

From the 'paradox of morals' to an ethic of forgiving and reconciliation?

1. Introduction

In his recent book, *I was wrong. The Meaning of Apologies* (2008), Nick Smith states that apology is a source of moral meaning in modernity. This generalizing statement indicates a strong ethic consideration. Apology shouldn't be linked with a cost-benefit legalistic analysis. In such an analysis, offense and remission—or pardons—eventually hold each other in equilibrium: either through the expiration of punishment or as a consequence of apologizing. Nick Smith says that legal systems, which convert the worth of human existence into monetary terms, provoke unease and discomfort.

But Smith observes today a deplorable evolution. In today's geopolitical situations—and in postcolonial thinking—apology has become an act without engagement. The pope apologized for the sexual abuse committed by US priests, whose victims were innocent children and teenagers. The former Belgian Prime Minister apologized for the crimes committed by the colonial regime, which were lengthened by the postcolonial behavior of Belgian external politics and diplomacy. For these crimes his government wasn't responsible at all. Amplified by the media, these public statements of apology erode the moral—and even flatten the legal—meaning of public and private expressing of regret, and they corrode asking forgiveness. A second statement of Smith has peculiar weight for the closer consideration of pardon and regret in globalizing political and personal culture. It relates to the genealogy of the apologizing behavior and expression. From Plato to our time, apology developed from the public defense confronting a specific audience, into excusing and uttering sorry for an ambiguous (or underdetermined)—mediated—audience. 'Sorry' shares its root with the word 'sorrow', which on its turn can be put in relationship with grieve, sadness, trouble, and mourning, pointing at uncertain feelings and sensibilities about the disengaging future and the undone past. In the historical development of the concept of apology—from defense to excuse—other signifying concepts entered the discourses of offense, crime, retribution, and remission. Admission, confession, repentance, blaming, recognition, consolation, and recovery of personal dignity: all of which are linked with the event of offensive behavior and forgiving.

Someone who apologizes accepts to have been blamed for an injury done. Through the apology she explains—convincingly or not—the reasons of the wrong doing, both to herself and the offended, and to the 'third' (whether this is a peculiar community, or society at large). In Smith's view this 'validates' the beliefs in good and bad both of the offended and of the 'third' party. This validation enhances the restoration of social bonds, personal interrelationships, and consolidates the sharing of values and

norms. The reinstatement of the dignity of the offended person being an important outcome, the future of all parties is secured, while expectations and hope are instigated. If honesty and truthfulness are the case, the offended, the offender, and the 'third' together find the way to rebuild an imminent normative community, for which they equally engage themselves and to which they jointly feel committed.

2. The present-day global debate on forgiveness and reconciliation

In case of truthfulness and honesty, such is the problem that lasts. It makes the so-called moral meaning of apology in modernity easier said than done. The moral meaning of apology—and, consequently, of forgiveness, in as far as it leans upon uttered feelings of remorse and the affirmation of guilt—is itself a moral quandary. Or to say it differently: the moral meaning of apologizing is itself a paradox of morals. The catch-22, to some extent, is evidenced in most of the shortcoming endeavors to organize global society along the lines of transitional justice procedures, while confronting issues of unembarrassed crimes against humanity, blatant transgressions of peace, and deliberate warfare misdemeanors. Seeking reconciliation through transitional justice courses of action, confronts humanity with the endlessly troubled blending of forgiveness and apology, of recognition and declaration of guilt, of self-worth and admission of culpability.

The unsettled combination of pardon, apology, culpability admission, and guilt, makes it evident that in global ethical thinking we still are in a state of discourse instability. This situation—and the human rights violations circumstances worldwide—complicates the search for peace and justice in concrete situations of crimes against humanity and these rights violations. In case of radical conflict—such as in Northern Ireland, in Israel – Palestine, in Sudan — Darfour, or in Sri Lanka—distinctive parties dispute each other's narratives of the conflict. We should remember that such was not the case at the end of the Second World War and all along the Nuremberg Trials. The Nazis were beaten and those Germans, who were still haunted by Nazi-sympathies, were obliged to conceal them. The situation was one of an apparent and undisputed discourse, the discourse of the conqueror. The Nuremberg Trials consolidated this one-sidedness, what facilitated the transition towards a period of conciliation, based—for the time being—on the widely recognized disgrace of a whole nation.

Nonetheless, what in recent times developed into an issue of concern is the feasible relationship between memory (memorials), repentance, conciliation, building or rebuilding society, and human dignity after violation. The idea of a 'transitional justice', approved and endorsed by governments, is linked with this awareness. For instance, the *International Center for Transitional Justice* has listed five basic approaches to transitional justice: (a) criminal prosecutions, (b) truth commissions, (c) reparation programs, (d) security system reforms, (e) memorialization efforts (Source: *International Center for*

Transitional Justice website). Might it be possible to deduce in some way or another, a global ethic of reconciliation from the combination of these basic approaches? Or, will such an ethic turn out merely to be derision from the point of view of the paradox of morals?

3. The imperative significance of Jankélévitch's moral philosophical examination of *pardon*

Reading *Le pardon*, I rested somewhat puzzled by the sinuousness of Jankélévitch examination of forgiving. As always the argumentative structure isn't made clear at the onset. It is in the process of reading that the reader might grasp structure of the argument. But this rhapsodic style is not my problem. I am well accustomed to it, after I went through his *Traité des vertus*, *Le paradoxe de la morale*, *Je-ne-sais-quoi et le presque-rien*, and *La Mort*, to name only the major philosophical contributions. With *Le pardon*, the problem lies elsewhere. I had the impression that the author stays perplexed by his own moral severity, what led him to an unavoidable incoherence, a kind of well conceived of indecision. As a reader I was perplexed with the author by the inescapable reversals in the treatment of what forgiving might do in human relationships. The volte-face has a clear-cut dichotomist characteristic. Yes, there are abysses of malice and malevolence, the unthinkable as such. Yes understanding might lead to forgiveness.

Are the two statements equally genuine? Or are they in contradiction with each other? Do they oblige us to find our way out in comprehending, explaining, and curing the evil acts of men, in times of war, depression, poverty, and exploitation? What if it is correct that *Homo Sapiens* was the very reason for the extinction of his nephew, *Homo Neanderthalensis*? What if the latter was Abel and the first was Kain? And yet, the terrors of men and the disasters of mankind, only a short time after that enigmatic disappearance of a related human species, weren't lesser. Millions have died, without explanation, without admission, leaving but a few traces of what has been.

When Jankélévitch considers the contribution of understanding to pardon, he has some beautiful arguments to convince mankind of the role of forgiveness in the appeasement and the conciliation. We might prefer the latter word to 'reconciliation', for it captures the genuine innovative —birth giving— character of the future pacifying union among men who were but enemies to each other.

Yes, understanding might enable the offended to pardon, as it might equally lead the offender to apology and admission of the evils done. Let's focus on this side of the volte-face.

Five reasons can be given in favor of the nexus 'understanding – pardon'. Understanding of the evils done establishes an abstract brotherhood among men. It has an edifying character, we shouldn't ignore.

In understanding, man recognizes and respects a comparative truth in the divergent claim of the other, making it answerable.

The forgiveness induced by understanding lacks the second person, for it is related to the anonym universality of the 'third'. The understanding addresses *Vous*, (in French, *Sie* in German, *U* in Dutch, *Ön* in Hungarian) instead of *Tu* (*Du*, *Jij*, *Te*). In *You* as *Sie*, the general others: *They*, *Ils*, *sie*, *Zij*, *Ök*, are included as well.

Forgiveness from understanding, though remaining a kind of simili-pardon, might bring forward a genuine communication between the offended and the offender, as they reciprocally abandon their *philautie*, their peculiar self-centeredness, to pave the way for some intellectual generosity. On a personal level, in forgiving through understanding, I welcome the other — *l'autre*— with his spoken words, transgressing my pitiful monologue of rancor and hate, abandoning the soliloquy of resentment. In the intelligible dialogue of remembering, of admission, and of explanation, I oblige me to welcome the sincere spoken word of the other in its most favorable meaning (Gusdorf).

Finally, forgiveness through understanding, puts the human person in his dignity, not exclusively as this specific other — *l'autre*— the my detailed personal relationship with her, but as the Other — *Autrui*— standing for all the others, infinitely multiplied in the 'humanness' (*hominité*) of humankind. *Autrui* is the 'I' in plural, the I of *sobornost*, of conciliarity, beyond whatever social attachment, institution, and organization. This 'I' is always far away and nearby —paradox of paradoxes—, obliging in its invitation to diminish the swelling of my *philautie*.

But still, we should remember that abysses of malice and malevolence block all understanding and comprehensive excuse. No, it isn't true that 'intellection', as Jankélévitch called it, will lead deductively, to forgiving. 'Intellection' will lead merely to understand the 'circonstances atténuantes', extenuating circumstances. A gulf remains between 'intellection' and pardon, which only can be bridged by an irrational jump in the personal sphere of I and Thou, *Ich und Du*. Understanding the offense, ultimately means that the offended accepts that she wasn't offended at all, and that malice merely was an explicable accident. Deceitfully, 'intellection' anaesthetizes the offense, the crime, the malevolence, and the inhumanness. Even time —this other anaesthetizing operator— cannot annihilate the crime. Once again, only real pardon — *le vrai pardon*—, in its irrational and pathetic character, might cure, without making disappear misdeed and inhumanity.

Jankélévitch's legendary severity goes even further. 'Imprescriptibility' is the mark of those crimes that are forever beyond all 'intellection', whatever the understanding and comprehension of them might present as a proper explanation.

Les millions d'exterminés, eux, ont besoin de notre rigueur...

...

...notre "rigueur" voudrait simplement exprimer qu'il n'y a *aucun rapport* entre leurs crimes et le temps, pas même un rapport de rancune...

In the midst of his examination of dimensions of forgiveness and of the different appearances of it, Jankélévitch hits on the subject of the expiration of crimes against the humanness of humanity. His opinions are well known to all who are readers of his work. Nazi crimes are unforgettable and unforgivable. They are outside times and beyond intellection. The 'quiddity' dissolves in the 'quoddity' of the misdeeds. Understanding the 'what' and the 'how' of the misdeeds, remains forever unrelated to the 'that' they were committed.

In this, we might easily agree with Jankélévitch, were it not that in yet another volte-face of his examination, he transposes the unbridgeable gulf between 'quiddity' and 'quoddity' to the domain of those crimes that, properly speaking, aren't crimes against the humanness of humankind.

In fact, between chronology and axiology, the author comes across the same abyss, which cannot be bridged.

In Tolstoj's *Resurrection*, Katjoesja Maslowa finally accepts the benevolent 'acting behavior' of Prince Dmitri Nechljoedow, he himself trying to undo what he provoked, but without being able to undo what he has done. All of this is utterly unrelated to time. Her acceptance of Nechljoedow's benevolence leads her not to forgiving, nor to understanding. Nevertheless, it brings her peace and serenity of spirit. The acceptance of the nobleman's benevolence belongs to another realm: the kingdom of ends, the dominion of resurrection and transfiguration, where past and present are unknotted, opening all at the sudden a two-sided future for both individuals personally. Were it the effect of time or 'intellection' to improve the offender, the spontaneity of personal conversion would be useless, and sincere repentance and moral crisis would lose their substance. The same can be said about forgiving and reconciling. Time and understanding —so it is stated in the reverse of Jankélévitch's argument— do not have weight in the morals of crime and pardon.

But paradoxically, it is within time that an individual human being personally fulfills her vocation as a moral being. *A l'instant meme*, instantly, *hic et nunc*, *in einem Augenblick* – *ogenblikkelijk*, as it satisfactorily may be said in German and Dutch: 'at a glance'. As moral beings —men and women of 'doing', of "that it must be done", of 'quoddity', of *séance tenante*—, we fulfill our vocation. We are called for and we don't walk out, for we decide to carry out what is required. Moral life isn't a process, for it is a drama. It is the drama of *das Augenblick*, 'kairos', not to be missed.

But once again, with a paradoxical reversal, moral life it proposed to be the salary of men's volitional effort not to miss the instant, not to be afraid of what comes up to and what cannot be avoided. Only ignorance, unawareness, anxiety, *tartufferie*, untie us from this dramatic destiny, in which our humanness is validated and our dignity announced. All this happens within historical times, and within historical times, at the inner circle of our personal history. How one may put it, our personal history turns out to be the very process of our self-conquered sincerity, of our overcoming the *Angst* confronting the ambiguousness of our existence.

The philosopher knows it quite well. Repentance means the sincerity of regret. It stands for the intensive dedication of resolution. And only on this condition, regret and admission have a redemptory character. Not only for me, but also for the other in front of me, and for the 'Other', who was and is and will be. Genuine pardon is possible only between man and man, on a personal level. *A l'instant meme*, free of charge: leaving the other to decide whether the apologies given are to be accepted or not. Once again: harshness that cannot be avoided, for the moral philosopher takes it not as his purpose to formulate once and for all an ethic of forgiveness. Such an ethic, over again, will turn out to be a miserable pretext for the crimes and the offenses that cannot be undone.

In his own words:

Le passage du plus ou moins, traversant tous les degrés du comparatif, ne saurait remplacer ce changement du tout au tout, cette conversion de contradictoire à contradictoire que le pardon suppose...

Even when oblivion, wearing off, or integration (through justification and explanation), succeeds in dissolving crime and rancor to the infinitesimal minimum of minima, it will not pave the way to a new life, a new order, a truthful conciliation, able to create dignity and self-esteem for all. Yet at the end, we still are obliged to confront the unforgivable, which is beyond — outside and further than— all comprehension, and which therefore must be remembered time and again.

4. Testimonies from world literature

In the abovementioned, I already referred to Lev Nikolajevitsj Tolstoj's, *Resurrection*. One knows the significance of Russian literature both for the work of Jankélévitch and Lévinas. Let us recall Jankélévitch sayings (I quote):

Earlier we have dwelled upon the secure and viable workings of the aesthetic —ethic, I would add— imagination, and with the dead born volatile inconsistent realizations of charity. The first survive their

creation in a permanent manner. The second are alike disappearing appearances.

...

In moral acting, doing doesn't result in what has been done for all times. It urges us to do, without interruption, what has been done again and again. Can one understand that what is empty from whatever content, likewise being full of love, must be done unconditionally?

....

Stated otherwise: the imperative of love doesn't depend on specific circumstances, independent of any casuistry whatsoever, free from all conditionality. The imperative to love is the only unconditional imperative, without limits and without *quatenus* (= in so far as).

When she was sixteen years old, the girl, Katinka Maslowa, met Dmitri Nechljoedow, at the time he visited the estate of his wealthy aunt. She felt in love with the adult prince, and he felt for her grace, charming kindness, and her young beautiful body. He made her pregnant. But soon afterwards, he left the estate to rejoin the undisturbed existence of the wealthy. She has born a boy, who died in misery. She is chased from the estate, for she is an evil woman from her pregnancy onwards. She entered prostitution and got mixed up in the killing of a client, for which she hasn't any personal responsibility at all. She is condemned to hard labor and transportation to a Siberian penal establishment.

By chance, the rich prince is a member of the jury, which has to decide upon her fate in the course of her prosecution. He recognized his charming young mistress, and regret creeps into his mind, disconcerting his undisturbed existence. How could he have driven such an innocent and beautiful young girl into this state of wretchedness? How could he repair, how could he relieve that what cannot be undone?

From that time onwards, Nechljoedow, devotes his life and fate to the restitution of Katjoesja's dignity and humanness. Neither time nor money, not even his freewheeling style of life, will be spared, to bring back what cannot be restored. For what has been, isn't anymore. And what is, hasn't been before. Dmitri follows his ex-girlfriend, who on her miserable journey, continues to refuse his favors and time and again ignores his passionate demands to forgive him. At last, he arrives in the region of the penalty camps in Siberia, in an effort to share the torments and despair of the prisoners.

At the end of his own journey, and after he proposed her to marry her, she seems to accept his efforts to clean her reputation and to obtain an appeal for mercy for her. The judicial mistake is recognized and she goes free. In this final moment, she says that he, whom she still loves secretly, has to fulfill his own life, to marry a woman of his rank and raise children with her.

She has decided to follow a political prisoner, who imagines himself as her lover.

At last, both Katjoesja and Nechljoedow are resurrected, not because the past has been restored, and not because they both will enter a new life as husband and wife. Their future is the future of hope and love of humankind.

Tolstoj depicts this ultimate *à l'instant meme*, this *Augenblick*, as a liberating delight:

It was as if abruptly he had found, after a long period of torment and distress, tranquility and freedom of the soul....

It is a radical opening in time, a new beginning, and a resurrected existence, in which the past hasn't been undone, since the past cannot be undone. A radical gulf is kept between the past and the future.

Vasili Grossman, in his beautiful novel *Panta Rhei*, has portrayed the same opening of time *in* time. Repeatedly the principal character of the novel, Igor Grigorjevitch, confronted with the malice and malevolence of his relatives and friends under Stalinist terror, says to himself (and to the reader): let us not judge hastily, let us think it all over, let us consider circumstances and particular cases.

Grossman, sarcastically, confronts the reader with the problem of guilt and responsibility of all those who collaborated with the secret agencies of state terror. They collaborated —passively or actively— in the purges and the prosecutions of innocent men and women. They are people who denounced others to keep themselves free of examination and trial. Grossman speaks of the four Judas-figures: persons who escaped from thirty years of imprisonment and hard labor in the Stalinist camps, and who aren't forgiven, nor understood, by Ivan Grigorjevitch after his return from prison camp.

What has been done —the crimes committed, the denunciations and the vicious revenges— cannot be undone. Igor Grigorjevitch, at the end of the novel, refuses to search for repair or admission. He decides to return to the house of his father and mother, only to experience that it doesn't exist anymore. There, in the town by the sea, nothing remains from his youth and the happy days in summer. There, nearby the beach, he stands, with his head bowed to the earth. He still is the same. He is unchanged: a person further than time and beyond all circumstance.

Neither forgiving, nor understanding: only the radical opening in time. A new beginning, which marks the end of the novel, leaving the reader discomfited and in distress, were it not that the writer has portrayed the love Igor felt for a woman who herself has committed the crime of denunciation.

In obeying the imperative of love —without compensation, without revenue, beyond reckoning, outside circumstantial computation, and therefore free from all conditionality— Igor consents to a future that remains empty of the perspective of return. In this, he resembles Nechljloedow and Katinka Maslowa:

The imperative to love is the only unconditional imperative, without limits and without *quatenus* (= in so far as).

5. Does the 'paradox of morals' evict an ethic of conciliation?

Genuine pardon is only possible between man and man. It happens on a personal level, *à l'instant meme*, free of charge, leaving the other free to decide whether the given apology is to be accepted or not.

This is the harshness that cannot be avoided. For the moral philosopher — Jankélévitch— doesn't take it as *his* purpose to formulate once and for all an ethic of forgiveness. Such an ethic, in his opinion, would turn out to be a miserable pretext for the crimes and the offenses that cannot be undone.

In Jankélévitch's words:

Le passage du plus ou moins, traversant tous les degrés du comparatif, ne saurait remplacer ce changement du tout au tout, cette conversion de contradictoire à contradictoire que le pardon suppose...

All those who have doubts about ethics with an ideological content, to be used in politics or in judicial rhetoric, share his opinion. Thomas De Koninck, from Laval University, Quebec, in 2002 recalls the words of Paul Ladrière ('La dignité humaine en question', Januar 2002):

Sans l'ancrage dans la concrétitude de chaque individu, la dignité et le respect inconditionnel de la personne dégénèrent en moralisme et en toutes sortes d'idéologies sexistes, racistes, nationalistes, corporatistes, classistes, élitistes, etc. Moralismes et idéologies qui ont en commun de n'accorder dignité et respect qu'à ceux qui leur semblent le mériter...

Does this harsh position evict the possibility of a search for an ethic of conciliation in times of crimes against humanity and human rights violation? It still is an intriguing and unavoidable question.

We know it: even the categories of 'crimes against humanity' and 'human rights violation' belong to an ideologically based normative discourse in 'global ethics'. But the moral status of 'global ethics' is itself a moral quandary. Those categories, today, are the domain of churchmen, politicians, NGO administrators, corporate managers, and all the gang of modern moralists, who don't stop chattering about codes and conduct.

They are the champions of the “comparative degrees” with which they try to circulate the personal level and the obligatory conversion of apologizing and forgiving. They go about individual dignity, in their talks about recognition and empowerment. In their moralisms —to refer once more to Paul Ladrière— they risk to dignify only those who in their proper statements deserve it. From a genuine moral point of view, they merely are begging the question. They fail to appreciate the ‘paradox of morals’.

But even if I agree with the critique on this ideological moralism, being aware of the dangers of “les entreprises réductionnistes” —as they were called by Jankélévitch—, I still experience the demand of a normative outlook on the meaning of these forms of ‘simili-pardon’ that might contribute to the conciliation among men. Isn’t it for the sake of the ‘humanness of humanity’, which Jankélévitch laid at the bottom of all genuine recognition and sincere establishment of a realm of values, that I feel this demanding force?

Jankélévitch has been categorical in his view on morals, emphasizing the core of morality as that what must be done: now, by me, without postponement, evicting calculation and proper understanding. When it is imperative, he once said, to do instead of to talk about, the important thing is not to be eloquently brilliant and spiritual, but to act in behalf of what is good. Acting —considered in this way, or better, from this angle— is undividable and one. Acting —from this point of view— is to do unconditionally in a world of events. It cannot be captured in whatever ideological language, which is the language of calculated time and place, of deliberation and reflection.

In this categorical view, he imagines theoretical ethics as some kind of dogmatic substantialism, in which first ‘the good’ is ‘theoretized’, later to be said that it indeed is good by all means, and to be afterwards applied after the conceived model theoretically put forward. He turns his back to this dogmatism, for what is good isn’t it through a similarity with an archetype. What is good, is the free creation of our “déliure éthique”, to be translated as: our moral creativity on the spot, without delay, and without delegation (*Traité des Vertus*, t. 1: *Le sérieux de l’intention*).

How convincing Jankélévitch emphasis on ‘the doing’ and ‘acting’ dimension of the good may be, it remains difficult not to reconsider the relationship between, at one side reflection, understanding, and comprehension, and at the other side the practice of acting in particular circumstances following the events in which came up to us all at a sudden.

Considering cases of conciliation, after human dramas have taken place, in times of war, in situations of civil uproar, religious and geopolitical conflict, we need the time to reflect and to delay our judgment. In the words of Vasili Grossman —though they were meant to be ironic and deconstructing—: let us be patient to think things over, and let us not judge

to hastily. Let us ask ourselves: what is really happening all the time? What went wrong, and why people behave as they did?

Indeed, one can agree with Jankélévitch, that the delay needed for reflection and for understanding remains a matter of a third, of an outside position. But it is my opinion that in our globalizing worldscape, we cannot easily break away from these pressing situations of external viewpoint. Human rights violations, regretfully, are the salt of the earth. Crimes against humanity haven't diminished after the two world wars.

There is a remarkable passage in the first volume of Jankélévitch's *Traité des vertus*, which can be used to diminish the austerity of his rightly stated 'paradox of morals'.

(I quote): Doing starts by yourself. The imperative to do is absolute and initial. To say it otherwise: you are obliged to do because you are obliged. The value that has content —if she it is, which we must fulfill— cannot be valuable otherwise than by higher reason. But this higher reason, on its turn, depends on still other reasons to do, and this till the very limit of what is categorical out of itself, justifying itself. The normative sciences tell us what we should do, on condition that we were obliged to do so. They do not tell us that we should do. They rather assume the 'that', while already they tacitly are moral....

This remarkable statement concerning the 'normative sciences' —and I suppose that here is meant 'ethics', both theoretical and practical, in more conventional way— admits that some implicit, or tacit, moral purpose already is at work. Moreover, Jankélévitch must have been convinced that these 'normative sciences' are both possible and conceivable. One can say even more: he admits that what men are studying and examining in the 'normative sciences' has weight for men's judgment. In fact, he agrees that the 'normative sciences' allow men to decide upon what should be done, even agreeing that the 'what should be done' is dependent on conditions of the 'that' something ought to be done. Okay, always there will be an ultimate final moment —*ein Augenblick*, only the time for a first glance— in which all knowledge breaks down, and in which we are definitely left alone, further than cognition —far beyond 'intellection'—, yet until this final ultimate moment, perhaps we are left with but a few moments to reflect, to think things and circumstances over, to consider, to examine, to wonder, to wonder the way Igor Grigorjevich did it, after his return from Stalinist prison camps in Siberia.

Has not Jankélévitch fully agreed on this? Hasn't he said in his wonderful *Le paradoxe de la morale* —the final statement of his moral philosophy in 1982— what follows?

... thinking is anterior to moral valuation, but the reverse is also true, the moral valuation is anterior to thinking...

I took the freedom to translate the French “évaluation” by the deweyan “valuation”, for this concept is more precise and it offers more ethical perspective on the issues we confront ourselves with.

To me it seems that the French moral philosopher has never ignored that thinking, reasonably, might dedicate itself to moral valuation, and that this is a consequence of moral valuation itself. The thinking is in some way or another a moral act itself. It is a doing, and as a doing it springs from a sudden insight that something ought to be done: the consideration and examination of human misery, of the violations of human dignity, time and again.

An ethic of conciliation and human dignity isn't without engagement, nor commitment. An ethic, if it were the result of a sincere human effort to examine and to understand with the aim to suggest a curing course of action, is itself the result of a moral act. An ethic of conciliation, if it were sincere, is already morally preoccupied. In agreement with the great US moral scientist and philosopher, the regretted Abraham Edel, I would prefer to confirm that the ‘normative sciences’, occasionally at the basis of an ethic of conciliation, do not start from the academic question “Why should I be moral?” (Kai Nielsen), but from the engagement “that something must be done, more precisely, that without delay something should be examined.” If we are committed —by free choice and without delay— to the fate of human rights and the humanness of humanity in times of war crime, then we oblige ourselves to the examination of defensible norms and values, to be justified on reasonable grounds. Only then, we might have the opportunity to convince ourselves that a normative community is within reach. This will be a community in which men will have conquered —only for the time being— the opportunity to face each other as moral beings, in the same way as Nechljloedow and Maslowa faced each other at the end of their voyage through life. Nothing will be definite, for the morality of our normativity will never reach beyond the paradox, that I must do it. With the words of the young Jankélévitch, taken from his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of Friedrich Schelling:

We create our roles ourselves and while we are playing our roles, we collaborate with an invisible creator who discloses himself bit by bit in the course of what becomes....

(Jankélévitch, *L'Odysée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*, Paris, Harmattan, re-edition 2004 from 1933, p. 337. My translation)

Earlier, in commenting Nick Smith's book, I stated that the moral meaning of apology —and, consequently, of forgiveness, in as far as it leans upon uttered feelings of remorse and the affirmation of guilt— is itself a moral quandary. The moral meaning of apologizing is itself a paradox of morals. The catch-22, to some extent, is evidenced in most of the failing endeavors to organize global society along the lines of transitional justice procedures. Nonetheless we oblige ourselves to confront issues of shameless crimes against humanity, blatant transgressions of peace, and deliberate warfare misdemeanors. And though seeking conciliation through transitional justice courses of action, confronting humanity with the endlessly troubled blending of forgiveness and apology, of recognition and declaration of guilt, of self-worth and admission of culpability, we still worry ourselves and we feel obliged to understand what is going on, to understand so that we might cure.

Though the ever unsettled combination of pardon, apology, culpability admission, and guilt, makes it evident that in global ethical thinking we still are —and we still will be until the end of times— in a state of discourse instability, yet this makes our investigation into the issue of pardon and apology the more eminently an ethical one.

We saw how according to Smith's apology —and *a fortiori* 'simili-forgiveness'— 'validates' the beliefs in good and bad both of the offended and of the 'third' party. It enhances the institution of social bonds, personal interrelationships, and it consolidates the sharing of values and norms. The inauguration of the dignity of the offended person being an important outcome, the future of all parties is secured, while expectations and hope are instigated. If honesty and truthfulness are at stake, the offended, the offender, and the 'third' together will find a way to build an imminent normative community, for which they equally engage themselves and to which they jointly feel committed. With this normative community, hope is installed that on a personal level, the one and the other will make "as much love as is possible in as less being as possible":

...faire tenir le plus possible d'amour dans le moins possible d'être

.....

Cet amour qui aime l'humanité de l'homme — et l'aime d'amour, non par raison—, qui aime le genre humain comme on aime quelqu'un, qui aime incompréhensiblement la personne-en-général, qui aime le genre humain incarné dans la personne et la personne élargie aux dimension de l'humanité, cet amour est évidemment paradoxal.

The supra-natural love, in which man loves the humanness of man, simply to love humanity for its own sake, paradoxically transfigures love. In this love man loves humanity as if it were a concrete person, a *Thou* for her personally. Supra-natural love, but genuine love, and therefore a paradox.

And let's remember that 'paradoxal' means: against nature, against the process of facts, facts, facts, that so superbly was ridiculed by Charles Dickens in his *Hard Times*, against the current: *contre courant*.

Being and love, they suppose each other but they equally contradict each other.

Paul Ricoeur once said (*Le Juste*, Paris, Éditions Esprit, 1995):

Quelque chose est dû à l'être humain du seul fait qu'il est humain.
....une exigence plus vieille que toute formulation philosophique...

A demand of all times, until the end of times, recognized by all human beings wherever they live, and yet unfulfilled until the end of times.

Coda

Jankélévitch and Thomas Hobbes: the ever-ambiguous importance of the peace-seeking moral philosopher

The sixth 'law of nature', in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, gives evidence of the weight of pardon for peace in the 'commonwealth'. In three points, the English philosopher, states the advantages of pardon for human interrelationship in organized society. Without the provision of pardon, the disorder of violence would be a continuous menace. Careful management of the future could get the offended to accept apology and to forgive the wrongs of the past. The conclusion is undemanding: "Pardon is nothing but granting of peace". Pardon, for Hobbes, is 'until the end of times' conditional, depending on a continuously painstaking calculative deliberation, in which the past, the present and the future are meaningful put together in an overall consideration. Understanding is the very basis of generosity. Baruch couldn't say this better than Thomas.

Yet, it would be erroneous to oppose this view to Jankélévitch's analysis of pardon, as I already might have made clear in the foregoing subsection. In the tension between severity and immoderation, pardon confronts us with the complexity of modern man. Let us remind the words of Jankélévitch taken from his *Le paradoxe de la morale* —the penultimate summing up of his moral philosophy:

One could say that there exists an analogy between the thorn-up firmament of values and the city of persons: the axiological deficit of coherence seems to have been made present in the monadological plurality. Of course the plural absolutism opens some emptiness between the persons, a few discontinuities, a number of passages that mobilize intransitively the stream of love. More can be affirmed, for the plural absolutism rouses the struggle for life. Friction and clash are brought forth by equal justified claims to one almighty substance, without value sharing. Equally, the absolutism of each person and of

freedom thought separately, for which each purpose is considered on its own (as *imperium in imperio*), awakens the reciprocal attraction and the wild competition. In a few words only: it rouses the passionate tension. To use the language both of Pascal and Leibniz: the monadic universe of persons and their contradictory egocentrisms is the totality of which the center is everywhere. The Other —as *Autrui*— is my brother in humanity. Paradoxically, at the same time, he is the one who get in my way. My brother enemy, who is nearby and far away. The second person —Martin Buber's *Du*— is the sanctuary of community, despite the fact that he is the object of envy and hate. Through the law of alternation my place has been taken by someone else, my part has been taken by the other. Solidarity may be the mark of the monadic persons; nevertheless in completing each other, they remain impossibly together. In this manner, abundance turns into shortage. (My translation; p. 155)

This is not another version of philosophical pessimism, inspired by the unavoidable Schopenhauer. No, it is only Hobbesian realism, which Jankélévitch shares with Pascal and Leibniz (to whom he referred explicitly in the quoted text).

But what might be the cause of desperate feelings, is the origin of joyful expectation, of hope:

L'annonce du Messie est l'évènement limite qui peut arriver à tout moment;

To use a paraphrase of Jankélévitch's beautiful and profound philosophical language: the announcement of Masjiach is the limit event occurring at any time whatsoever. It is the future of all futures, because that what comes at any time, is unexpectedly becoming my present. In the same way, out of the blue my own death becomes my present, though, during my life, she remained my future. My death is always a future and my birth is always a past. But suddenly they are imminent. Time is near. Time has come. Time knocks at my door. It is God who stands behind the door. Listen to the philosopher's prose:

...l'avenir de tous les avènements, celui qui est toujours à venir devient brusquement notre présent. C'est ainsi que la mort propre devient brusquement notre présent, elle qui par définition demeure un futur pendant toute la durée de la vie. Car ma mort est toujours un avenir et ma naissance toujours un passé. Et voici qu'elle devient subitement imminente; les temps sont proches, les temps viennent, ils sont là, les temps sont venus, les temps frappent à la porte. C'est Dieu qui est

derrière la porte... (*Sources. Recueil.* Paris, Seuil, 1974, établi par Françoise Schwab, p. 73).

It was Lev Tolstoj, who in 1890 wrote the phrase: "God knocks at the door". Time has come. From this great Russian author, Jankélévitch got his inspiration for the theme. Each day, historical times come to an end, for they are the times —in the plural— of misery, despair, injustice, and crimes against humanity. All the way long from *Homo Neanderthalensis* to *Homo Sapiens*, in passing the crusade against the Kathars, the sacking of Jews in Worms, the pogrom of Kishenev, the killings fields of Ypres, the industrialized murder in Birkenau, the Kulak destruction, etc., etc. The historical times are short of fulfilling love. The ending of historical times, each day of our lives —making that day the first day in Spring— means radical opening (*ouverture*) and ever ongoing adventure (*aventure*). An absolute and ultimate end of time —such as has been suggested by Olivier Messiaen in his famous Quatuor— is inconceivable. The ultimate end of time is impalpable, the impalpable of the impalpable.

In agreement with Tolstoj, Jankélévitch indicated love as the opening of all openings. Not the love of beings complementing each other, suffering from nostalgia and spleen. This dominant occidental conception of love assumes an original unity, which is lost and must be restored. This conception turns to the past. The love, Jankélévitch proposes in his moral philosophical examination, turns to the future, to the adventure that is 'ouverture'.

Par le fait même que nous visons un avenir infiniment lointain, que cet avenir n'arrivera jamais sur le calendrier, mais surviendra comme un profond mystère, comme le mystère de la mort débouche dans un autre ordre, il est toujours aussi présent : dire qu'il est toujours futur ou toujours présent revient au même. En somme ce demain est aujourd'hui.... *Demain éternel qui marche devant moi* (André Spire).

Ce demain il est mon aujourd'hui, il brille dans cette lampe allumée de l'espérance qui est au cœur de chacun de nous et il transfigure notre « tous les jours », notre quotidienneté, il l'oriente pour que l'espérance fleurisse perpétuellement en nous. (*Sources. Recueil.* Paris, Seuil, 1974, établi par Françoise Schwab, 81)

And in one of his final sayings, Jankélévitch once again looked back on 'time' as the inconceivable and impalpable

Le temps n'est pas seulement le plus insaisissable d'entre les insaisissables puisqu'il est, en tant que devenir, le contradictoire même de l'être: à peine avons-nous fait mine de définir le devenir, le devenir est déjà un autre que lui-même: le devenir est essentiellement instable... (*Premières et dernières pages.* Paris, Seuil, 1994, 225)

If pardon endlessly was (and still is) nothing but granting peace, the peace mentioned by Hobbes obligatory has be filled with love for humanity, for humanity's sake, making the lamp of hope flickering in the heart of those who are willing to, for those who have the capacity for it.

If pardon eternally is nothing but granting peace, it must make us—who are ready for it and have the honesty—turn our back to the past, transfiguring our commonness—our day-by-day trivialities—only to inflame the blossoming of hope in the eternity of our present.

If, truly, pardon ceaselessly is nothing but granting peace, the grant transfigures the human being in the light of a welcoming reception of the 'Other', which is the warrant of a limitless expansion of humaneness (*hominité*).

The words are from Georges Gusdorf, the other long forgotten moral philosophical voice on the continent.

Car, réduit à lui-même, l'homme est beaucoup moins que lui-même; au lieu que, dans la lumière de l'accueil, s'offre à lui la possibilité d'une expansion sans limite.

In the many concrete issues of forgiveness—real forgiveness between person and the other, in all those cases of honest apology, sincere admission, and candid explanation—we meet reasonableness beyond irrationality and intellection alike.

In forgiving through understanding, I welcome the other—*l'autre*—with his spoken words, transgressing the 'monoversion' of rancor and hate, leaving my soliloquy of resentment far behind. In the dialogue of remembering, of admission, and of explanation, I oblige me to welcome the sincere spoken word of the other in its most favorable meaning (Gusdorf).

Only in this way, I may contribute to the realm of truth—ceaselessly unfulfilled and still waiting for its ultimate achievement—and I play my part in the institution of moral order in what forever stays an ambiguous and ambivalent human reality.

Has not Jankélévitch written in his *la Musique et l'Ineffable* that the dialectics of an sincere dialogue between men—encroaching the seemingly coherent discourses and crushing the diatribes of the orators—shows itself as a 'interrupted serenade'.

The dialectics of dialogue—understanding and conciliating—emerges as a kind of questioning silence, a broken-up discourse in which the one listens to the other, and reciprocally, the other listens to the one.

Only that way, they are pushed forward to a future and a landscape that will be truly a human future and a human landscape. Each day again, and day after day: until the end of times.

Ronald Commers (1946 -)

Full professor moral philosophy and history of modern philosophy

Ghent University, Belgium

Department of Philosophy and Moral Science, Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Chairman of the *Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry*, member of the *International Global Ethics Association*

<http://www.cevi-globalethics.ugent.be>

Short bibliography (only book editions):

(1982) R. Commers. *De overbodigheid en de noodzakelijkheid van de moraal. Bericht aan de kinderen van Prometheus*, Baarn / A'pen, Het Wereldvenster / Standaard Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij (in Dutch. Translation: *The Superfluity and the Necessity of Ethics. Message to the Children of Prometheus*)

(2009 autumn, forthcoming) R Commers. *Kritiek van het Ethische Bewustzijn. Van liefde met recht en rede*. Leuven, ACCO Academic Publishers (in Dutch. Translation of the title: *A Critique of Moral Consciousness. Of Love with Justice and Reason*)

(2008) R. Commers. *Tussen de zichtbare en onzichtbare wereld. Vrijmetselaarsfilosofie en Mozart*. Leuven, ACCO Academic Publishers (in Dutch. Translation of the title: *Between the Visible and Invisible Realm. Philosophy, Freemasonry, and Mozart*)

(2008) R. Commers e.a. (eds). *Ethics in an Era of Globalization*, Aldershot, Ashgate.

(2005, 2009) R. Commers. *Het onzegbare en het onuitsprekelijke. Ethiek, metafysica en muziek bij Vladimir Jankélévitch*, Brussel, VUBPress (in Dutch. Translation of the title: *The indicible and the ineffable. Ethics, metaphysics, and Music in Vladimir Jankélévitch's*)

(International Jankélévitch *Forgiveness* Conference at Saint-Francis College, Brooklyn Heights, NY, Spring 2009)