

two On Forgiveness

A Roundtable Discussion
with Jacques Derrida

Moderated by Richard Kearney

Richard Kearney: I am going to ask each speaker to pose a question to Jacques Derrida on the theme of forgiveness and, in so doing, to try to keep the discussion as informal and conversational as possible.

Kevin Hart: Jacques, I wonder if I might get things going by reminding you of a phrase which you used two or three times last night. You use the locution, “forgiveness, if there is such a thing.” I think I know why you use that prudent phrasing. You explained the other night that there is a relation between forgiveness and the figure of the impossible: Forgiveness, if there is such a thing, would exceed the economy of the philosophical. However, I would like to know if you could imagine the circumstance that you have stepped outside the economy of philosophy, that you stand on that non-place you have evoked so often, would there ever be forgiveness? From that vantage point is there such a thing as forgiveness? If there is such a thing, what would it be? What circumstances, what constraints, could one imagine that would give us forgiveness?

Jacques Derrida: It so happens that I often and regularly use this phrase, *s’il y en a*, “if there is such a thing,” not only for forgiveness but for a number of related concepts, or quasi-concepts—for the gift, hospitality, and so on. What I

mean by this is that when an impossible something happens or becomes possible *as impossible*, then the criteria provided by what you call the economy of philosophy should become unavailable. When I say “if there is such a thing,” I do not mean that I doubt the possible occurrence of such a thing. I mean that, if forgiveness happens, then this experience should not become the object of a sentence of the kind “S is *p*,” “this is, this presents itself as forgiveness,” because forgiveness should not present itself. If it happens, it should not be in the form of something present. I have said the same thing for the gift. So as soon as I am sure that I forgive, for example—I cannot be sure that the other forgives—if I say that I know that I forgive, if I say, lightly, “I forgive you,” this sentence in the present, with a verb in the present tense, is absolutely the destruction of forgiveness. That is because it implies that I am able to forgive, that I have the power to forgive, the sovereign power to forgive, which introduces me into the scene of the economy of exchange. You have to recognize that I forgive you, and this is recognizable, which is, of course, the beginning of the destruction of what forgiveness should be.

This means that forgiveness should exceed the very category of presence and, of course, of objectivity, of anything that could become the object of a theoretical statement; there is no theoretical statement about forgiveness. Each time I make a theoretical statement about the event of forgiveness I am sure that I miss it. Even more than that, the consciousness or the self-consciousness of the forgiver, as well as of the one who is forgiven, has the same effects. That is, if I am conscious that I forgive, then I not only recognize myself but I thank myself, or I am waiting for the other to thank me, which is already the reinscription of forgiveness into an economy of exchange and hence the annihilation of forgiveness. So if forgiveness happens, *if* it happens, it should exceed the order of presence, the order of being, the order of consciousness, and happen in the night. The night is its element.

Now then, I come back to the most difficult question, these themes which I try to explore again and again. What, then, regulates my use of the word forgiveness? What should forgiveness mean, if it is not something of that sort? Well, here I must say I do not know. I have no knowledge of this. I can know what is inscribed in the concept of forgiveness that I inherit, so I work on this heritage. I found the word and the concept, and a certain number of conflicts surrounding the concept in our tradition, in a number of traditions. This can be the object of knowledge, and from within this possible knowledge, I discover this extraordinary excess that I mentioned a moment ago. And about this excess itself I have no knowledge, and I cannot speak of it in a theoretical fashion. But I can nevertheless think—I can think what I cannot know—I can think of a desire to forgive beyond economy, or to be forgiven beyond economy. I have a thought of this gracious and unconditional forgiveness. I have a thought which is given to me by, or rather through, this heritage. Even if nothing can be adequate to this thought, I have the thought or the desire of this motion. It is out of this desire or thought, which exceeds knowledge, that I

speak, that I organize this discourse; but it's a very unsafe discourse, as you realize. That is why I use quotation marks, as if to say, "that is what they used to call forgiveness," "that is what I myself as a subject inscribed in this tradition call forgiveness." But who knows? Perhaps, since nothing can be adequate to it, this word is just useless. Perhaps we will have to get rid of it. Perhaps that is what is going on today on a worldwide scene. On the one hand, forgiveness dominates the whole scene, and on the other hand, it has become hollow, void, attenuated. Perhaps that is what we are experiencing right now. But perhaps Richard will not forgive me for going on.

Kearney: Kevin, would you like to comment on that?

Hart: No, let us go on.

Derrida: Let me add just one thing. As you can imagine, I have reflected on my insistence of the *s'il y en a* in a number of contexts. In a recent text on Jean-Luc Nancy¹—who, by the way, is trying to write something on deconstruction and Christianity to be entitled *La déconstruction du christianisme*—and in rereading his work, I found that he does not say, "if there is something." He repeatedly says, "*il n'y a pas le langage*," "*il n'y a pas la technique*," "*il n'y a pas le toucher*," and so forth. We should not speak of "*le langage*" or "*la technique*" or "*le toucher*" in the singular, as if there were a singular word or concept. Nevertheless, he uses these words; having said this, he goes on using these words. I was comparing the two strategies. They have something in common, but they are not the same. The signature is different. There is some idiomatic gesture here.

Robert Gibbs: I will start with a citation and then go on to a question. I hope this won't be very long.

Derrida: To save time, just ask unanswerable questions.

Gibbs: In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, when Zarathustra comes down from the mountain, the first person he meets is the saint. And as he leaves the saint, he says to himself "Is it possible? The old saint in his forest has not heard that God is dead?" You build off of Jankélévitch the notion that forgiveness is dead, impossible, and that somehow we are now in a new era that we might call, not postmodern, but post-forgiveness. So a new possibility of forgiveness arises in this moment of post-forgiveness. Now Nietzsche has his reasons for saying that God is dead, and Jankélévitch obviously links his claim to the Shoah. I think some of us, working with theological traditions, find themselves in a situation where we might be like that holy saint. We are not so sure that forgiveness from before the Shoah is impossible after the Shoah. The question I want to put, what I want to ask you to explain a bit more, is this. You speak of the inheritance from these traditions, and you use a language of being in the wake of them, of following after them, and you also indicate a kind of continuity with them. Obviously it is both a rupture and a continuity. I think I understand how that works. But that particular event of inexpiable violence seems to occupy a specific place in the way you want to examine forgiveness. Now I will make the question just a little bit longer, but not too much longer. In Jewish philosophi-

cal and theological reflection, there are a lot of people who made such a claim, Fackenheim, Arthur Cohen, and others. But there are others who say “Well, you know, actually this is something which the Jews have been struggling with since the destruction of the Second Temple. The normal economy was destroyed when the Temple was destroyed and it turns out that the economy has been impossible ever since, and yet there has been the recovery of forgiveness. So this particular rupture for Jewish thought does not represent such a big rupture. It is another terrible rupture, but we are familiar with ruptures.” The topic that I want to hear your thoughts about is to what extent are we in a post-forgiveness situation, a situation of forgiveness after the death of forgiveness? To what extent is that really different from before? And insofar as it may not be so different, then the recultivation of those theological traditions might in fact have more resources precisely for addressing some of these cataclysmic evils.

Derrida: Thank you. I think we agree more than you seem to think. You attribute to me Jankélévitch’s thought, which I criticize or question. Jankélévitch says that forgiveness has come to an end, has died in the death camps. I oppose this. It is exactly the opposite. It is because forgiveness seems to become impossible that forgiveness finds a starting point, a new starting point. So I would not say that we are entering a post-forgiveness era at all. I said almost exactly the opposite. Of course I agree with you that, whatever originality there may be in the Shoah, this is repeating a long history. I come back to this question of the Shoah, and not only the Shoah, but all the inexpiable monstrosities of this century. If I do not think we are entering an era of post-forgiveness, nevertheless I think that something new is happening today in the world and that this has to do precisely with what happened in the second part of the century. In the process of globalization we see the theatricality of forgiveness, with heads of state asking for forgiveness, and so forth. By reference, I add to this the juridical concept of “crimes against humanity,” which was coined for diplomatic reasons, produced by the Nuremberg court, and a new “Declaration of the Rights of Man,” which is different from the previous one. So there is a new space in which the universalization of the notion of the inexpiable provokes new urges for forgiveness, for asking forgiveness, even if it is in a confused language, in a language full of equivocations. There is this universal potential agreement about crimes against humanity, the rights of man, and so on. We have had a lot of progress. Nevertheless, the international community, international law, with the institution of a universal penal court, and so on, are indications that humanity is entering a phase in which the inexpiable should be denounced and judged as such, the inexpiable as such.

That is why I take so much interest in the French law about imprescriptibility. Of course, I insisted on the fact that this law has nothing to do with forgiveness. If something is imprescriptible, that does not mean it is unforgivable. Nevertheless, in this law there is a sign toward the eternal right to judge crimes which are held inexpiable, beyond history, beyond time, beyond any given period of time. That means that the horizon of the forgiving of the

unforgivable is now determining the human community, at least potentially. That is what interests me. From that point of view I would say that we are in something new. I would not call it post-forgiveness, and if I call this a new epoch, I would historicize it again. I think it is not a history, not a part of a history, but something more than historical that is happening now. What in the act or the experience or in the thought, not the concept but the thought, of forgiveness is meta-historical, not unhistorical but historical in a different way? Forgiveness should imply a break with the ordinary course of time, an interruption, and we are now experiencing this interruption in our history and in our concept of history. You cannot open a newspaper without being informed about the new scene of forgiveness, asked for and granted, or not. I think what is happening today is perhaps this new era of forgiveness. I am sure that in order to think what is coming, we need the old history and tradition, not the tradition but traditions and all conflicts within the traditions. Yesterday I referred to the heterogeneity of these traditions. We need constantly to look back and to reread these texts, even as you said in your paper in a very striking way. Each time we reread a text—the Bible, your texts, mine—it looks like a repentance. We are asking for forgiveness by reading. Somewhere I wrote that as soon as I write, I am asking for forgiveness, without of course knowing what will happen. But forgiveness is inscribed in the very first speech act. I cannot perform what I would like to perform. That is why things happen.

Kearney: Before we move on to Jean Greisch, I wish to invite Jean and each of the subsequent speakers also to feel free to pick up on any of the points made by previous speakers.

Jean Greisch: Thank you, Richard. My question is immediately linked to what you said about interruption and forgiveness as breaking the ordinary course of time and history. I would relate this to what you hinted at yesterday evening, namely, Benjamin's paradox of forgiveness without reconciliation (*Vergebung ohne Versöhnung*).² This is a very challenging topic. Something that troubles me nevertheless is to what extent we can dissociate forgiveness and reconciliation? Why must the notion of reconciliation be rejected or excluded? To give a sharper formulation to my question: Does this rejection apply to every possible notion of reconciliation or only to Hegel's image of the wounds of the spirit which heals our wounds without leaving scars, an image he uses precisely in the context of discussing *Vergebung*?

Derrida: Thank you. Of course, it is not a matter of rejecting or excluding reconciliation. I tried to refine the purity, the possible purity, the rigor of the concept of forgiveness. So if forgiveness has a finality, if it is given in view of reconciliation, that is, of being at peace with the other or, as they say in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, of "healing away" the traumatic experience, if forgiveness has such a finality, then it is not pure, gracious, and unconditional forgiveness. Let us come back to the situation of the world today. Speaking of this equivocal use of the word forgiveness, we see that all

these political scenes of forgiveness, of asking for forgiveness and repentance, are often strategic calculations made in view of healing away. I have nothing against that. I have something against the use of the word forgiveness to describe these cases. “Healing away” is a major term in South Africa. In France, each time the head of state, the prime minister, wants to grant amnesty and to erase the crimes of the past, it is in the name of “national reconciliation,” to reconstitute the healthy body of the nation, of the national community. I have nothing against that. But if the word forgiveness is used in view of such an ecology or therapy I would say no, that is not to forgive. It is perhaps a very useful, a very noble strategy, but it is not forgiveness. So forgiveness, if there is such a thing, should be devoid of any attempt to heal or reconcile, or even to save or redeem. If I forgive, or ask to be forgiven, in order to be redeemed, that is a noble and worthy calculation, an economy. I ask for forgiveness, so I pay, and then you pay me back by forgiving me, and we are reconciled. There is a reconciliation of the victim and the perpetrator. We are, both of us, saved and redeemed. So I am trying—and I know how violent this is—to disassociate true forgiveness from all these finalities—of reconciliation, salvation, redemption, and so on.

If by reconciliation—now I go back to the sharpest point of your question—I refer to something which has no identification, no recovery, no therapy, as simply a certain relation to the other as such, then I say yes, that is what I have in mind by forgiveness. But that is not what one usually has in mind when one speaks of reconciliation, not only in Hegel but in others who speak of reconciliation, for whom reconciliation implies community, education, complicity, and so on. But in that case, this would not be pure forgiveness.

I would like to add just one more point, since you refer to a text of Benjamin, a very enigmatic one-page text, in which he speaks of the Jewish God as forgiving without reconciliation, as falling like a tempest or a hurricane that strikes the land.³ That is the asymmetry of forgiveness, an eschatological asymmetry. Now forgiveness should keep this asymmetry. If this asymmetry is kept in the reconciliation, then I have nothing against reconciliation. This asymmetry is part of the scene of forgiveness. The most violent violence is when you not only victimize someone but you victimize someone to the point that the victim cannot even forgive, cannot even speak, cannot even witness, and then is not in a position to be asked to forgive. That is an absolute asymmetry. So we must constantly take into account this interruption, this asymmetry. The word forgiveness, once it is rigorously dissociated from all these motives associated with it by religion—redemption, salvation, justification, which are very biblical—once we have purified the concept of forgiveness, so to speak, then, even if it is inaccessible, we start at least to know what we are speaking about; we have at least a measure to control political rhetoric. We know that this reference to forgiveness is often empty rhetoric, hypocritical rhetoric. If you do not have this point of reference for a rigorous use of the concept,

however difficult it might be, then you cannot as a practical matter have a critical response to the political abuses of the concept, of which, as we know, there are more and more today. This is also a political precaution.

Kearney: I would just like to reiterate, given the fact that Derrida, as we know, nearly always turns an answer into another question, each speaker can respond to Derrida's answer, which is also another question, as well as posing their own question.

Cleo McNelly Kearns: I think this will be in line with what Richard just said, because I think my question is perhaps just a reiteration of what I am hearing on both sides of the discussion at the moment. It has two parts. My question in a simple form is a re-posing of Robert Gibbs's question. I can see that forgiveness exceeds economy, but I am curious as to whether it exceeds heritage. Let me come back to that for a moment because I want to just add a loop in there. Jacques Derrida has spoken, very well, I think, and I am pondering it very deeply, of the corruption of the process of forgiveness, whatever it may be, by therapeutic discourse. I think this is really a very fertile and fruitful thing to pursue, although I think we would have to distinguish between many different kinds of therapeutic discourse. I want to use, or I want to invite you to use, if you wish, as a case in point some of the complexities of that. I have in mind another novum, as it were, in terms of the war crimes and crimes against humanity issue, which is the elevation, if that is the word, of a rape into a war crime, which is, as you know, a highly debated thing in feminist legal circles, a very complex business. I mention only one of its complexities, which is that it is a crime where even to announce that one has been the victim increases the victimization. That is to say, we have now a situation in Bosnia where men are refusing to accept back their wives who have confessed that they have been raped. So you have a kind of double indemnity there, if you like, which is extremely complicated by the issue of therapeutic discourse because in matters of sexual violation, therapeutic discourse has just proliferated, making a great claim to be able to heal.

Derrida: Thank you. You realize that when I opposed the conditional to the unconditional I immediately added that they were absolutely irreducible to one another but indissociable. That is, if we want to embody an unconditional forgiveness in history and society, we have to go through conditions. We have to negotiate between the unconditional and conditional. They cannot be dissociated, although we know they are absolutely heterogeneous and incommensurable. It is because these incommensurable poles are indissociable that we have to take responsibility, a difficult responsibility, to negotiate the best response in an impossible situation.

Then the second part of this question has to do with the possibility of exceeding the heritage. What is the heritage? The way I address this question implies that as soon as we speak, we are inheriting; we speak out of a heritage. But the heritage itself is heterogeneous and multiple; it gives us contradictory injunctions. For example, the heritage of the concept of forgiveness is not a

given. On the one hand it prescribes unconditional forgiveness and on the other hand it prescribes conditional forgiveness, conditioned by repentance, or by asking for forgiveness, and so on. The heritage is not something I receive. It is something I have to interpret and reinterpret through an active responsibility. So nothing exceeds the heritage, but the heritage exceeds itself. Within the heritage you have such conflicts, such irreducibly conflicting motives that the excess is within the heritage. What we inherit is an idea of the excess. Everything that we have discussed here today has to do with the excess within the heritage. Everything we inherit, especially in religion, in faith, whatever we want to call it, is a heritage of excess, and the excess is part of any heritage, not only a religious heritage. When my father leaves me something, it leaves me free. My freedom is the condition of my inheritance. So he gives me something which is infinite, which exceeds myself, and I have to assume this excess. So the excess is part of the heritage.

To go quickly—because Richard is looking at me—I want to go back to the last part of your question, about the abuse of the language of forgiveness and therapy and especially your reference to the woman. I can take another example, from another part of the world. I refer to a wonderful and moving book by Antjie Krog.⁴ She is a woman poet from South Africa, whom I met and who attended the sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She is an Afrikaner and she was absolutely traumatized, overwhelmed, by what she saw and heard. In this book, she reports—and this refers to the victims who cannot bear witness—that women in South Africa were often raped and could not come forth and bear witness before the commission because they would have to tell the stories of their being raped or they would have to show the scars and expose their nakedness. So they could not come before the commission and testify. There was also the case of a remarkable woman who became a minister after the end of Apartheid and who had an important political position, but who could not publicly testify to the violence. Many of them told the “Gender Commission”—this is described in a chapter entitled “Does Truth Have a Gender?”⁵—the story of the way they were arrested. The first gesture of the black policemen was to tell them, “You are not an activist; you are not acting politically; you are a whore, a prostitute.” They were denied the dignity of their political involvement and then, after their terrible experiences, they could not come before the commission. These are victims who could not simply publicly testify. There was the story of another woman who came before the commission and met one of the policemen who killed her husband, and she was asked whether she could forgive him. She spoke in her own language—there are eleven languages in South Africa—and so we are not sure what she said because this was translated into English. She said, “First, no government can forgive, no commission can forgive, only I could forgive and I am not ready to forgive.” This sentence translated into English remains very obscure because it may mean “I am not ready to forgive because of the violence,” or “I am not ready to forgive because I am not ready today”; this would require a

time of healing away, a work of mourning. Or it may mean “I am not ready to forgive because I am a victim but the main victim is my husband, who is dead, who would be the only one entitled to forgive.” So we cannot even understand what she meant by this “I am not ready to forgive.” In any case, she was pointing out that no institution as such, no commission appointed by the government, no government is entitled to forgive. Forgiveness is something else. She probably did not use the word “forgive” but this was translated into Anglo-Christian English. There was a case of another woman who was in the same situation who said, “Well, the only thing I wanted was to know what happened. Now I know what happened. I want no revenge. I forgive.”

Regina Schwartz: You’ve inspired a lot of questions, so I have to choose among them. Early in your talk last evening, you were talking about the problem of who can forgive whom. You said that one individual can forgive another individual, or one community can forgive another community. At the time I thought, there are two other options. One is forgiving yourself, and I am curious to know what you would say about that problem. In order to forgive yourself, do you need a prior forgiveness? Is that what we mean by divine forgiveness? Is it a self-acceptance after you have done something horrible? The fourth and final possibility is a little risky to bring up, but where else can I say it than at a conference called “Questioning God”? Can you forgive God? Is that a question that we can ask? For instance, when I was quoting Psalm 22, “My God, why have you forsaken me?,” the answer for Christ is that he is not forsaken. What about those who ask the question and do not get that answer, or who do not feel they got that answer? Can they legitimately ask that question of God? The question, I suppose, is the old one of divine justice, but now in the context of contemporary thought.

Derrida: Thank you. “Forgiving oneself”—if I had to answer, I would say, on the one hand, I never forgive myself, and on the other hand, I always forgive myself. In both cases, it would imply that I am not alone with myself, either when I forgive myself, because I summon someone who helps me, or when I do not forgive myself, because there is another one of me who will not forgive me. Freud tells the story of Heinrich Heine, who was converted, and the conversation concerned the Christian God. When he was lying on his deathbed, and there was a priest there, and someone asked him “Do you think God will forgive you?” His answer was, “Well, he will forgive me because that is his profession!” The very genesis of the idea of a God in that case would be to produce someone who is available for forgiveness each time we need it. So then I may have someone who does that job for me. I constantly have to forgive myself just to survive, just to go on. As you know, the young Levinas wrote in one of his essays before the war—I don’t remember the title—that forgiveness and reconciliation were part of the constitution of the temporalization of the ego.⁶ It is not simply a moral, ethical, or religious experience, but simply in order to go on and to produce the synthesis that you need to be yourself, and to identify yourself through time, you have to forgive yourself constantly. Forgive-

ness then is part of the temporal constitution of the ego, self-forgiveness. So from that point of view, yes and no, I forgive myself, I never forgive myself; it depends. We are a scene of multiple egos, persons. There is in me someone who is always ready to forgive and another who is absolutely merciless, and we are constantly fighting. Sometimes I can sleep, sometimes I cannot.

Now I turn to the phrase “forgiving God.” We know that we, especially the Jews, often make God appear before a court. After the Shoah, there were scenarios in which some Jewish communities called upon God to appear and to respond, to account for his misdeeds. But even without these theatrical and sometimes unbelievable scenarios, we are constantly trying to judge God. Even if we forgive him, even if we think finally that we cannot judge God, nevertheless the movement to evaluate God ethically, trying to understand the will and the strategies and designs of God, is a way of judging him. Finally, the believers are those who think that they do not have the right to judge, that a priori they forgive God for whatever God does. I am not sure that all the believers do that constantly. The people who have faith in God—since faith is not certainty and since faith is a risk—are also the people who are constantly tempted not to forgive God, tempted to accuse or to denounce God. That is part of the risk of faith. I am sure that we are constantly struggling with the temptation to judge God, constantly.

Graham Ward: You just mentioned Levinas and I want to ask you a question about Levinas. I am aware that there has been long conversation between you and Levinas, a dialogue between your work. What I am interested in is your first essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” where you seem to me to question the residue of transcendentalism that is going on in Levinas. So I was really surprised last night that you structured your argument around a series of transcendentals, such as absolute forgiveness, absolute otherness, radical evil, interruption. I thought those things would be deconstructed, but they are not and so I would like to ask you, what is happening there? But more importantly, and following from that, if you structure your argument about forgiveness in that way, then is there not the danger that you make aporia itself a transcendental, so that we are just paralyzed in front of an absolute abyss and therefore unable to do anything, let alone forgive?

Derrida: Thank you. First of all, in this early text on Levinas, I did not charge him with transcendentalism. On the contrary, I tried to question him, at least provisionally, from an ontological and transcendental point of view. My objections were made to him from a transcendental point of view. So in that respect I have nothing against transcendentalism. On the contrary, I was trying to say that a transcendental philosophy such as Husserl’s could resist, could more than resist, Levinas’s objections. So my strategy in that article was rather transcendentalist, at least in that essay. But in other places, my relationship with transcendental philosophy is more complex, as you suppose. I have nothing against transcendentality. In *Of Grammatology* I spoke of an ultra-transcendentality. I tried a discourse which had to be even more than transcen-

dental.⁷ I question the history of the concept of the transcendental, but not in order to go back to the opposite of the transcendental, to empiricism or positivism. I make the option of the more transcendentalist, so to speak, than the traditional transcendental, and I often use the word “quasi-transcendental,” to define the key concept that I use in certain contexts. The quasi-transcendentals function like the classical transcendentals, but they are not transcendentals in that sense. We need them for many reasons. Now to come back to the question of forgiveness, we need a pure concept of forgiveness, even if there is no forgiveness. We need at least a reference to an absolute forgiveness, an unconditional something, in order, first of all, to know what we mean as much as possible, and to think what we think, even if we cannot know it. So I am exactly the opposite of an anti-transcendentalist. The strategy is more complex here.

As to the aporia, on the one hand, I often say, perhaps not enough last night, that the aporia is not a paralyzing structure, something that simply blocks the way with a simple negative effect. The aporia is the experience of responsibility. It is only by going through a set of contradictory injunctions, impossible choices, that we make a choice. If I know what I have to do, if I know in advance what has to be done, then there is no responsibility. For the responsible decision to be envisaged or taken, we have to go through pain and aporia, a situation in which I do not know what to do. I have to do this and this, and they do not go together. I have to face two incompatible injunctions, and that is what I have to do every day in every situation, ethical, political, or not. So the aporia is not paralyzing, not the way I understand it. I often say the aporia is not something I can refer to as a phenomenon. In the small book entitled *Aporias* I say that what is aporetic in the aporia is that the aporia never presents itself as such.⁸ The aporia consists in the fact you cannot do a phenomenology of the aporia; the aporia does not appear as an aporia, as such. So I am not referring to some object, to a set of quiet poles of opposition. An aporia is an experience, enduring an experience, in which nothing—such as forgiveness—presents itself as such. That is because absolute forgiveness never presents itself as such and is irreducible to conditional forgiveness. That is the reason the aporia does not present itself as such, either. Of course, when I say that the aporia is what we have to go through in order to take responsibility and to act or to decide, that does not mean that it is easy to do. On the contrary, I will never know that I have made a good decision. If someone tells us, “I have made a decision, I have taken this responsibility,” for me, to my ears, this sounds absolutely ridiculous and obscene. One never knows who is taking the responsibility, or if it is the right one, and so on. So not only “I forgive,” but also “I am responsible,” or “I’ve made a decision”—that is to me not only unjustified but unbearable.

Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza: I would like to ask you about something that you indirectly alluded to but did not discuss in detail in your talk last night. My question concerns the significance of two elements that are indeed distinct from forgiveness but are nevertheless related to the topic of forgiveness:

namely, collective guilt and collective repentance. Collective guilt is a common Christian theme in its theological tradition on original sin. However, as you mentioned in your talk, a German could say: "My grandparents were involved in the Holocaust, but I wasn't," or an American could say, "My ancestors were involved in slavery, but I wasn't."

Nevertheless, I would like to note that in America today we still live off the benefits of that slavery. I may not have been a colonialist and I may not have trafficked in slaves, but I live off the benefits of colonialism and the results of slavery. The very shirt that I wear may be cheaper than it would be because of underpaid labor in a colonized country. Therefore, the question of collective guilt emerges in relation to the enjoyment of benefits that result from injuries to others, even if done in the past or by others. Even though one may have not been directly involved, one nonetheless still enjoys the benefits of the injustice. Therefore, I would like to point to the notion of a collective repentance. The acknowledgment of the obligation of repentance is an acknowledgment of an obligation that follows from collective guilt. I would argue that in the United States, the question of affirmative action toward minorities (for example, affirmative action in admitting of minorities to universities) should be a part of the collective repentance for evil that was done in the past and whose effects still exist. To those individuals today who might complain that affirmative action treats them unjustly for they were not directly guilty, one could point out that affirmative action is required because collective guilt should entail collective repentance. What I am interested in and what I am asking you is, how do you understand and interrelate such a notion of collective guilt and repentance with your understanding of forgiveness?

Derrida: I totally agree with you. Let me come back for a second to something I just said in order to say something even more shocking. The fact that I cannot, I should not be able to, say, "I forgive," or "I am responsible," or "I make a decision," does not exonerate me from my responsibility, but it implies that the one who forgives in me or decides in me or takes responsibility in me is the other. If my gesture, forgiving, deciding, being responsible, is simply the explication of what I am or of what is possible for me, for my power, then I do nothing. For me to do something, which is forgiving or deciding, I must do something that is higher, larger and other than me, that is, the other makes the decision in me, which does not mean that I am passive, that I am simply obeying the other. But the one who forgives, the one who decides, the one who takes responsibility is the other in me. That comes back to the relative complexity of the scenario within ourselves.

Now I come back to your question. I totally agree with you. Yesterday I said that although we often presuppose that the scene of forgiveness is face to face and that it implies singularity, I also added immediately that a third one was implied. There is no scene of forgiveness without language, even if it is a silent language. We are in the possibility of a community and of heritage. Now, while I agree with you, I would disassociate the scene of forgiveness from the

scene of repentance. I think it is a good thing that the community repents, and I totally agree with you when you say that Americans today and others have benefited from slavery. That is obvious every day. So Americans today have to recognize their current guilt and to repent. That is what Clinton did when he was traveling in South Africa and met Nelson Mandela. He did not repent but he recognized that there was some guilt, that slavery is the Americans' responsibility, but without drawing any consequences, because in that case repentance requires precisely starting a process of repairing, repaying. On the international scene, as soon as you acknowledge a crime, then you have to repay. There are procedures of compensation, which is what happened with the Jews in Germany. So if Clinton or the American government wanted to be consistent with their recognition of slavery, they should provide deep transformations, endless transformations, in the current state of society. This would not have anything to do with forgiveness. They would not be forgiven; they would not have asked for forgiveness. They have to simply acknowledge what happened and be consistent with this recognition. Of course, everyone, not only the Americans, should participate in this transformation of society. When I was lecturing in Australia on forgiveness, I was asked by a journalist at a press conference, should our government apologize for the treatment of the Aborigines? My first response was, I am a visitor here and it is your responsibility. I will not give advice. Nevertheless, if you insist, I would say, yes, the government should apologize because that would be a promise to improve the situation, to change a terrible situation. The next day, in the newspaper, the headline read, "French Philosopher Urges Government to Apologize."

Hart: And the Prime Minister refused.

John Milbank: I think I would like to pick up on what Graham Ward said. Your reply, Jacques, was of course absolutely right, that you are a transcendentalist philosopher, even of a new sort, an extreme sort. So really what I want to ask is, why is that not called into question? Why are you a Kantian? The question really has two parts, relating both to ethics and to theoretical philosophy. So, first of all, in relation to ethics, it seems that there's a repeated structure that you share with Levinas and Patočka, whereby you say, if such and such an ethical concept can be purged of certain religious elements, having to do with reward and salvation, it would become purer and thereby more religious.

Derrida: More religious?

Milbank: Yes. Now what I would like to ask is this. Is this in danger actually of being too moralistic, in the sense that it is not looking at how the purer the ethical becomes, the more anti-ethical it becomes. What I mean by that is that if I insist on pure absolute self-sacrifice I am indeed suggesting a kind of obliteration of myself, and one might ask, well, is this ethical? It does seem to me that secularity of itself almost encourages that, because if death is the ultimate horizon in the future rather than eternity as the ultimate horizon, then one tends to say that the noblest thing is for the individual to sacrifice

himself or herself to the future or to the state or whatever. So that what we have seen is that ever since the nineteenth century, the more secular things have become, the more people talk about sacrifice. You get this in Comte and Durkheim, and what I worry about in somebody like Patočka is whether that sort of thing isn't still going on. It is the same with talk about a very pure gift or very pure forgiveness. If you demand that they be really pure, then they are impossible, but should we actually want them to be really pure? Up to a point I strongly agree with you about asymmetry, that you have got to be prepared if necessary to sacrifice yourself, and that you shouldn't be forgiving the other just so that you can be forgiven. But nonetheless, is pure forgiveness the name of the good or, as Robert Schemann, a German philosopher, argues, would the name of the gift, the name of the good, rather be, in the end, something like us all sitting down for the eschatological feast? In other words, if there isn't enough to go around then I should give my share away to the other, but obviously I hope that I will be able to eat alongside of the other, too. That is the religious image, the religious beyond the ethical, a sort of hyper-ethical. You could argue that it is actually more ethical, and that in a very strange kind of way, secularity encourages a kind of masochism.

Derrida: Masochism?

Milbank: Yes. Whereas the traditional religious view does not. So it does seem to me that there is a common thread of Kantianism, seeing the ethical as purity of will and so forth, and an unpreparedness to examine something like the eudaimonistic. That is the first part of the question.

The second part is this. You have this notion, indeed, of some sort of transcendental horizon, of something that is absolutely impossible that is nonetheless the condition of possibility for the possible. But it then tends to happen that when that impossible is expressed, it is betrayed. Absence founds presence, but as soon as the thing is, it is present, and then it is concealing absence, and so on. You are arguing that that is rigorous transcendental philosophy, indeed almost a kind of phenomenology, that that is what appears to us. But what I want to ask, then, is, well, there's a sort of objectivism about that, and could that be concealing a decision you are making or a subjective judgment that you are making? I wondered actually in "Circumfession," in the text underneath the Bennington book, whether you were raising that question yourself, whether you started to say, well, maybe what I have concluded is actually autobiographical. That does seem to be a serious question. If we're talking about something like the boundary between the known and the unknown, is it correct to think like Kant, that one can somehow state what the limits of possible knowledge are, even if one states them as aporias? One still claims in that way that one can fix the boundary between the known and the unknown, and of course, in the wake of Kant, Jacobi called that into question. It does seem that perhaps Jacobi is actually somehow beyond the postmodern, if one wants to think of you as a postmodernist. I am not worried about the term. The question is really, Are not so-called transcendentalist issues, setting

out a transcendental framework, really not always themselves a matter of interpretation? Have you not owned up to something like an act of interpretation? It is here that the issues with theology I think become crucial because I agree with you, against Kevin Hart, that ultimate aporias are not a lot of use to theology. An aporia might, as you say, be a gift, and it might be a poison. But if it is a matter of interpretation, does it somehow still remain possible for theology to say, well, in my interpretation, in my experience, presence and absence are not related like that, but somehow presence in its very presence is mediating an absence? So, in other words, one has the idea that the unknown, the horizon beyond, is always somehow mediated, is always coming through the known in such a way that there is not really any fixable boundary, but the unknown makes itself present because one has interpreted the unknown more as a plenitude than as an abyss. The question is, is that not an equally possible interpretation once one has abandoned the assumption that one can even do transcendental philosophy, even of the kind that you carry out?

Derrida: I would need twenty-four hours at least to answer all these questions. So let me try something. I take the risk of saying this abruptly. First, on the one hand, pure forgiveness should be in a certain way beyond any interpretation, because interpretation, the process of interpreting, is already taken in an economic way—reconciliation, healing away, negotiating. So in certain way, forgiveness should go beyond interpretation understood in that sense. In another sense, because of the reasons I gave, there is only interpretation in the night about forgiveness. I would say both at the same time. I leave this as an aporia. Now I will try to answer some of your questions.

The first one has to do with the transcendental tradition. Here again I am in a heritage. I am struggling, as we all are, with the heritage of philosophy. I learned a lot from Plato, Kant, Husserl, and I try to be true to their lessons and the request for transcendentalism is one of them. Nevertheless, this does not prevent me from objecting to Kant on many points, especially on the point of duty and the moral law. I said somewhere⁹ that if I act ethically, not only in conformity with duty (*Pflichtmässig*), but out of duty (*aus Pflicht*), then I am just paying a debt. In that case, I am not behaving ethically. I should do what I have to do beyond the duty. So I am ultra-Kantian. I am Kantian, but I am more than Kantian. I am constantly taking up this struggle within tradition. The same would be true with the question of the boundary between the known and the unknown. When I referred to this classical distinction between knowing and thinking a moment ago, I did not imply that I knew where to draw the boundary. It is unclear to me. So again I am here in this difficult position. I must confess that I am struggling with things which remain problematic and unclear to me and I have no response. Having worked, like all of us, within the heritage, I am in the process of understanding a little more, of transforming the heritage, and going I do not know where. I really do not know where.

Now the danger of becoming moralistic is obviously a danger. I agree with you. Personally, I am someone who is constantly described as an immoralist

and an atheist and also as a priest. I have to respond to these two sets of imperatives and I am taken in this way. That is why the question of sacrifice, which is at the center of what we are discussing, is not addressed much. Again, in what I write, which I cannot reconstitute here, I am constantly against the logic of sacrifice, especially in the question of forgiveness. I am trying to deconstruct the logic of sacrifice, which is at the center of Kant, Levinas, Lacan, Heidegger. In that case, deconstruction consists in identifying the sacrificial logic even if it is hidden in these great thinkers. So I try not to be simply sacrificialistic but at the same time I cannot deny that sacrifice is unavoidable. I try to think what a sacrifice is and I am against it and for it. You said that today, in what you call secularity, the secular dimension of our time, one speaks more and more of sacrifice. The concept of secularity to me is very, very obscure. I do not think that there is anything secular in our time. First of all, the concept of secularity is a religious concept. So when you are describing something as secular you already understand and interpreting it as religious. So I think our time is less secular than ever. If I am interested in forgiveness and the gift it is because I think what is at stake today in our time is something that is neither secular nor religious in the traditional sense. It is something else.

Milbank: But if I said something “immanentist,” thinking of someone such as Durkheim?

Derrida: But if I ask you what you mean by immanence and you tell me the Incarnation is the mediation of God and man, is that transcendence or immanence?

Milbank: It is both, but is predicated on transcendence, whereas I do not think that worshipping society is transcendence.

Derrida: Judaism would say that the Incarnation is a way of immanentizing transcendence. So I do not know. Each time I face this couplet of concepts I just resign myself. We have learned, especially from Kant and from Husserl, that there is transcendence in immanence, and so on. I do not want to choose between the two. Now at some point you used the word “betrayal.” I do not remember the sentence but I remember the question. You wanted to avoid betrayal or urge me to avoid betrayal and unfortunately I think we are, that I am, constantly betraying. I tried in a short essay on Levinas to show that from the very beginning of ethics, in the very relation to the face, *visage*, in a dual relation, since the third one was required and the third one is already comparison, the betrayal, the perjury, is already there. The perjury does not fall upon the promise or the sworn faith; the perjury is at the heart of the sworn faith. That is why the seminar I am currently giving is not simply on “Forgiveness.” It is called “Forgiveness and Perjury.” I think that perjury is unfortunately at the very beginning of the most moralistic ethics, the most ethical ethics. That might sound difficult, but in a certain way it is trivial: As soon as I am true to you, I am betraying you, or the other one, one as/or the other, and I know that from the beginning. So Levinas was suffering from this. He asked

why there is another of the other, and why I am compelled to compare, to refer to justice in the sense of the law, the legal institution, to comparison, to reason, and so on. Because as soon as I relate to an irreducible singular one, I am betraying another one, or I introduce a third one who disturbs or corrupts the singular relation to the other. So I betray or I am perjuring. The fact that there is betrayal at the beginning does not mean that I am free to betray.

Milbank: I would like to say something very quickly about betrayal. I was really more talking about transcendental betrayal . . .

Derrida: I am too sensitive to transcendental betrayal.

Milbank: I wanted to ask whether one could also conceive the ultimate ontological scenario in another way. I cannot spell this out now but, roughly speaking, I think something like the *analogia entis* conceives this scenario in another way. But I think that is not irrelevant to what you are talking about. Because I think if one has this model of transcendental betrayal, then one somehow thinks that difference is taken to be the ultimate, that, if you have got a sort of transcendental difference, and difference is the ultimate, then there is a sense in which everything is on a level and there is a certain kind of indifference and then transcendental betrayal. So you will end up saying, well, I have an equal duty to this person and this person. As you put it very wittily in one of your books, you say, why should I look after this cat and not other cats?¹⁰ That seems to be a consequence of this transcendentalism about betrayal. You will end up thinking “nothing has more weight than anything else.”

Derrida: It is not “nothing,” but “no one.”

Milbank: That there is no sort of sort of real, imbued order to the universe. I want to ask, is that necessarily the case? Do we not usually experience the sense that—even if we can agree that there are lots of situations where we can never be absolutely sure of this—somebody has some sort of prior claim? Also, if you look at this on a social level, are not such aporias to do with a sort of absolute breakdown of community? If there are a lot of stray cats, then it’s a problem. In Italy it would be a problem, but in cat-loving England it is not a problem, because everybody there looks after their cat. So obviously you can look after your cat with a good conscience, because you know that other people are looking after their cats.

Derrida: You might change the example!

Milbank: Yes, I might change the example. I think it is important to do so. The idea that charity is an absolutely general obligation to everybody—again, I am not so sure about that. In the Middle Ages they tended to interpret charity in terms of notions of kinship, quasi-kinship, and friendship, so that there was a higher duty to look after those closer to you. Aquinas says that you should love your wife and your family more than other people. It is only later on that people have real problems with that. In the Middle Ages they were not thinking of charity as some sort of indifference to Eros, friendship, and affection, to affinity, if you like. What you are saying seems to me not to take seriously

affinity and the erotic. So, again, it seems almost that *because* you are being too moralistic, you will also end up saying that one cannot do anything moral.

Derrida: You might call this indifference, but if you think that the only moral duty you owe is the duty to the people—or the animals—with whom you have affinity, kinship, friendship, neighborhood, brotherhood, then you can imagine the consequences of that. I, of course, have preferences. I am one of the common people who prefer their cat to their neighbor's cat and my family to others. But I do not have a good conscience about that. I know that if I transform this into a general rule it would be the ruin of ethics. If I put as a principle that I will feed first of all my cat, my family, my nation, that would be the end of any ethical politics. So when I give a preference to my cat, which I do, that will not prevent me from having some remorse for the cat dying or starving next door, or, to change the example, for all the people on earth who are starving and dying today. So you cannot prevent me from having a bad conscience, and that is the main motivation of my ethics and my politics. If I speak of “national preference,” as we do in France, and we say that we will give work to French-born citizens and not to the immigrant . . .

Milbank: No, I do not mean that at all.

Derrida: . . . but that is kinship and affinity and a common language. Then you can see where that leads. It is not because I am indifferent, but because I am not indifferent, that I try not to make a difference, not to make a difference ethically and politically, between my family and his family and your family. I confess that it is not easy. I know that practically I grant a privilege to kinship, to my language, to France, to my family, and so on. But I do not have a good conscience about that.

Kearney: We have time now for questions from the floor.

Audience: Throughout the conversation, the phrase has been going through my head “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” I ought to say that I am mentioning this as a quotation and not offering it as a prayer for this group. Both would do, of course. That seems to me to raise a question, well, very many questions, that cannot be answered in five minutes. But there's a question there about forgiving those who do not know what they do and of forgiveness being pleaded for by a third party (or perhaps a second-and-a-half party, if we are going to be trinitarian), which adds another dimension. That also relates to another question that occurs to me, which is, are Christianity's contributions to the heritage the concept of the unforgivable, rather than some exalted sense of forgiveness, that it is Christianity that brings in the idea of unforgivable sin, the unforgivable sin of nailing god on a cross, which then relates to the other unforgivable sin or the punishment that a heritage metes on the Jews as having resigned any right to forgiveness, if you take the Gospel passages at face value. That is a complex question.

Derrida: Two points. First, “Forgive them, they do not know what they do”—that is of course a very famous and difficult statement that I try to interpret in my seminar, and it takes a long, long time. But on two occasions, once

when I gave a lecture at the Institut Catholique de Paris, and once last spring when I was having a debate with Ricoeur on the question of forgiveness before legal theorists, the same question occurred, and of course it is an unavoidable one. No one had mentioned this in the debate until someone like you brought it up. I tell you what I tried to answer. I tried two possible answers, which differ in tone. One, of course, is the trivial one: Since they do not know what they do, they are not responsible for what they do. They did wrong but with no intention of doing wrong, so they were not wicked themselves and so we can forgive them. They are not responsible, not knowing what they do. That is a trivial answer. The other, more sophisticated answer that I take the risk of formulating is that between what one does when one harms someone, when one sins or does something criminal, between what one does and knowledge there is a gap and you cannot reduce the gap between doing and knowing, in a certain way. Forgiveness has nothing to do with knowledge. That is why St. Augustine, when he confesses, asks God, why should I confess before You when You know everything in advance? That means that the confession does not consist in letting the other know. The other knows. In order to confess, you have to imply that the other knows already, that in confessing you do something else than to inform the other. So confession, forgiveness, have nothing to do with knowledge. Sinning, doing something wrong, or causing harm have nothing to do with knowledge. So forgive them because what they did has nothing to do with their consciousness or knowledge. That is a more risky interpretation.

You say, in a very interesting way, that perhaps Christianity has taught us the unforgivable rather than forgiving. Now, we can connect this statement with what is happening today, crimes against humanity. What is unforgivable today before the law, in France and elsewhere, is a crime against humanity, that is what is inexpiable and unforgivable. That means that what becomes unforgivable is a crime directed against what is most sacred in humanity, in the humanness of the human, the most sacred. The concept of a crime against humanity implies something sacred. It is an absolute principle; no one would oppose that. Today the cornerstone of international law is the sacred, what is sacred in humanity. You should not kill. You should not be responsible for a crime against this sacredness, the sacredness of man as your neighbor, your brother, the Christian man, made by God or by God made man. That is, God-made man. Man is divine, sacred, and the crime of what is inexpiable is crucifixion, a crime against the most sacred dimension of humanity. In that sense, the concept of crime against humanity is a Christian concept and I think there would be no such thing in the law today without the Christian heritage, the Abrahamic heritage, the biblical heritage. That is why I do not think there is anything secular in international law today. The idea of crime against humanity is a religious law. I am in favor of that. I think it is a radical mutation, a progress, but this does not prevent me from thinking that it has some religious origin.

Kearney: I would like to thank Jacques Derrida on behalf of all of us, in particular for the extraordinary gift, yet again, of his generosity, time, energy, intellectual dexterity, and wisdom, and not just with regard to philosophical and theological concepts and arguments, but with regard to very ordinary, everyday, concrete moral and political issues, ranging from Yugoslavia to South Africa to crimes against humanity to the Holocaust. It is a unique combination of the philosophical and the ethical and we have been very privileged to witness this yet a second time here in Villanova. There is talk, and it is only a rumor, of a third conference on religion and postmodernism, probably a mad dream in the minds of Michael Scanlon and Jack Caputo. But if it comes to pass, you might all remember an old legend about the Augustinians and visitors to their monasteries, which is that if a visitor comes back for a third time and knocks at their door and enters, he or she shall become a novice. So, if Jacques Derrida returns and takes on for a third time this debate in this Augustinian institution, the question remains undecidable for the moment as to whether he becomes a novice or this Augustinian institution becomes deconstructed, or both. But you are all invited back to the next one to find out. So on behalf of all of you, I would like to thank Jacques Derrida for his extraordinary generosity.

Derrida: Thank you, Richard, and thank all of you for your hospitality. I very much enjoyed this new experience. Forgive me for improvising in my awkward English. For me an improvised discussion is always a nightmare, especially in a foreign language for which I have no affinity or kinship. In order to thank you, I wanted to add an anecdote to what Richard said. Before giving a seminar on forgiveness and perjury, I gave a three-year seminar on hospitality, in which I often refer not just to Christianity or to Judaism, but also to pre-Islamic culture. The hospitality which was required among nomadic communities was such that when someone lost his way in the desert, the nomadic communities should receive him, should offer him hospitality, for three days. For three days they had the obligation to feed him and look after him, but after three days they could kill him.

Kearney: Thank you, Jacques.

NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).
2. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), Fr. 71, pp. 97–98.
3. “Wie der reinigende Orkan vor dem Gewitter dahinzieht, so braust Gottes Zorn in Sturm der Vergebung durch die Geschichte, um alles dahinzufegen, was in den Blitzen des göttlichen Wetters auf immer verzehrt werden müßte.” Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, IV, p. 98.
4. Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999).

5. Chapter 16 is entitled "Truth Is a Woman."
6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987).
7. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 60–61.
8. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).
9. See Derrida, *Aporias*, pp. 16–17; Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 8.
10. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 71.