

Jacques Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness

Filosofia do perdão de Jacques Derrida

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents social and political dimensions of forgiveness within Jacques Derrida's philosophy. Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness is an example of how philosophy can help us understand and resolve contemporary social and political issues. Derrida believes that traditional concept of forgiveness should be broadened beyond the bounds of the rational and the imaginable. According to Derrida, traditional concept of forgiveness needs rethinking because of the phenomenon of proliferation of scenes of forgiveness after the Second World War that produced globalization of forgiveness and trivialized and decharacterized this term. According to Derrida, the act of forgiveness can only be thought beyond the limits of common sense and in the space of the impossible, and that is the forgiveness of something that common sense cannot forgive. Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness has wide social and political implications as it transcends binary oppositions: present/past, self/other, friend/enemy and so forth. All concepts within Derrida's philosophy of politics (friendship, enemy, hospitality, forgiveness, justice, and so on) are significant for societies eroded with traumas of wars and ethno-national divisions and conflicts.

Keywords: Derrida, philosophy, forgiveness, enemy, migration, asylum, hospitality.

RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta as dimensões sociais e políticas do perdão na filosofia de Jacques Derrida. A filosofia do perdão de Derrida é um exemplo de como a filosofia pode nos ajudar a compreender

e resolver problemas sociais e políticos contemporâneas. Derrida acredita que o conceito tradicional de perdão deve ser ampliado além dos limites do racional e do imaginável. Segundo Derrida, o conceito tradicional de perdão precisa ser repensado devido ao fenômeno de proliferação de cenas de perdão após a Segunda Guerra Mundial que produziram a globalização do perdão e banalizaram e descaracterizaram esse termo. Segundo Derrida, o ato de perdoar só pode ser pensado além dos limites do bom senso e no espaço do impossível, e que é o perdão de algo que o bom senso não pode perdoar. A filosofia do perdão de Derrida tem amplas implicações sociais e políticas, pois transcende oposições binárias: presente/passado, eu/outro, amigo/inimigo e assim por diante. Todos os conceitos da filosofia política de Derrida (amizade, inimigo, hospitalidade, perdão, justiça e assim por diante) são significativos para sociedades erodidas por traumas de guerras e divisões e conflitos étnico-nacionais.

Palavra-chave: Derrida, filosofia, perdão, inimigo, migração, asilo, hospitalidade.

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of forgiveness has gained a renewed interest – particularly its social and political dimension “in relation to injustices against groups, such as apartheid and genocide” (La Caze, 2012). This paper explores the social and political aspects of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy of forgiveness that is relevant to many contemporary ethical and political issues.

In his work *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, “Derrida confronts two pressing problems: the explosive tensions between refugee and asylum rights and the ethic of hospitality; and the dilemma of reconciliation and amnesty where the bloody traumas of history demand forgiveness” (Derrida, 2001a, p. i). Jacques Derrida’s political philosophy is based on concepts of unconditional forgiveness and universal hospitality. These concepts stem from Derrida’s idea of the *Other*, and his problematization of the binary hierarchy self/other and other related binary oppositions, such as: citizen/refugee, West/East, Christianity/Islam, European/non-European, national/transnational and so forth. Derrida’s conception of forgiveness is inseparable from his deconstructive political philosophy. Derrida’s deconstruction aims at transforming the hierarchic structures within philosophy, law and public discourses (Derrida, 1974). According to Banki, “if deconstruction is both a thinking of the impossible and the unconditional injunction to do and/or make the impossible, then it necessarily implies both a thought and an experience of forgiveness” (Banki, 2011, p. 295). Derrida’s notion of forgiveness belongs to the realm of the impossible (Derrida, 2001b).

Jacques Derrida develops his philosophy of forgiveness in his work *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (2001a), in his essay “To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible” (2001b), and in his *The Politics of Friendship* (2005b). In his *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Derrida addresses two main topics. The first essay “On Forgiveness” relates to the question of forgiveness regarding the traumas of history such as the Holocaust Apartheid in South Africa (Derrida, 2001a). Derrida argues that without forgiving the unforgivable, the concept of forgiveness disappears. He emphasizes: “Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality” (Derrida, 2001a). The second essay “On Cosmopolitanism” relates to refugee and asylum rights (Derrida, 2001a). Jacques Derrida argues about the importance of development of cosmopolitan rights for refugees and asylum seekers. Derrida’s political philosophy is based on concepts of unconditional forgiveness and universal hospitality stem from his philosophy which emphasizes the importance of opening to *Other*, and overcoming the binary opposition friend/enemy.

In his essay "To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible", Derrida argues "that there is in the very meaning of forgiveness a force, a desire, an impetus, a movement, an appeal (call it what you will) that demands that forgiveness be granted, if it can be, even to someone who does not ask for it, who does not repent" (Derrida, 2001b, p. 28). Derrida deconstructs traditional concept of forgiveness and offers a novel concept based on his philosophy. According to Peter Banki, Derrida "elaborated a novel concept of forgiveness that took as its departure point a reading of this phenomenon quite different from that of anyone else" (Banki, 2018, p. 49). Derrida's goal was to rethink the Abrahamic heritage of the contemporary notion of forgiveness employed within legal and political discourse. The Abrahamic tradition of forgiveness is based on the unresolvable binary opposition between unconditional and conditional forgiveness (Evans, 2013, p. 24). Derrida employs the

(...) term 'Abrahamic' to designate an idiom of apology, reconciliation, and forgiveness, which is the shared inheritance of the three great monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, it is clear what he is most concerned with is the Jewish and in particular, Christian appropriations of this idiom (Banki, 2011, p. 286).

According to Derrida, traditional concept of forgiving needs rethinking because of the phenomenon of proliferation of scenes of forgiveness after the Second World War. Derrida argues about the "globalization" ("mondialization") of the traditional notion of forgiveness (Derrida, 2002b). Derrida's idea of "globalization of forgiveness" represents "the observation that the language and scenography of apology, reconciliation and forgiveness function today as an ethico-political currency that can be brought or sold in a globalised market place" (Banki, 2011, p. 286). Derrida aims at rethinking the concept of forgiveness based on Abrahamic heritage "through the novel re-reading of the Abrahamic heritage itself. Not simply by returning to a Hebrew thought of forgiveness of which he is also aware, but (...) by re-reading the Latin idiom of the gift in its alliance with forgiveness (the verbal link of 'don' and 'pardon')" (Banki, 2011, p. 293).

Derrida attempts to develop the concept of the unconditional forgiveness. However, this concept is paradoxical and remains internally divided. It emphasizes abysses and contradictions, which this concept reflects. According to Derrida, "if there is forgiveness, it must forgive the unforgivable – such is the logical aporia (...) If one had to forgive only what is forgivable (...) then one would not forgive" (Derrida, 2002a, pp. 385-386). His concept of unconditional forgiveness brings a novel perspective on various social and political issues.

Forgiving the unforgivable

Jacques Derrida's account of forgiveness is mostly inspired by Vladimir Jankélévitch's and Hannah Arendt's accounts on forgiveness. Derrida comments the concept of forgiveness within Vladimir Jankélévitch's works *Le Pardon* (1967) and *L'Imprescriptible* (1986). Jankélévitch argues that crimes committed during the Second World War cannot be forgiven. According to him, "forgiveness died in the death camps" (Jankélévitch, 1996, p. 567). Jankélévitch also emphasizes that it is impossible to forgive if forgiveness is not asked for (Jankélévitch, 1996). Jankélévitch argues that Nazis cannot be forgiven since they didn't ask for forgiveness (Jankélévitch, 1986). Jankélévitch wrote his essay "Should we Pardon Them?"¹ in response to the debate that emerges after "France judged it opportune to decide that the crimes against humanity were to remain imprescriptible" (Derrida, 2001a, p. 52). Jankélévitch argues that "all the juridical criteria regarding statutory limitations usually applicable to common law crimes are in this case beside the point" (Jankélévitch, 1996, p. 555). He emphasizes that the crimes of the Nazis are exceptional in many ways. They represent "ontological wickedness",

¹ This essay originates from Jankélévitch's letter published in the *Le Monde* on 3 January 1965.

radical evil (Jankélévitch, 1996, p. 556). "But above all, they are crimes against humanity in the proper sense of the term, that is, crimes against the human essence or, if you will, against the 'hominity' of human beings in general" (Jankélévitch, 1996, p. 555). For this reason they cannot be pardoned, and the question can be raised: *Who* can pardon these crimes? Jankélévitch emphasizes that these crimes are so horrible that they cannot even be a subject of debate (Jankélévitch, 1996, p. 560).

A similar point of view was expressed by Hannah Arendt who argues that crimes against humanity cannot be forgiven, since their essence is different from all types of crime. According to Arendt:

Expulsion and genocide, though both are international offenses, must remain distinct; the former is an offense against fellow-nations, whereas the latter is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the 'human status' without which the very words "mankind" or 'humanity' would be devoid of meaning (Arendt, 2006, p. 268).

According to Arendt, the crimes against humanity represent radical evil "that could be explained by comprehensible motives" (Arendt, 2004, p. 592). They include actions that destroy human potentiality (Arendt, 2006). Thus, they transcend the realm of forgiveness and human affairs. According to Perrone-Moisés:

In The Human Condition, Arendt seems to admit a possible combination between forgiveness and punishment, in stating that punishment is the alternative to forgiveness, not its opposite: both have in common the attempt to put an end to something that without its interference could go on endlessly (Perrone-Moisés, 2006).

However, Arendt rejects the possibility of unconditional forgiveness as it transcends the realm of human affairs.

Jacques Derrida challenges both Arendt's and Jankélévitch's understanding of forgiveness and its social and political aspects (Derrida, 2001b). From the perspective of Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness, Jankélévitch's and Arendt's account on forgiveness is conditional. According to Derrida, "forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality" (Derrida, 2001a, p. 32). Derrida argues that true forgiveness can only arise from what is considered the unforgivable (Derrida, 2002a). According to Derrida, "forgiveness must therefore do the impossible; it must undergo the test (*épreuve*) and ordeal of its own impossibility in forgiving the unforgivable" (Derrida, 2002a, pp. 385-386). Derrida's philosophical conception of unconditional forgiveness is based on logical contradiction. He founds his conception of forgiveness on the unforgivable:

Derrida argues that true forgiveness consists in forgiving the unforgivable: a contradiction all the more acute in this century of war crimes (from the Holocaust, to Algeria, to Kosovo) and reconciliation tribunals, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. If forgiveness forgave only the forgivable, then, Derrida claims, the very idea of forgiveness would disappear (Critchley and Kearney, 2001, p. vii).

However, Derrida emphasize that we should not equate forgiveness with reconciliation and other similar terms.

Derrida compares forgiveness with a gift (Derrida, 2001a). For him, forgiving should be perceived as unconditional giving. According to Derrida, forgiveness has to overcome the limits of reciprocity and economic exchange, because it is not done in order to achieve a goal (Derrida, 2001a). Thus, forgiveness does not exist within the context of conditional imperatives.

Derrida's analysis of the exchange of gifts in the work of Marcel Mauss's significant anthropological essay *The Gift: The Form and reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1990/1925) plays an important role within Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness. According to Mauss, the classical form of social interaction, especially in areas where any form of political control was absent, was determined by reciprocal exchange that involved "the duty to give, the duty to receive, and the duty to give back" (Mallard, 2018). According to Derrida, it is precisely this type of social communication that should be transformed into unconditional giving, because only this type of interaction is the only authentic type of social relations. Derrida gives an example from *Genesis 22*, in which God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son (Derrida, 1995). Abraham obeyed God's command sacrificing what was most valuable to him – his son Isaac. This is an example of the unconditional giving that reflects the intention to suspend the reciprocal relation, to break with the instrumental and conditioned type of social exchange (Harbas, 2019, p. 184).

Just as making a gift and asking for something in return is not an authentic gift so forgiveness itself must go beyond the limits of economy and retribution (Derrida, 2001a). Thus, authentic forgiveness does not contain a condition or purpose, because it is not done to achieve a goal. Authentic forgiveness is should be beyond any condition, goal and purpose (Harbas, 2019, p. 184).

According to Derrida, the nature of forgiveness is always exceptional. Derrida emphasizes that there is confusion between the concepts of forgiveness, regret, excuse, prescription and amnesty (Derrida, 2001a). He states:

Forgiveness is often confounded, sometimes in a calculated fashion, with related themes: excuse, regret, amnesty, prescription, etc.; so many significations of which certain come under law, a penal law from which forgiveness must in principle remain heterogeneous and irreducible (Derrida, 2001a, p. 27).

Derrida argues about the "globalization (mondialization) of forgiveness" which occurs after the Second World War, after the crimes against humanity committed during the war (Derrida, 2002b). Derrida's idea of "globalization of forgiveness" refers to the proliferation of scenes of excuses, repentance and forgiveness after the Second World War, and their increasing with time. Derrida refers to these scenes by terms such as "great world scenes of repentance", "the theater of forgiveness" and "moving ceremony of guilt" (Derrida, 2002b, pp. 382-383). His concept of globalization of forgiveness refers to various calls for reconciliation "as when the Japanese Prime Minister asked forgiveness of the Koreans for past violence, or when, in South Africa, white oppressors asked forgiveness of their black victims" (Critchley and Kearney, 2001, p. x). Derrida argues about the globalization of forgiveness in the sense "in which the Abrahamic moral tradition, in which forgiveness is a central concept and which is at the basis of the three great monotheisms, has globalised itself in a more or less secular form. Increasingly, we live in a world where forgiveness is demanded, granted, or withheld" (Critchley and Kearney, 2001, p. x). By these proliferation of scenes of forgiveness, the notion of forgiveness is both trivialized and decharacterized (as forgiveness is asked by entities such as churches, governments and so on, not persons or people) (Perrone-Moisés, 2006).

According to Derrida, decharacterization of forgiveness makes this concept an empty term as the idea of forgiveness is always tied to the question "Who should Forgive?" (Perrone-Moisés, 2006). An entity (state or public institution) cannot forgive. "Derrida gives the example of the South African woman whose husband had been imprisoned and tortured, who, before the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, said: a commission or a government cannot forgive. Perhaps only I could do it. But I am not ready to forgive" (Perrone-Moisés, 2006). This brings us to the question: *Who can forgive?* which lies at the core of the tension between the conditional and unconditional understanding of forgiveness.

Derrida's politics of friendship

Derrida's philosophy aims at deconstructing the Western philosophical discourse as well as the binary oppositions on which it is based (Derrida, 1974). Derrida's critique of the fundamental postulates of philosophy can also be applied to the postulates of political institutions based on them (Newman, 2001). It calls into question essentialist and homogeneous identities and concepts which represent the basis of legal text and legal and political decision making. According to Critchley and Kearney: "'On Forgiveness' and 'On Cosmopolitanism' are proof, if proof were needed, that deconstruction is not some obscure textual operation intimated in a mandarin prose style, but is a concrete intervention in contexts that is governed by an undeconstructable concern for justice" (Critchley and Kearney, 2001, p. viii).

For Derrida, law represents only "the general application of a rule, while justice represents the opening of law to the other" (Newman, 2001, p. 15). Justice stands in the relation of otherness to law: it opens the discourse of law to the otherness (Newman, 2001). For a decision to be just, it should transcend the general application of a rule, and should be different each time (Newman, 2001). It should constantly rethink and re-evaluate the rules of law (Newman, 2001). "Therefore, justice conserves the law because it operates in the name of the law; but at the same time, it suspends the law because it is being continually reinterpreted" (Newman, 2001, p.15). Derrida's conception of forgiveness relies on his distinction between justice and law. His idea of the unconditional forgiveness stems from his idea of justice ("opening of law to the other") (Newman, 2001, p.15).

In his works *The Politics of Friendship* and *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, Jacques Derrida offers significant insights into how the concept of enemy (the *Other*) can be perceived within the framework of deconstructive political philosophy. Derrida's philosophical accounts on forgiveness, otherness and friend and enemy are relevant for societies eroded by the traumas, ethno-national divisions, conflicts and wars (Harbas, 2019). Derrida argues that the concept of enemy does not only belong to the domain of the *Other*, but also represents the constitutive element of the self. Thus, we need this concept in order to define our own personal, political and other identities. All these notions are fluid and changeable and we are constantly rethinking and reinventing both the self and the *Other*.

Derrida's conception of unconditional forgiveness leads to transformation of political ideas of relationship between friend and enemy. Derrida rethinks Mauss's conception of reciprocal giving towards the unconditional giving. The society based on this idea of giving recognizes the *Other* that has often been excluded throughout history. Derrida's concept of friend does not exclude enemy. He overcomes traditional (mythological and religious) concept of friend which excludes enemy as its *Other* (Harbas, 2019).

According to Derrida, philosophy should be open to what excludes, open to its *Other*: "The act of forcing philosophy to confront its own structures of exclusion and repression, is a thoroughly ethical gesture" (Newman, 2001, p. 13). Derrida's perception of philosophy as openness to otherness is influenced by Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics of alterity (Lévinas, 1969). Lévinas seeks to transcend Western philosophy and break through its framework, confronting it with the *Other* (Newman, 2001, p. 13). Emmanuel Lévinas develops the ethics which transcends the modernist exclusionary idea of subjectivity. According to Lévinas, the ethics arises from our responsibility for the other. Lévinas states: "My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world, within the ontology of sameness" (Lévinas and Kearney, 1986, p. 24).

Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness perceived as opening to *Other* (in the broadest sense) requires "a hyperbolic ethical vision" (Derrida, 2001a, p. 51) which represents a move from conditional to unconditional, from possible to impossible. In his essay "On Forgiveness", Derrida argues: "I remain 'torn' (between a 'hyperbolic' ethical vision of forgiveness, pure forgiveness, and the reality of a society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation)" (Derrida, 2001a, p. 51). Derrida's philosophy of forgive-

ness reflects this tension between the unconditional and conditional conception of forgiveness as unconditional forgiveness is difficult to achieve in practice (McGonegal, 2009). This is, in fact, the tension between ethics and politics (McGonegal, 2009, p. 45). Responsibilities and decisions are taken in the negotiation between these two poles within Derrida's political philosophy (Derrida, 2001a).

Drawing on Hannah Arendt and Immanuel Kant, Derrida also identifies the tension between the unconditional and conditional conception of cosmopolitanism. Kant's account on hospitality is limited and conditional and does not include the possibility of permanent stay. Kant emphasizes: "Hospitality means the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another" (Kant, 1795). Kant's conception of hospitality implies sharp binary oppositions such as: citizen/stranger, national/global, self/other and so forth.

Derrida's political philosophy emphasizes both unconditional forgiveness and unconditional hospitality.² Both concepts relate to his idea of democracy to come. Democracy to come is represents political and ethical project which aims at transcending binary hierarchies. Derrida develops his idea of democracy to come in his later works, *Spectres of Marx* (1994), *The Politics of Friendship* and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005a). "'To come' in Derrida's formulation, then, points to a transformative and disruptive potential at the heart of democracy, it points to a promise of change in the here and now" (Matthews, 2013). *Democracy to come* is represents political and ethical project which aims at transcending binary hierarchies, and rethinking and overcoming exclusivist nature of traditional democracy.

Conclusion

Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness has wide social and political implications as it transcends binary oppositions: unconditional/conditional, present/past, self/other, friend/enemy, national/postnational and so forth. All concepts within Derrida's philosophy of politics (friendship, enemy, hospitality, forgiveness, justice, and so on) can be thought of in any society eroded with war and various forms of divisions and conflicts (Harbas, 2019). However, forgiving the unforgivable is perhaps the most difficult act or challenge for a person or society. Where terrifying conflicts and crimes have taken place, the most serious, but also the greatest, act that one can do is unconditionally forgive something that is impossible to forgive (Harbas, 2019). Derrida believes that this classical religious concept of forgiveness should be deepened to limits that go beyond the boundaries of the imaginable, normal and rational (Harbas, 2019). He therefore raises the question of whether it is at all logical to forgive what is forgivable (Derrida, 2001a). He also raises the question whether we are doing something valuable at all by forgiving what is forgivable. In the end, if we are only willing to forgive something that is forgivable then the very idea of forgiveness disappears. In that sense, only something terrible (that seem unforgivable) can be forgiven. The act of forgiveness can only be thought of beyond the bounds of common sense and in the space of the impossible (Derrida, 2001a). Forgiveness must not taken from the point of view of economy or reciprocal exchange, where one forgives in order to achieve or gain something in return.

Derrida compares forgiveness with a gift. For him, forgiving should be perceived as unconditional giving. According to Derrida, forgiveness has to overcome the limits of reciprocity and economic exchange. However, there is a tension between Derrida's concept of forgiveness and practice of forgiveness, which is always conditional (McGonegal, 2009, p. 43). This tension is, in fact, the tension between ethical and political realms.

Some authors argue that Derrida's philosophy of forgiveness "leads to potential denial of victim's agency" (McGonegal, 2009, p. 45). According to McGonegal: "While this is obviously not Derrida's

² However, Derrida argues that this concept also includes the tension between the conditional and unconditional: "On the one hand, there is an unconditional hospitality which should offer the right of refuge to all immigrants and newcomers. But on the other hand, hospitality has to be conditional: there has to be some limitation on rights of residence" (Critchley and Kearney, 2001, p. x).

aim, his theory runs the risk of forfeiting the victim's right to set the conditions of forgiveness" (McGonegal, 2009, p. 45). The question who is entitled to forgive is the most significant. Derrida is aware of this question.³ He argues that if we have to negotiate the conditional and the unconditional in order to embody the unconditional notion of forgiveness in history and society (Evans, 2013, p. 27). Forgiveness always includes a risk, but forgiving should be an act of responsibility it should not be done blindly (Evans, 2013, p. 27).

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³ I remain 'torn' (between a 'hyberbolic' ethical vision of forgiveness, pure forgiveness, and the reality of a society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation)" (Derrida 2001a, p.51).

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