but it *is* forgotten in forgiveness. In a typically paradoxical sentence, Kierkegaard writes, »Every time you recollect the forgiveness, it [sin] is forgotten; but when you forget the forgiveness, it is not forgotten, and then the forgiveness is wasted« (UD 247; SV3 11, 230). The believer must not, indeed cannot, forget he is forgiven, because it is out of forgiveness that his new life springs. »A man rests in the forgiveness of sins when the thought of God does not remind him of the sin but that it is forgiven, when the past is not a memory of how much he trespassed but of how much he has been forgiven« (Pap. VIII 1 A 230, JP 1209).

Does that mean that crimes like the Holocaust can be forgotten? On the contrary, it has to be remembered all the more as a point where the divine 'nevertheless' impinges on human history. Does it mean that reparations to those who suffered in the Holocaust and punishment of those who perpetrated it can be set aside? By no means: these are matters of love to our neighbours. What it does mean is that we cannot seek to seal the Holocaust off as a unique and inhuman invasion into history. On the contrary it is a uniquely potent manifestation of the most universal aspect of the human condition: the sin against the Holy Ghost which is the human life closed to God's gift of possibility.

Kierkegaard would be misrepresented if he were put forward as an advocate of the idea that forgiveness obliterates the past and undoes evil. Indeed, his position may give evil a stronger metaphysical basis than do, for instance, Hegel or Schelling, who follow Augustine's notion of evil as privative and therefore ultimately unreal in the face of the good. Though it is difficult to be specific here on Kierkegaard's view on the metaphysics of evil, there is evidence, at least in Vigilius Haufniensis' *The Concept of Anxiety*, of a rather different attitude which resonates with his different understanding of forgiveness:

If, (*sit venia verbo* [pardon the expression]), freedom remains in the good, then it knows nothing at all of evil. In this sense one may say about God (if anyone misunderstands this, it is not my fault) that he knows nothing of evil. By this I by no means say that evil is merely the negative, *das Aufzuhebende* [that which is to be annulled]; on the contrary, that God knows nothing of evil, that he neither can nor will know of it, is the absolute punishment of evil. In this sense the preposition *apo* [away from] is used in the New Testament to signify removal from God, or if I dare put it this way, God's ignoring of evil.

If one conceives of God finitely, it is indeed convenient for evil if God ignores it, but because God is the infinite, his ignoring is the living annihilation, for evil cannot dispense with God, even merely in order to be evil (CA 112; SKS 4, 414).

Kierkegaard explains that when God forgives, sin, in a startling phrase, is 'hidden behind God's back'. It does not cease to have existed, but it ceases to be regarded. In this special sense, God 'forgets' sin, and here forgetting has the same structure as hope, but in reverse. Whereas hope gives being to what does not (yet) exist, forgetting removes being from what nevertheless exists. What is forgotten is not the same as that which never existed, or indeed as that which has ceased to exist. It is that which is disregarded in love.

It is precisely because evil partakes in some sense of existence that God can subject it to 'living annihilation,' rather than its simply vanishing when ignored. The 'forgotten' evil is not rendered non-existent by God's forgetting. Far then from being the champion of forgiveness as a forgetting of evil actions which renders them unreal, Kierkegaard's account depends on a stronger sense of evil's reality than the Augustinian tradition seems to countenance. It depends on the necessity of the remembrance of past evil, precisely in so far as it has become the occasion for divine forgiveness.

One corollary of this is that forgiveness for Kierkegaard does not mean that the ill consequences of one's sin will be eradicated, but they will cease to be seen as punishment. They will become suffering that can be borne with Christian fortitude as they are not inflicted by God on one estranged from God, but they can be offered to God who will bear them with and for us as he would any other suffering (see here *Pap. X 3 A 319*; *JP 1222*).

This provides a way to understand the rather grim quotation with which we began. The fate of the one who persists in sin is precisely – to be ignored. Just as God 'makes nothing' of evil by putting it behind his back, so he 'makes nothing' of the human being who chooses to make nothing of God. In the article in *The Moment* 8 entitled 'Tremble – Because in One Sense It Is So Infinitely Easy to Fool God,' Kierkegaard puts it this way: »For an omnipotent being it must, if one may speak this way, be an immense effort to be obliged to look after a nothing, to be aware of a nothing, to be concerned about a nothing. And then this nothing wants to fool him – O man, shudder, it is done so infinitely easily« (*MLW 307*; *SV3 19*, 288).

But God's greatest punishment is to ignore us – just as he makes nothing of evil. A journal entry reiterates this point:

It is much easier to fool God than my neighbour. Why? Because my neighbour is insignificant enough to keep a sharp eye on me. But, but, but that God is easiest to fool means: God punishes – how genuinely majestic – by ignoring. (...) And therefore – what dreadful punishment! – worldly life goes on splendidly for us and humankind makes great strides in physical discoveries etc. – but God ignores us (*Pap. XI 1 A 37, JP 2563*).

The human being is only sustained in existence by God's loving forbearance which restrains his omnipotence. The human being who in the end sins by refusing to believe in the forgiveness of sins is not simply 'made nothing of,' he is nothing. As such, there can be no salvation for him, for how can 'nothing' be saved? Paradoxically, as ever, in Kierkegaard's understanding it is only by realising our dependence on God that we can receive the gift of being an individual in the face of God.

Though Kierkegaard does not make this explicit, there is a divine like-for-like implied in the fate of those who are not punished in time. The transition out of time for all human beings is death – for those who refuse God, physical death is inevitable. For the Christian, *The Sickness unto Death* argues, physical death itself is not a punishment, but a task we can take up with and in Christ. Far more to be feared is the 'sickness unto death,' the despair that cannot die. Those, however, who have lived a life where they live by the terror of inflicting physical pain and death on others, gain the like-for-like. They have lived by the credo that death is the worst that can happen and have used that threat mercilessly against their fellow citizens. In death, they meet that punishment and become the victims themselves of death as terror. Having ignored God, they are ignored by God.

4. The Scandal of Forgiveness

This offers no easy answer to the problem of sin, of human suffering and divine responsibility. By all human standards, scandal is the proper reaction to Jesus' claim to forgive sin, as Anti-Climacus points out in *The Sickness unto Death*:

The Jews had a perfect right to be offended by Christ because he claimed to forgive sins. It takes a singularly high degree of spiritlessness (that is, as ordinarily found in Christendom), if one is not a believer (and if one is a believer, one does believe that Christ was God), not to be offended at someone's claim to forgive sins. And in the next place, it takes an equally singular spiritlessness not to be offended at the very idea that sin can be forgiven. For the human understanding, this is most impossible – but I do not therefore laud as genius the inability to believe it, for it *shall* be believed (*SD* 116; *SV* 3 15, 166).

Jankélévitch is a modern witness to this justifiable sense of scandal. Kierkegaard's contribution, as so often, and here I think his thought is profoundly in accord with the New Testament, is to heighten the scandal by insisting that the unforgivable *is forgiven*. Paradoxical as it seems, at one level this is simply a restatement of the banal scandal that evil occurs – and yet the world continues with all the implications for God's love, power and justice that have been mentioned before. Kierkegaard's answer demands a further question, one that was raised at the beginning of this paper and it is this: Can we forgive God for forgiving the unforgivable?

A remark of Derrida's¹⁷ bears repeating in this context. Asked, »Can one forgive God?« his reply was illuminating. Insofar as human beings constantly seem to *judge* God, he said, it makes sense to ask the question of forgiving God. Believers, according to Derrida, are those who have decided *a priori* to forgive God. The life of faith then is lived in the constant temptation *not* to forgive God.

Confronting the Holocaust, and other such crimes, we may see a God who is impotent or careless of human life, or both. It is a moot point whether it is easier to forgive God his apparent cruelty or his apparent weakness. In *The Sickness unto Death*, however, Anti-Climacus delves deeper to explain the problem at the heart of the need to forgive God. What God must be forgiven is the infliction of human misery as the inescapable consequence of the possibility of offence inseparable from his love:

What a rare act of love, what unfathomable grief of love, that even God cannot remove the possibility that this act of love reverses itself for a person and becomes the most extreme misery – something that in another sense God does not want to do, cannot want to do. ... therefore he can – it is possible – he can by his love make a person a

miserable as one otherwise never could be. What an unfathomable conflict in love! Yet in love he does not have the heart to desist from completing this act of love – alas, even though it makes a person more miserable than he otherwise would ever have been! (*SD* 126; *SV3* 15, 174–175)

Here it is God who is faced with an impossibility. By loving the human being, by offering the possibility of the forgiveness of sin, God also introduces the possibility of offence, and thus of despair. To paraphrase both Derrida and Kierkegaard, to continue to believe in a God of love and justice after the experiences of the twentieth century is evidence either of spiritlessness or of a *folie de l'impossible*. The culture of despair is an understandable reaction to these horrors whether it expresses itself as a facile and unseeing optimism, a defiant cynicism, a desperate displacement in consumerism, or a spiritless apathy. Not to believe, however, gives victory to the despair which is not only the reaction to evil but its cause in the first place. In an moving reflection on Primo Levi's writings out of the experience of concentration camps, Ettore Rocca sees the murder in the camps as the outcome of the modern culture of despair: »The sickness unto death in its final stage is sickness unto extermination; the culture of despair in its fulfillment is the culture of the concentration camps.«¹⁸

If Kierkegaard is to be believed, this outcome is ultimately a consequence of God's love. That in turn means that what God has to be forgiven is his love, which is offered to all. It leads to his acceptance of those we cannot accept, his forgiveness of those we cannot forgive, and most pertinently, his forgiveness of us. The subjective motion of accepting the forgiveness of sins is to forgive God his temerity, his weakness, and his harshness, for loving us. This is the other side of the divine like for like.

5. The Power to Forgive

Here, humanly, we encounter the impossible possibility. But here too may be the answer to the question that Derrida poses himself at the end of his essay on forgiveness.

What I dream of, what I try to think of as the 'purity' of a forgiveness worthy the name, would be forgiveness without power: *unconditional but without sovereignty*. The most difficult task, at the same time

necessary and apparently impossible, would then be to dissociate unconditionality from sovereignty. Will that be done someday? Don't hold your breath, as the saying goes. But since the hypothesis of this unrepresentable task is announced, even as a dream for thought, this folly is perhaps not so foolish (...).¹⁹

The word from the cross is the word of forgiveness from the point of utter powerlessness. All sovereignty has been renounced. In addressing his prayer to the Father – »Father, forgive them (...)« – Jesus does not even claim the power to forgive. Nor is any condition made for their forgiveness. Kierkegaard makes this connection between impotence, forgiveness and the crucifixion explicit in a journal entry: »That supreme power is impotence is seen in the impotence of Christ, the only one who never got justice for even his death became a benefaction, even to his murderers« (*Pap.* IX A 499; *JP* 4154).

This is the point, too, of the well-known passage in the journal where Kierkegaard explains that human freedom is only possible because of God's omnipotence (*Pap.* VII 1 A 181; *JP* 1251). Only omnipotence has the power to restrain itself enough to leave space for freedom, or to use the terms of the present discussion, only omnipotence is sovereign enough to be able to renounce its sovereignty. In any situation where human sovereignty is involved, be it of the king or the state, the potential abusiveness of a claim to pardon also is present.²⁰

In the *Christian Discourse* entitled 'The Joy of It: That the Weaker You Become, the Stronger God Becomes in You', Kierkegaard explores the mystery of omnipotence which can require love from a human being. God creates human beings from nothing, which is wonder enough, but then says to them: »become something even in relation to me.«

In human relations it is the power of the mighty that requires something from you, his love that gives in. But this is not so in your relationship with God. There is no earthly power for whom you are nothing, therefore it is his power that requires. But for God you are nothing, and therefore it is his love, just as it made you to be something, that requires something of you. It is said that God's omnipotence crushes a human being. But this is not so; no human being is so much that God needs omnipotence to crush him, because for omnipotence he is nothing (*CD* 128, *SV3* 13, 124).

God's power is not to be understood by extrapolation from human power. Human power has to take the existing human being as a given and therefore has to exercise itself to if it wishes to influence or subdue him. God is not powerful; he is omnipotent. This is a difference of kind and not degree. In relationship to a human being, God does not require to exercise power because, in the face of omnipotence, a human being is nothing. It is only God's love that imparts to the human being the existence that enables a relationship to God. Because of this, it can look as if God is weak and that it is the human being who has the power if the human being chooses to keep the strength imparted to him by God to himself. But »the one who is strong without God is weak« (CD 130; SV3 13, 126) and any human declaration of independence is merely defiance.

Yet, as we have seen, for Kierkegaard, »what is decisive is that with God everything is possible.«²¹ It becomes decisive precisely at the point where humanly speaking there is no possibility. In his discourse on 'The Joy of It: That Hardship Does Not Take Away But Procures Hope,' Kierkegaard reminds us that though the impossibility of the forgiveness of sins provokes either scandal or a spiritless acceptance in this age, the third and proper response to it is wonder:

The highest is proclaimed, the most marvelous, but no one wonders. It is proclaimed that there is forgiveness of sins, but no one says, »it is impossible.« Scarcely anyone turns away offended and says, »it is impossible;« even less does anyone say it in wonder and as the one who says it who would like it to be true but does not dare to believe it, the one who still does not want to let go of it but unhappily loves this pronouncement that he does not dare to believe even less is it said by one who just believes it, one whose repentance is mitigated into a quiet sorrow that in turn is transfigured into a blessed joy, the one who therefore, expressing his unspeakable gratitude to God, refreshes his soul by repeating, »It is impossible!« Oh, blessed refreshment, that the one who was brought close to despair because it was it was impossible now believes it, blessedly believes it, but in his soul's wonder continues to say, »it is impossible!« (CD 107; SV3 13, 105).

Not to believe gives victory to the despair which is not only the reaction to but the cause of the evil in the first place. The holocaust shows what despair can do. Forgiveness as God's possibility becomes decisive just where there is no human possibility of forgiveness – in the face of the unforgivable.

Notes

1. In this article, Kierkegaard's works are referenced to the English edition of *Kierkegaard's Writings*, edited and translated by H. and E. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1978-1998, and to *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers (JP)*, edited and translated by H. and E. Hong, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967-75. References to the Danish text are to either the third edition of the *Søren Kierkegaards Samlede Værker (SV3)*, 3rd edition, edited by A.B. Drachmann, J.L. Heiberg and H.O. Lange, revised by P.P. Rohde, vols. 1-20, Copenhagen, Gyldendals Forlag, 1962-1964, or *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter (SKS)*, edited by Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Joakim Garff, Jette Knudsen, Johnny Kondrup, Alastair McKinnon, Finn Hauberg Mortensen, Copenhagen, Gads Forlag, 1997-2002; furthermore to *Søren Kierkegaards Papirer*, 2. ed., Copenhagen 1968-70. The following abbreviations are used for the English Titles: *MLW: The Moment and Late Writings (KW 23)*; *SD: The Sickness unto Death (KW 19)*; *WL: Works of Love (KW 16)*; *CA: The Concept of Anxiety (KW 8)*; *UD: Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits (KW 15)*; *CD: Christian Discourses (KW 17)*.
2. In Psalm 73, the psalmist confesses that he has almost lost faith because the wicked seem to prosper mightily at the expense of the righteous. However, in the temple he receives a vision of the ultimate downfall of the wicked despite present appearances and his confidence in divine justice is restored. A similar protest and reassurance is to be found in Psalm 94, which goes on to rejoice in the blessedness of being punished while in the meantime the Lord digs a pit for the prosperous wicked. The wicked themselves think to deceive God as they say to themselves in midst of their crimes, »The Lord does not see, the God of Jacob does not perceive« (Psalm 94:7). This finds an echo in the fact that Kierkegaard follows the article on »Divine Justice« in *The Moment* no. 8 with one entitled »Tremble – Because in One Sense It Is So Infinitely Easy to Fool God!«
3. Jankélévitch's main works on the subject – the two essays *Dans l'honneur et la dignité* (1948) and *Pardonner?* (1971) – are collected in the *L'Imprescriptible*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1986.
4. See here; for instance, many of the contributors to the Symposium edited by Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman which forms the second part of Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*, Schocken Books, New York, 1998 (revised and expanded edition). This powerful text raises many of the questions this paper addresses in a particularly pointed and poignant way.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1958.
6. »Le Siècle et le Pardon: Entretien avec Michel Wievorka« first appeared in *Monde de débats* 9, December 1999, and is reprinted in Jacques Derrida, *Foi et Savoir* suivi de *Le Siècle et le Pardon (Entretien avec Michel Wievorka)*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000, pp. 101-133. The essay is an outcome of three years' consideration of forgiveness in Derrida's seminar. Translations in the text of the present paper are my own.
7. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 108.
8. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 108.
9. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, pp. 119-120.
10. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 109.

11. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 109.
12. See also Mark 10:27, 14:36; Luke 1:37.
13. For a compelling and too little known reading of Kierkegaardian category of offence, especially in relation to the gospels, see David McCracken, *The Scandal of the Gospels: Jesus, Story and Offense*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, especially chapter 4 »Offense or Faith: The Kierkegaardian Choice«, pp. 41–68.
14. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 119.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2000, p. 605. Ricoeur here relies on the standard French translation of Paul's phrase *panta stegei* in 1 Cor 13:5 as »elle [la charité] excuse tout«. Most English translations take the verb *stegein* to mean 'endure' or 'bear with'. The epilogue to this book (pp. 591–656) is entitled »Le pardon difficile« and engages extensively with both Jankélévitch and Derrida. Ricoeur agrees explicitly with Derrida that forgiveness is wedded to the unforgivable, but regards it, as his title indicates, as difficult rather than impossible. He takes the line that forgiveness is an irreducible, and therefore inexplicable given, like love. Kierkegaard is given practically the last word in the book, but interestingly, in a passing reference to the lilies and the birds and their lesson to man of his own magnificence. Kierkegaard's own discussions of forgiveness are not dealt with.
16. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 113.
17. This was a response to a question from the audience after Derrida's lecture on 'Forgiveness', delivered on 14th Oct 1999, at 'Questioning God', the second conference on Religion and Postmodernism held at Villanova University, Philadelphia, PA, USA.
18. Ettore Rocca, »La Memoria, il Silenzio e lo Straniero: Søren Kierkegaard, Primo Levi e i Campi di Sterminio«, *Quaderni Di Studi Kierkegaardiani* 1, pp. 115–125, p. 125.
19. Derrida, *Le Siècle et le Pardon*, p. 133.
20. In a journal entry (*Pap. XI 2 A 3; JP 1224*), Kierkegaard writes that forgiveness is the prerogative only of the divine and that the sinner is justified in saying to human forgiveness:

No, thank you, may I rather ask to be punished and suffer my punishment and be spared your miserable, wretched forgiveness, which, even if I were properly saved and become somewhat meritorious, would probably turn up again and in the form of envy the forgiveness would be charged to my account.

Human forgiveness, in this passage, does not cease to see the sin and refuses to *forget* it.
21. See note 7.