<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Why There Should Be No Argument from Evil : Remarks on Recognition, Antitheodicy, and Impossible Forgiveness

Pihlström, Sami Johannes

2017

Pihlström , S J 2017 , ' Why There Should Be No Argument from Evil : Remarks on Recognition, Antitheodicy, and Impossible Forgiveness ' , International Journal of Philosophy & Theology , vol. 78 , no. 4-5 , pp. 523-536 . <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2017.1327368>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/301733>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2017.1327368>

---

cc_by_nc_nd

acceptedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

WHY THERE SHOULD BE NO ARGUMENT *FROM* EVIL: REMARKS ON ANTITHEODICY, RECOGNITION, AND IMPOSSIBLE FORGIVENESS

Sami Pihlström

1. Introduction: theodicism, antitheodicism, and failed recognition

Evil and suffering have typically been approached from two quite different perspectives: from (1) the traditional viewpoint of theology and philosophy of religion focusing on the question of *theodicy* (“how could an omnipotent, omniscient, and absolutely benevolent God allow seemingly unnecessary evil and suffering?”), and (2) the viewpoint of secular ethics, politics, and historiography, supplemented by, e.g., psychological, socio-psychological, and psychopathological accounts of evil-doing (“how can evil actions be explained?”, “why do people commit atrocities?”). However, it is unclear whether these discourses have much, or anything, in common. It seems that they often either intentionally or unintentionally fail to recognize each other as adequate responses to a universal human problem concerning our appropriate reactions – religious or secular – to the reality of evil and suffering, receiving different interpretations throughout history. Indeed, it remains unclear whether there is any such thing as *the* problem of evil and suffering at all. Thus, this division among the two main approaches to our topic already raises issues of *recognition*. In the following, I will explore some of the ways in which recognition becomes relevant in this area of reflection, drawing particular attention to the notion of forgiveness.

I have argued on a number of earlier occasions that we need a thoroughgoing philosophical articulation and defense of *antitheodicism*, a way of thinking about evil and suffering that firmly rejects the pursuit of theodicies allegedly justifying evil and suffering ([see author XXX]). This, however, cannot take place by simply dropping the controversies over evil and suffering taking place within theology and the philosophy of religion and by replacing them with a secular ethical and political discourse on evil and suffering. Instead, antitheodicism has to be carried through within both discourses. This general antitheodicism – philosophically more fundamental than, for example, the distinction between theological and non-theological views on evil and suffering – is, I believe, the key to the integration of the theological and the secular ethical approaches. In short, we should, by defending antitheodicism across the board, critically integrate the two apparently diverging approaches. We need to *emancipate* the problem of evil and suffering – including its traditional theological articulations – from theodacist assumptions that lead to a chronic non-acknowledgment of the sufferers’ experiential point of view. This also entails emancipating the problem of evil and suffering from the need to consider the so-called *argument from evil*. In the argument “from” evil, evil and suffering are seen as pieces of empirical evidence against theism (see, e.g., Rowe

2001). This presupposes understanding theism as a hypothesis to be tested in an evidentialist game of argumentation. Such a presupposition already fails to acknowledge the depth and variety of both religious and non-religious approaches to living with evil and suffering.

One way of cashing out what moral antitheodicism amounts to is to analyze theodicism as a failure of recognizing others' suffering. Furthermore, one way of cashing out what this mis- or non-recognition amounts to is to analyze the *unforgivability* of evil in a manner inspired by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's classical novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. The focus on recognition and forgiveness in this context can be understood as an attempt to show that there is something seriously wrong with mainstream analytic philosophers' of religion preoccupation with the argument from evil. In contrast, an ethically proper response to evil and suffering emerges, I will suggest, from a serious consideration of the mutual relations between recognition, forgiveness, and the unforgivable.

I maintain (but cannot fully argue here) that a promising way to critically integrate the above-mentioned apparently very different types of discourse on evil and suffering can be found in *theories of recognition*.¹ It may be argued that the two main approaches currently available in the literature on the problem of evil and suffering are by themselves too narrow to adequately deal with evil and suffering in their full complexity. We need to recognize both the unity of this issue and the differences-in-unity that need to be appreciated.²

Let me now introduce some further relevant terminology. Note, first, that the mainstream approach to the problem of evil in contemporary broadly analytic philosophy of religion is, arguably, strongly *theodictist*. It is well known that theodicies (traceable back to historical figures like Augustine, Aquinas, and Leibniz, and revived by leading recent philosophers of religion such as John Hick and Richard Swinburne) seek a justification, legitimation, and/or excusing of the omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely benevolent God's allowing the world (his creation) to contain evil and suffering. In a way or another, theodicies try to recognize the reality of evil and suffering as an unavoidable element in an overall harmonious divine plan. By "theodicism" we may refer to all those attempts to face the problem of evil and suffering that regard theodicy as a *desideratum* of theism, irrespective of whether one ends up endorsing or rejecting theism. The theodictist can, then, be an atheist, insofar as s/he concludes that God does not exist (or probably does not exist, or that there is no justification for theism) precisely because the theodictist desideratum cannot be fulfilled. Indeed, most atheists *are* theodictists in this sense, appealing to the "argument from evil" as a major consideration against theism.

Furthermore, those (e.g., Adams 1989, 2013; Plantinga 2000; van Inwagen 2006; Stump 2010) who offer a mere "defense" – instead of a theodicy proper – can be regarded as theodictists in the sense that they also seek to defend God and account for divine justice by arguing that, for all we know, God *could* have

ethically acceptable reasons to allow the world to contain evil and suffering, even on the massive scale familiar to us, though we cannot know those possible reasons to be actual. In short, both theodicies and defenses seek to respond to the argument *from* evil. However, theodicism is not restricted to positions available within the scope of the theism vs. atheism controversy. One may, by extension, hold secular versions of theodicism, replacing the alleged harmony of the cosmic divine plan with, say, a teleological conception of world-history or simple political necessity, which supposedly justifies (or explains away) any concrete instances of evil and suffering. Clearly, Hegel – a key source for recognition theories – is a major historical background figure of such theodacist ways of thinking.

By *antitheodicism*, in contrast, we may refer to the rejection of any such, or indeed *any*, theodicies – and of the theodacist requirement to produce one. For a defense of antitheodicism to be successful, the strongest conceivable arguments for theodicism need to be critically tested. The overall view I have tried to defend elsewhere is that antitheodicism is a necessary condition for the possibility of the moral point of view itself (see again author XXX). This antitheodicism, grounded in pragmatism and recognition theory, yields a meta-argument against the entire argumentative “game” based on the argument from evil, demonstrating that there is something seriously wrong – ethically wrong – in that game and that philosophers, theologians, as well as political theorists and other scholars ought to abandon any theodacist pursuits in order to appropriately acknowledge the real evil and suffering people have to experience in their lives.³

One way of articulating and defending antitheodicism is by focusing on the way in which some important contemporary forms of antitheodicism share a Kantian background and become manifest in key twentieth century philosophical approaches and in powerful literary works. The argument in [author XXX] starts from Immanuel Kant’s 1791 “Theodicy Essay”. The view that antitheodicism is needed to counter both theological and secular theodicies is based on an essentially moral argument, grounded in the idea that theodicies fail to adequately recognize the *meaninglessness* of suffering and hence treat suffering human beings (or, by extension, non-human sufferers) as mere means to some alleged overall good. Kant’s criticism of theodicies involves the Biblical character of Job, emphasizing his sincerity (*Aufrichtigkeit*) in not succumbing to the theodacist tendencies of insincerely and dishonestly functionalizing and legitimizing suffering, exemplified by Job’s “friends”.

From this Kantian starting point, we may develop the idea that theodicies are morally inadequate, or even immoral, responses to evil and suffering precisely due to a serious failure of recognition (or of acknowledgment). We may distinguish (in the contemporary discussion) between several “Kantian” varieties of antitheodicism, such as Jewish post-Holocaust ethical antitheodicism, Wittgensteinian antitheodicism, and pragmatist antitheodicism (cf. author XXX). Such approaches arguably provide us

with Kantian antitheodicies, even when not directly invoking Kantian considerations, since they can be seen as defending antitheodicism quasi-transcendentally *as a condition for the possibility of the moral perspective (or moral seriousness) itself*. In this sense, it can be argued that *only* an antitheodacist can occupy a morally serious perspective on evil and suffering.⁴ The details of such approaches cannot be discussed in this essay, but the specific view on forgiveness to be examined in some detail below, based on Vladimir Jankélévitch's ideas, can be seen as a contribution to Jewish post-Holocaust antitheodicism. More generally, my discussion is transcendental in the sense of drawing attention to antitheodicism as constitutive of the moral standpoint and its possibility.

It is also worth pointing out that there is no lack of cases illustrating the *failures* of mutual recognition in the discourse on evil and suffering. Christian philosophers like van Inwagen (2006) typically argue against political and cultural thinkers like Susan Neiman (2002) who view the problem of evil as a historically transforming problem receiving both theological and secular articulations, while secular political theorists, in contrast, often maintain that theological views on evil lead us astray and should be abandoned. Both standpoints are problematic and can be seen as lacking in adequate recognition of the other party. There are only relatively few (e.g., Bernstein 2002; Neiman 2002) who adequately recognize the deep theological structures of the problem of evil and suffering while avoiding the narrowly theodacist discourse of the contemporary mainstream.

Of course, the relations of mutual recognition (or lack thereof) between conflicting theoretical or philosophical approaches to the problem of evil and suffering are, arguably, considerably less significant than the relations of recognition (or lack thereof) we may have to, say, victims of evil and suffering, or their experiences of suffering. On the other hand, it may be part of our proper ethical recognition of the victim or sufferer that we refuse to acknowledge some particular (e.g., theodacist) theoretical perspectives on her/his suffering as ethically adequate. Thus, while the main issue here is not the recognition between different theoretical perspectives, such recognition relations are not irrelevant to the ethical recognition of others – and others' suffering – that we are primarily interested in when considering the problem of evil and suffering.

Interestingly, a Kantian reading of the Book of Job leads us to appreciate the variety of ways in which we may see the antitheodacist argument against theodicies as drawing attention to a (moral) failure of recognition and/or acknowledgment (e.g., by Job's "friends" in their theodacist speeches). Such non- or misrecognition may take a variety of different forms. One may fail to recognize (to acknowledge), e.g., (i) the *suffering individual* (e.g., the victim of evil, individual or collective); (ii) the sufferer's *experience* of her/his suffering; (iii) the *sincerity* of that experience, or her/his communication, report, or account of it; or (iv) the *sufferer her-/himself as sincere* (as exemplifying sincerity) and as, thus, an intellectually and morally

integrated subject. All of these are different versions of failing to acknowledge what can be called “the reality of suffering”. The speeches by Job’s friends manifest these different ways of non-acknowledgment and insincerity, while Job’s key virtue, from the Kantian point of view, is his sincerity: he refuses to accept any theodist explanation of his suffering as being based on God’s alleged “reasons”. (Needless to say, there are also insincere reports on suffering, and insincere sufferers, just as there can be sincere attempts to formulate theodicies. This, however, is not at issue here.) The insincerity of theodicism lies at a transcendental level.⁵

Having briefly explained how the notions of theodicism, antitheodicism, recognition, and recognition-failure are mutually related, I will next focus on a particular case of potential recognition-failure – forgiveness. We will see that only by acknowledging the possibility of unforgivability can we hope to be able to adequately recognize the victims of evil and suffering.

2. Forgiveness as a recognition-failure?

The remainder of this paper examines *forgiveness* – as a relation that could obtain not only between human beings but also between a human being and God, insofar they believe in God’s reality – in the context of the problem of evil and the theodicy discussion. Forgiveness, specifically our forgiving God the fact that evil and suffering exist (or God’s allowing them to exist, or his having created a world in which they do), i.e., the fact that there is a world in which there is evil and suffering on the massive scale in which we find it around us, might be regarded as an ethically inappropriate and unacceptable form of theodicy. This kind of forgiveness – or, perhaps better, pseudo-forgiveness – can be analyzed as a failure to adequately recognize the victims of unforgivable evil as victims or sufferers. This, in my view, is the key issue regarding the relation between recognition and forgiveness. In order to examine how exactly we ought to recognize others’ suffering, we must take seriously the question of how, and whether, to forgive cases of extreme wrong-doing.

A classical case of an ethically motivated refusal to forgive horrible suffering inflicted on another human being, or a refusal to forgive a God who (if real) allows such suffering to take place in a world he created, can be found in Fedor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. There is no need for me here to revisit the famous argument by Ivan Karamazov, nor any of the other great novels in which Dostoevsky deals with profound ethical themes such as guilt, remorse, and forgiveness. As readers of Dostoevsky remember, Ivan “returns his ticket” to God who is, according to conventional Christianity, taken to promise ultimate redemption and salvation. According to Ivan, we have no right to forgive such monstrous actions as the

one imagined in the novel, i.e., deliberately and vengefully causing awful suffering to an innocent child. (For philosophical readings of Ivan's challenge, see, e.g., Sihvola 2006; Gleeson 2012.)

While many philosophers examine forgiveness with striking precision and in illuminating ways (e.g., Griswold 2009), they seem to prefer to avoid relating this topic to the problem of evil and theodicy.⁶ The theodicism vs. antitheodicism opposition is virtually absent from most contributions to the philosophy of forgiveness. My worry is that standard philosophical theories of forgiveness share with theodicism implicit presuppositions that need to be overcome in order to make possible a genuine acknowledgment of the victim or the sufferer. Therefore, the notion of forgiveness provides an excellent case study of how recognition may fail.

According to antitheodicism, there is, simply, evil and suffering (such as, paradigmatically, the Holocaust, but also, arguably, evils of a less enormous scale) that we just *cannot* forgive God, or anyone, whether or not we believe God to exist. Here the antitheodist agrees with Dostoevsky's Ivan. Yet we may have to continue to transform our capacities for forgiveness and *attempt to* – never entirely succeeding to – forgive even the unforgivable. Whether this is possible in any philosophically meaningful sense is something we may inquire into by examining the philosophy of forgiveness available in Vladimir Jankélévitch's *Forgiveness* (1967; see Jankélévitch 2005). It is through Jankélévitch's theory that I will try to articulate the basic opposition between theodist (and evidentialist) forgiveness on the one hand and antitheodist (and antievidentialist) forgiveness on the other hand. It is also through his views that I will sketch my proposal that the issue of forgiving God is an issue of transcendental forgiveness and can be ethically adequately approached only from a resolutely antitheodist point of view.⁷

Even though forgiveness generally need not be associated with theodicies, this is roughly how Dostoevsky would seem to understand the kind of harmony-seeking forgiveness that Ivan criticizes. In certain extreme situations, forgiveness would, from an antitheodist point of view, amount to an ethically unacceptable, or even monstrous, form of theodicy, which would simply show too much acceptance toward the perpetrator of evil and would fail to properly acknowledge the victim. While some philosophers even regard forgiveness as an obligation in certain situations, it can be argued that when we are dealing with really serious, possibly unforgivable, offenses, it is only in a theodist world, as we might say (whether or not we believe in God), that an obligation to always forgive exists. Only in a world that is eventually taken to wind up in a complete harmony (either secular or divine) can we meaningfully find forgiveness an obligation, which would enable us to move ever closer to, and finally to reach, that harmony.

I am *not* saying that philosophers defending forgiveness as a duty are explicitly committed to theodicies. They might, on the contrary, deny making any theodist assumptions. However, implicit theodist

presuppositions may be more deeply embedded in our moral discourses than is often observed. When we speak of forgiveness as a duty *in any sense*, however qualified and minimal, and when we start grounding that duty in moral reasons or rational considerations more generally, we have, arguably, already taken first steps toward an overall approach that, due to its implicit theodicism, will then have lost its resources to provide any appropriate response to the kind of worry that Ivan Karamazov raises. According to Ivan's charge, forgiveness – both our forgiving the offense against the boy in Dostoevsky's story and our forgiving God for allowing the world to be the way it is – amounts to a kind of theodicy.

In contrast to most philosophical theories of forgiveness (e.g., Sihvola 2006; Griswold 2009), Jankélévitch suggests that forgiveness lies completely beyond normal ethical relations. In particular, it cannot have any reasons. If it takes place, it takes place without reasons, or in the absence of reasons – like, for instance, religious faith or love. It is not warranted or unwarranted; it is, rather, beyond warrant. It is, therefore, more generally, outside the sphere of our normal (normatively grounded and governed) ethical concepts.

We may read Jankélévitch's account of forgiveness not only through the conceptual framework of antitheodicism but also through an analogy to *negative theology*. There is, according to Jankélévitch, no general positive criterion of forgiveness; it is, rather, always something new, an instantaneous event. It is ineffable and even miraculous. As Andrew Kelley, the translator of Jankélévitch's book on the topic, notes in his introduction, "as soon as reasons are given as to why one should forgive, then forgiveness collapses back into something else such as excusing, clemency, or reconciliation" (Kelley in Jankélévitch 2005, xxi). Forgiveness is needed and indeed possible only when there is no excuse available and the offense or misdeed cannot be forgotten, either.

While many theorists of forgiveness (e.g., Griswold 2009) are busily trying to understand the complex sets of moral and political norms and duties that govern or could govern forgiveness, Jankélévitch suggests that forgiveness is "amoral" rather than moral (Kelley in Jankélévitch 2005, xxiii). Forgiveness, Jankélévitch tells us, just happens, if it does; it not only has no reasons but can have no reasons. It cannot be commanded or recommended. It "stands outside of any moral system" (ibid.). I would not go as far as Jankélévitch and claim that the kind of forgiveness that more conventional theorists examine are merely cases of pseudo-forgiveness. But I am, drawing help from Jankélévitch, trying to examine the hypothesis that the more radical form of forgiveness (radical, perhaps, in the etymological sense of *radix*, or root, just like Kantian "radical evil" is radical) penetrating down to the roots of our ethical relations to others may be necessary for us to be able to grant, or refuse, more mundane forms of forgiveness.

One may ask whether this view is possible or even coherent. Can one describe and theorize about a notion as fundamentally important to interpersonal moral relations as forgiveness and then just claim that it stands outside morality? Some creative reinterpretation is needed to make this plausible. Perhaps,

however, forgiveness could stand outside any moral system in the sense in which a transcendental condition making a system possible stands outside that system – or, preferably, not outside it but *at its limit*. The analogy would, then, be Kantian transcendental philosophy: the transcendently necessary conditions for the possibility of cognitive experience of objects and events – such as, famously, space and time, as well as the categories – are not themselves objects or events of the empirically experienceable world. Similarly, the transcendental (metaphysical) subject invoked in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) is not itself part of the world it "limits" and makes possible; it is, rather, a limit of the world. Perhaps this, indeed, is the best analogy: forgiveness could be taken to lie at the limit of morality, or at the limits of any moral system possible for us, as an indicator of that very possibility, as something constitutive of those systems, as an extreme possibility that is itself necessary for them to be possible. Another Wittgensteinian analogy could also function here: forgiveness could represent what Wittgenstein, in his 1929 "Lecture on Ethics", called ethics in the "absolute" sense, as distinguished from any ethical systems that are inevitably relative to some goals or values (see Wittgenstein 1965).

Jankélévitch radically claims that forgiveness doesn't really take place in the natural world of history, or space and time, at all. It is "an event that has never come to pass in history, an act for which there is no place in space, a gesture of the soul that does not exist in our contemporary psychology" (2005, 1). Jankélévitch tells us explicitly that "only an apophatic or negative philosophy of forgiveness is truly possible"; such a philosophy of forgiveness must distinguish true forgiveness from what it is not, i.e., "*decay through time, intellectual excuse, and liquidation*" (ibid., 3).

Like Avishai Margalit (2002) later, Jankélévitch (2005, 3) compares forgiveness to gift: "True forgiveness, which is at the margins of all legality, is a *gracious gift* from the offended to the offender". However, whereas Margalit maintains that there are norms governing such gift exchange, it is precisely its nature as a gift, its gratuity, that in Jankélévitch's view distinguishes true forgiveness from all normal norm-governed moral or legal relations. Another point of agreement with Margalit is that forgiveness is not simply forgetting – it is not "decay through time". But Jankélévitch more strongly argues that forgetting plays no role in true forgiveness; quite the contrary. He articulates an instantaneous concept of forgiveness in which the pass of time ("decay") is irrelevant (ibid., chapter 1). Forgetting and "decay" must not be confused with forgiveness because they are neutral with respect to moral goodness and evil, and because the passage of time will never wipe past horrors and offenses away: "Each year, trees blossom in Auschwitz just as they blossom everywhere, and grass is not disgusted to grow in these places of inexpressible horror." (Ibid., 38.) While time may "neutralize" the effects of a past misdeed, it "cannot destroy the *fact of the misdeed*" (ibid., 48). There is always "the indestructibility of the 'having-taken-place'" that remains (ibid.), the traces that inevitably stay with us. Thus, in addition to being in a

fundamental sense *amoral*, forgiveness is *atemporal*; or, as Jankélévitch also puts it, it deals with a moral problem “situated outside of time” (ibid., 55).

Another confused form of pseudo-forgiveness is, according to Jankélévitch, a certain kind of intellectualization that looks at mitigating circumstances and excuses. The intellectualist implicitly recognizes “the nothingness of evil” and denies “the wickedness of the wicked person” (ibid., 58). An intellectualism that, following Socrates, denies “ill will”, ends up denying the will altogether, because the will cannot will the good if it cannot will evil (ibid., 59). Intellectualized excuses abolish the need to forgive, because no fundamental offense can have been committed in the first place, given the circumstances and their mitigating role. In such a situation, intellectual “comprehension takes the place of forgiveness and renders forgiveness useless” (ibid., 68). This kind of intellectualization is explicitly theodacist insofar as it is connected with Leibnizian views of the world: sin is part of the “general plan of the universe” and can thus be understood rather than being forgiven (ibid., 69; see also 74-75). In contrast, true forgiveness does not seek any mitigating circumstances; it does not seek excuses, but can also forgive the inexcusable (ibid., 81, 93). The contrast between intellectualization and forgiveness could hardly be sharper:

For intellection, there is nothing to forgive, but there are a multitude of delicate mechanisms, of cogs and springs to dismantle, of motives, of previous histories and of influences to understand. And conversely, for forgiveness, there is everything to forgive, and there is almost nothing to understand ... (Ibid., 88.)

3. Recognizing the unforgivable

Jankélévitch's view on forgiveness is fundamentally antitheodacist (although this is not his terminology). It does not try to theodacistically rationalize or speculate about justification and harmony. It does not excuse the offender, or God. What Jankélévitch finds corrupt or fake forms of forgiveness are, in contrast, tied up with theodacist presuppositions. In particular, God is excused (rather than genuinely forgiven) in theodicies. The place of true forgiveness is in some kind of non-area where there is no (more) role for any standard ethics of principles to play, no moral system or code, that is, where everything of that kind has collapsed. The place of true forgiveness is, then, in our cruel post-Holocaust world where indescribable offenses have been committed against other human beings. The place of such true forgiveness is also, paradoxically, a place where the unforgivable needs to be acknowledged. Not only can forgiveness forgive the inexcusable; it can, paradoxically, at least seek to forgive the unforgivable.

It is, perhaps, the open question of whether forgiveness is (still) possible – rather than forgiveness itself – that constitutes moral seriousness and is in this sense transcendental – viz., a transcendental openness, or the openness of the ethical space itself. Antitheodicism keeps that ethical space open, while theodicism closes it into an allegedly pre-established illusory harmony. More precisely, both antitheodicism and the ineliminable possibility of transcendental (Jankélévitchian) forgiveness, even extending to the unforgivable, are necessary conditions for the possibility of moral seriousness, that is, conditions for there being moral reasons for anything, including “normal” forgiveness in the empirical or factual world of real offenses and sufferings. Thus, those moral reasons cannot be reasons for forgiveness itself at the transcendental level.

The idea that forgiveness cannot be supported by moral reasons or rights and justifications ought to be taken seriously. Jankélévitch writes:

Thus, simply the idea of a right of forgiveness destroys forgiveness. Forgiveness finds its use when the injury remains unexpiated, the mistake remains uncorrected, and as long as the victim is not paid damages for the damage. [...] An impurity purified according to the rigors of justice no longer has need of gifts from anyone ... On the other hand, forgiveness finds a *raison d'être* when the moral debtor is still a debtor [...]. (Jankélévitch 2005, 9-10.)

Again we may say that this is deeply antitheodictic language. According to theodicism, there is something fundamentally right and reasonable (and harmonious) about the world's scheme of things, even though evil and suffering cannot be completely eliminated. Moreover, if the right of forgiveness is a destructive idea, then so is, *a fortiori*, any moral obligation to forgive. Jankélévitchian forgiveness is relevant only when we have moved beyond rights and duties, onto a transcendental level concerning the possibility of ethics.

I have, finding crucial help in Jankélévitch, tried to articulate a non-standard notion of forgiveness, something we may call transcendental forgiveness, that I think is highly relevant to the theodicy vs. antitheodicy issue in general and to the relations of forgiveness (and recognition) between human beings and God in particular (whether or not we believe in God). We still have to deal with the final and most disturbing question, however: is there anything unforgivable? Is there any fundamental limit to the (occasional) duty to forgive or even to Jankélévitch's paradoxical and metaphysical type of infinite, overflowing, radical, supernatural “true forgiveness”? Could, say, the Holocaust – representing here paradigmatically any excessive evil transgressing comprehensibility – indicate such a transcendental limit? Could it, that is, set us a limit beyond which our forgiveness cannot extend without sacrificing the very moral seriousness itself that led us to consider the ethics of forgiveness in the context of the theodicy issue in the first place?

I think these questions can be more appropriately approached, though presumably not conclusively answered, precisely by distinguishing the problem of forgiving human beings from the problem of forgiving God. We might try to forgive everything, anything, to our fellow human beings, knowing (presumably by analogy to our own case) their inevitable weakness and vulnerability. Even if we cannot excuse them, or forget what they did, we could still try to forgive them in the radical Jankélévitchian sense. But we might have to – for ethical reasons defining the very standpoint from which our attitudes of forgiveness emerge, if they do – resist the very possibility, or the ethical appropriateness, of forgiving God the fact that a world like this exists. We might condemn *such* forgiveness, as Ivan does, as an unacceptable and inappropriate theodicy (even though Ivan talks about forgiving the offender rather than God, he does show a kind of denial of forgiveness toward God, too, by “returning his ticket”). Transcendental forgiveness at the heart of our moral orientation to the world would require a transcendental limit that cannot be transgressed without collapsing the entire moral universe within which (and only within which) forgiveness can become an issue for us.

As noted above, the Holocaust, paradigmatically (as a metonymy of all unspeakable offenses), could be seen as a crime that is beyond any humanly possible forgiveness. Seeing it thus might indeed seem to be the only way to properly recognize its victims. On the other hand, Jankélévitch, for whom the Holocaust plays a very special, though mostly implicit, role in his entire discussion, maintains that, given his concept of forgiveness, *nothing* is in principle unforgivable – precisely because there are no reasons and therefore also no limitations for forgiveness, which is something supernatural and infinite (see *ibid.*, 156; cf. Kelley in *ibid.*, xxiv-xxv). Only in Jankélévitch’s very special (transcendental and perhaps even transcendent)⁸ sense of forgiveness can anything unforgivable be forgiven. Indeed, the very point of such forgiveness is to forgive the unforgivable. This may be, well, impossible. But then again one motivation of Jankélévitch’s theory is that forgiveness lies beyond the merely humanly possible. It is, in brief, a miracle. Therefore the connection between forgiveness and philosophical topics such as the theodicy problem and recognition deserves further investigation; this paper has only set the stage for more detailed inquiries.

Human beings, however, are incapable of miracles. We might not be able to, in addition to being obliged not to, forgive God in a theodacist manner the fact that the world contains the evil and suffering it does. Even so, if we believed in God, we might still pray God to stop that evil; antitheodicism is not an obstacle to religious attitudes of prayer, for instance, but may in fact be a necessary condition for them. Antitheodicism, transcendental forgiveness, and the acknowledgment of a transcendental limit to forgiveness all go together here – perhaps not without a paradox, but it is hardly possible to deal with matters such as these without an air of paradox.

Recognizing the unforgivable is a way of recognizing suffering. It is a way of approaching evil and suffering in a resolutely antitheodistic manner. Therefore Jankélévitch's theory of forgiveness, despite its paradoxes and tensions, is a vitally important case of exploring these topics without any temptation to deal with any argument "from" evil.

4. Conclusion

Jankélévitchian forgiveness is so overwhelming – there is such an excess in this kind of forgiveness that it even matches the excess, or all possible excess, in extreme evil – that it has a modal structure covering *all possible* offenses in addition to any actual ones: "Not only does forgiveness forgive infinitely more misdeeds than the guilty person committed, but it forgives all of the misdeeds that this guilty person would be able to commit or still will commit. It immensely exceeds all culpability, either actual or to come." (Jankélévitch 2005, 154; see also 157.) This is a mirror image of the Dostoevskyan formula (invoked repeatedly in *The Brothers Karamazov* and elsewhere) that every human being is guilty for the sins of all others, and I am more so than anyone else. Indeed, this point touches the closing theme of *Forgiveness*: just like love is "strong like" death but not stronger than death (as death ultimately separates all lovers), "forgiveness is strong like wickedness; but it is not stronger than it" (ibid., 165).

Could this be developed even further? Could Jankélévitchian forgiveness forgive not only when we lack reasons to forgive but even when there is no right to forgive, when we have a duty not to forgive, as in the case narrated by Ivan? Forgiveness in this sense would be truly beyond *any* reasons whatsoever. It could, then, be (again) claimed to be constitutive of a moral life that can so much as have reasons at all. But so is, as its mirror image, Ivan's ineliminable problem. Only when there are such problems, only when forgiveness is impossible, does forgiveness become a transcendental problem leading us to address the very meaning of the ethical. Only then does the challenge of ethical recognition of otherness become fundamental.⁹

The striking conclusion that forgiveness (even if infinite and radical) is as strong as but not stronger than evil or wickedness – again somewhat paradoxical after an extended discussion of the infinity of forgiveness – amounts to Jankélévitch's final antitheodicism: true forgiveness can take place only in a world in which there *is* moral evil and wickedness, in which there is transcendental guilt, in which no final harmony is possible, in which even infinite forgiveness is tied to the excess of evil. This is itself a transcendental claim, and the fact that Jankélévitch's position is open to such a rearticulation is a good reason for considering his approach, as paradoxical and problematic as it remains, relevant to a philosophical understanding of transcendental forgiveness. To claim that forgiveness could be stronger

than any (unforgivable) evil would be to misunderstand the kind of transcendental forgiveness at issue in these reflections. It would be to confuse the transcendental with the transcendent.

An analogous misunderstanding would be to confuse the Wittgensteinian transcendental subject or self, which is a limit of the world, with a supernatural or transcendent subject beyond those, or any, limits. The infinity of radical forgiveness, when sincere, can only be antitheodistically articulated, and this "can" invokes the modality of the transcendental, rather than any imagined impossibility of the transcendent. At the same time, it invokes the arena of recognition and shows us how the problem of evil and suffering must be explored in a way that leaves any argument *from* evil behind. Through the example provided by a Janélévitchian analysis of impossible forgiveness, despite its paradoxes, we may see how the problem of evil and suffering can be examined in a genuinely antitheodistic manner. I have, hopefully, been able to show, at least implicitly, that this is very different from the way in which this problem is faced in (largely theodistic) mainstream analytic philosophy of religion today.¹⁰

References

- Adams, M.M. (1989), "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 63, 297-310.
- Adams, M.M. (2013), "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil", *Sophia* 52, 7-26.
- Agamben, G. (2002), *Remnants of Auschwitz*, NY: Zone Books.
- Bernstein, R. (2002), *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gleeson, A. (2012), *A Frightening Love*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Honneth, A. (2005), *Kampf um Anerkennung*, 2nd ed., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1st ed. 1992.
- van Inwagen, P. (2006), *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jankélévitch, V. (2005), *Forgiveness*, ed. and trans. A. Kelley, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (*Le pardon*, 1967). (Contains Kelley's "Translator's Introduction".)
- Kant, I. (1791), "Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodicee", in W. Weischedel (ed.), *Immanuel Kant: Werke in zehn Bänden*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983, vol. 9. English trans.: "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy": I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans./ed. A.W. Wood & G. Di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 20-37.

- Knepper, T. (2013), *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Margalit, A. (2002), *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Neiman, S. (2002), *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Phillips, D.Z. (2004), *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God*, London: SCM Press.
- Plantinga, A. (2000), *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rowe, W. (ed.) (2001), *God and the Problem of Evil*, Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Saarinén, R. (2016), *Recognition in Religion: A Historical and Systematic Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sihvola, J. (2006), "The Ethics of Forgiveness: Dostoyevskyan Reflections", in F. Ruokonen & L. Werner (eds.), *Visions of Value and Truth: Understanding Philosophy and Literature*, Acta Philosophica Fennica 79, Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 47-57.
- Stump, E. (2010), *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Taylor, C. (1995), "The Politics of Recognition", in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tilley, T.W. (1991), *The Evil of Theodicy*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Trakakis, N. (2008), *The End of Philosophy of Religion*, London: Continuum.
- Udoff, A. (ed.) (2013), *Vladimir Jankélévitch and the Question of Forgiveness*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Verbin, N. (2010), *Divinely Abused*, London: Continuum.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1921), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1965), "Lecture on Ethics", *Philosophical Review* 74.

Notes

¹ On religious recognition and its history, see, e.g., Saarinén (2016).

² In philosophical and political debates on recognition (e.g., Honneth 2005; Taylor 1995), a major issue is how various groups of victims and/or marginalized sufferers can be heard, and how they can "define themselves" or construct their identity,

political status, and distinctive perspective in their own ways. This entire debate may be re-evaluated on the basis of the ability of theories of recognition (*Anerkennung* in German) to account for experiences of evil and suffering.

³ Moral criticism of theodicies has fortunately been presented at least since Voltaire's critique of Leibniz in *Candide*, and it has re-emerged in contemporary ethics and philosophy of religion (see, e.g., Bernstein 2002; Gleeson 2012; Tilley 2011; Trakakis 2008; as well as Knepper 2013). However, my antitheodicism is considerably more radical – both methodologically and substantially – than the available moral critiques of theodicies, because it is *transcendental*; moral critics of theodicism usually do not formulate their criticism as a transcendental argument to the effect that theodicism violates the necessary conditions for the possibility of occupying a moral perspective.

⁴ This strong claim must, again, be put forward as a transcendental thesis, not as a factual or empirical claim about anyone's (theodacists' or antitheodacists') ability vs. inability to engage in moral deliberation. It concerns the necessary conditions for the possibility of the moral perspective.

⁵ Furthermore, at the meta-level we may also speak about the self-reflective failure to recognize (acknowledge) (v) *the impossibility of ever fully acknowledging the other's suffering* (or the suffering other), in the sense of (i)-(iv).

⁶ A notable exception is Verbin (2010), who deals with forgiveness in relation to the Book of Job, among other things.

⁷ I can offer no close scholarly reading of Jankélévitch here. See, for various relevant perspectives on his theory of forgiveness, Udoff (2013), and cf. [author XXX](#).

⁸ Jankélévitch's view on forgiveness seems to quite deliberately blur the distinction between the transcendental and the transcendent, which should in a Kantian context be kept sharp.

⁹ Note that I have in this paper provided no exact definition or characterization of the relation between recognition and forgiveness. What I have suggested is that a certain kind of antitheodacist understanding of forgiveness (and unforgivability) at a transcendental level – dealing with the very possibility of the moral perspective – is crucial to our ability to recognize other human beings and their otherness. A great deal of further work on the conceptual relations between recognition, forgiveness, unforgivability, and antitheodicism will still have to be done.

¹⁰ [Acknowledgments.]