Derrida and Conflict

Lucy Britt
Wesleyan University

Abstract: This article suggests that Jacques Derrida’s deconstructive theory of pure forgiveness of the unforgivable is a persuasive philosophical concept that nonetheless breaks down at the moment when it enters into a political discourse. Tracing two conflicting strains within Derrida’s theory—the deconstructive rejection of ideas’ degrading circulation and the unabashed endorsement of Nelson Mandela’s engagement of the ideals of democracy and justice—this immanent critique will point to possibilities for Derrida’s theory of forgiveness to have political relevance. It begins with an exploration of the philosopher’s theory of pure forgiveness as an aporia of the impossible forgiveness of unforgivable crimes. It then reveals tensions between Derrida’s deconstructive resistance to what he sees as the economic exchange of forgiveness and his uncritical endorsement of Mandela’s political use of the ideals of justice, freedom, and equality. This critique hopes to allow for new engagements with Derrida’s thought that will allow political and critical theory to address forgiveness as an important factor in postconflict politics and everyday life.

Keywords: Derrida, aporia, Mandela, forgiveness, Rwanda, puzzle, Ronell
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Lucy Britt
Wesleyan University

Although Jacques Derrida’s aporia of pure forgiveness is consistent within his deconstructive framework, his admiration of Nelson Mandela’s morality both shows a discord between exceptional forgiveness and universal justice, and exemplifies what Derrida elsewhere sees as the corruption of the deconstructive concept by the political. The concept of pure forgiveness, however, resonates with the seemingly impossible release of negative emotions surrounding severe trauma that survivors of genocide describe in postconflict Rwanda. While I acknowledge that Derrida is not an explicitly political thinker and that his writings about politics more closely resemble an aesthetic or literary reading than an engagement with policy, I offer this critique as an opening in Derrida’s vacillation for applications of pure forgiveness to postconflict political theory.

Something resembling pure or impossible forgiveness is not only possible but has been attained after horrific violence in places like Rwanda. Derrida senses the tension between the philosophical imperative to define pure forgiveness and the pragmatic need for political reconciliation. His answer to this tension is to point to the need for laws based on ethics of pure forgiveness. This imprecise answer gives little to the political pragmatist other than critical legal theory or legal reform informed by Derridian pure forgiveness and its contrast with reconciliation.

Derrida’s Aporia of Forgiveness

Developed mainly for a seminar on forgiveness he taught in 2001 at New York University with Avital Ronell, Derrida’s concept of forgiveness is one of several “aporias,” or thought experiments juxtaposing the possible and the impossible that he began exploring late in his career. As such, his essay “On Forgiveness” posits pure forgiveness as a “madness of the impossible” that fits into the broader deconstructive framework. He describes forgiveness as only possible in forgiving the impossible, meaning that the seemingly impossible task is only possible when the crime is so heinous as to be seemingly unforgivable. Moreover, Derrida’s pure forgiveness is a powerful concept because it begins to unravel survivors’ difficulties in coming to terms with terrible crimes and releasing the offender from resentment or culpability.

Background: Derrida and Deconstruction

An outcast his whole life as a Sephardic Jew raised in Algeria and marginalized under the Vichy colonial system, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) is best known as the father of deconstruction. This critique of Western philosophy attempts to undermine preconceived ideas by turning them inside out and by both reversing and destroying their dichotomies. In binaries where one idea is dominant (such as male-female or signifier-signified), deconstruction both reverses and breaks down the hierarchy. This critique is strongly rooted in language and textual content; his concept of différance, the “non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating

origin of differences,” focuses on the concept of the sign or signifier and the necessity of writing to reveal the relativity of meaning. Critiques of deconstruction aside (Is it useful? Playful? Intellectually wasteful?), Derrida’s attack on moral universalisms provides a compelling alternative to all-encompassing philosophical or ethical systems.

Deconstruction’s trope is that it reveals absence to be the new presence, distorting philosophical and literary narratives and revealing them to both enclose and destroy dualities. Derrida’s essay White Mythology claims that metaphor is a necessary part of philosophy; language is itself mere metaphor. However, a concept loses its purity when it is inevitably circulated in philosophical and everyday discourse. Like knife-grinders who efface coins’ markings and thus devalue them, metaphysicians participate in effacement through metaphor, whereby the idea is “worn and effaced, polished by the circulation of the philosophical concept.” The concept of effacement captures deconstruction’s criticism of philosophy that overuses universal concepts (from Aristotle and the classical world-builders to Kant and the Enlightenment thinkers and Hegel and the historicists). Derrida proposes instead a new philosophy that rejects metaphysics’ tropes of presence, telos, truth, and the good—one that shows how ideals turn back on themselves and reveal their dualisms. Late in his career, Derrida shifts his focus toward ethical and political questions. This “phase of affirmative deconstruction” takes on political issues, from September 11th to the death penalty, although Derrida’s philosophy was arguably always politically engaged.

**The Puzzle of Forgiveness**

Toward the end of his career, Derrida turns to the aporia, philosophical puzzles that present an impasse by being both possible and impossible. These include the impossibilities of gifts, hospitality, forgiveness, and mourning. As thought experiments, they use deconstruction to find contradictions in philosophical concepts.

It is in the context of a dialogue with Vladimir Jankélévitch’s work on forgiveness and against the backdrop of the Holocaust that Derrida begins his deconstruction of forgiveness. The French government had recently eliminated the statute of limitations, l’imprescriptible, on crimes against humanity. Jankélévitch’s 1967 philosophical exploration, Le Pardon or Forgiveness, covers the Judeo-Christian and philosophical concepts of forgiveness, the power to forgive the crimes against forgiveness itself, and the gift of forgiveness as being similar to love. However, Jankélévitch changes his mind about forgiveness in a chapter of a later book published in 1971, L’imprescriptible, arguing against forgiveness of the German people.

Derrida traces the shift in Jankélévitch’s argument between these two key texts. Le Pardon (1967) claims that forgiveness is possible even for inexpiable crimes: mad forgiveness “forgives one time, and this time is literally one time for all!” In L’imprescriptible (1971), Jankélévitch retracts...
his early exploration of forgiveness in the post-Holocaust case because the Nazi crimes are just too monstrous to forgive: “forgiveness is as strong as evil, but evil is as strong as forgiveness.”\(^{211}\)

Jankélévitch’s evolving thought influences Derrida’s emphasis on the sovereign and the problem of having a single identity to forgive unconditionally. Derrida explains the seeming contradiction between *Le Pardon* and *L’imprescriptible*: “pure forgiveness is uncoupled from the institutional application of its principles in the same way that Jankélévitch’s work *Forgiveness* is uncoupled from *Pardonner*? [the relevant chapter in *L’imprescriptible*.]\(^{212}\) However, Derrida fails to account for Jankélévitch’s initial Arendtian assertion in *Le Pardon* that the moral force of forgiveness lies in the fact that it erases the past, effectively causing offenses to no longer have happened. Whereas Jankélévitch ultimately finds that the Holocaust makes forgiveness impossible, for Derrida the Holocaust simply reaffirms that “[it is] because forgiveness seems to become impossible that forgiveness finds a starting point, a new starting point.”\(^{213}\) Here, Derrida differs from Jankélévitch: the former expropriates forgiveness to fit into his deconstructive framework, while the latter reworks his theory when forgiveness challenges it.

Jankélévitch criticizes the use of forgiveness after the Holocaust because the perpetrators did not repent or ask for forgiveness; in contrast, Derrida criticizes the use of forgiveness after political violence because it degrades Abrahamic forgiveness by attempting to fulfill a function such as repentance, changing the offender, or preventing a return to previous evil.\(^{214}\)

Late in his career, Derrida argues through the lens of aporia that one can only forgive that which is impossible to forgive—mortal or grave crimes such as those committed in Germany under the Third Reich. Forgiveness “only becomes possible from the moment that it appears impossible. Its history would begin, on the contrary, with the unforgiveable” such as the atrocities of Nazi death camps.\(^{215}\) Forgiving the impossible is therefore useful because it helps explain how such a seemingly difficult task becomes possible at the darkest moment. Derrida thus recognizes forgiveness’s circular and improbable nature, capturing its power to heal relationships in the unpredictable postconflict landscape of conflict.

Derrida’s most innovative contributions to thought about forgiveness are the elements of unconditionality and nonsovereignty in pure forgiveness. He insists upon a “radical purity” and unconditionality of forgiveness (that is, not asking anything of the forgiven, including not asking him or her to change). Unconditionality is as crucial to Derrida’s theory of forgiveness as it is to his theory of gifts: he claims it impossible for anyone, especially the person forgiving (or giving a gift), to state, “I am forgiving; forgiveness has happened” (or “I am giving”). Forgiveness defies practical application, and an utterance proclaiming it defies its impossibility because the concept is beyond cognitive understanding.\(^{216}\)

Pointing out a discord between unconditional “globalized” Christian forgiveness and

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211 Jankélévitch, “Should We Pardon Them?”
214 Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 34.
conditional, economically exchanged forgiveness, Derrida draws the important distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, which he defines as a calculation to heal a relationship or fix a situation where wrongs have occurred.\textsuperscript{217} Forgiveness is not only unconditional but also divorced from sovereignty. The modern nation-state was born out of violence, complicating issues of international human rights with sovereignty or individual power. For pure forgiveness, Derrida demands “a forgiveness without power: \textit{unconditional but without sovereignty}.”\textsuperscript{218} This means taking away the power of the individual to judge and punish in order to enable pure and radical forgiveness.

Derrida opposes the use of forgiveness in a normative discourse of mourning and reconciliation because doing so risks corrupting pure forgiveness. He insists that the language of forgiveness in dialogues of reconciliation prevents pure forgiveness. He argues that the entrance of a third party corrupts pure forgiveness and at the moment the victim understands the perpetrator as something other than a perpetrator, pure forgiveness gives way to a deliberate process of reconciliation. Here, the political (defined as the relationships between people as individuals and members of social, political, historical, or economic groups) can clarify Derrida’s aversion to the intervention of the state in forgiveness as wariness of the effacement of forgiveness. This dissociation is important because it separates judging from forgiving. The implication is that forgiveness is at odds with punishment, which Western systems of law associate with justice. However, judgment and forgiveness share the characteristics of universality and political applicability.

Derrida poses forgiveness only in the context of a singular perpetrator, explaining what it would look like \textit{s’il y en a}, “if there is such a thing,” in a 2002 roundtable discussion following a seminar on forgiveness.\textsuperscript{219} Forgiveness can only be between two people on their own terms. He cites the example of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to show that the state cannot forgive on behalf of the victim.\textsuperscript{220} Forgiveness is the sole decision of the victim, and the offender must retain his or her identity as an offender while the victim retains his or her victimhood.

The only instance, then, in which Derrida’s pure forgiveness could play out among actual people is an imaginary scenario in which a victim repeatedly forgives an offender as the offender continues to harm the victim, thus maintaining the status of each individual as victim and offender. This hypothetical describes forgiveness only if the offender, repeatedly offending, remains an offender and the victim, repeatedly victimized, remains a victim while forgiving. The moment the victim stops seeing the offender as an offender, there is no longer an offender to forgive.

This puzzle of forgiveness offers many immediately obvious but shallow points of critique. For example, there is the concern that the above scenario echoes cycles of domestic abuse and could be critiqued from a feminist angle, the argument that forgiveness as a deconstructive concept transcends all philosophical categories, and the critique of pure

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{218} Derrida, \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}, 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{219} Kearney.
  \item \textsuperscript{220} Derrida, \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}, 43.
\end{itemize}
forgiveness as an inhuman act. Moreover, part of Derrida’s argument against the universality of forgiveness is a practical concern: if everyone forgave every offense, “there would no longer be an innocent person on earth—and therefore no one in the position to judge or arbitrate.”

The pure forgiveness model as an aporia is consistent with the deconstructive attempt to break down dualities and show ideas enclosing both their possibility and their impossibility. Derrida’s forgiveness (both in his theoretical explanation in On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness and in his imaginary scenario from the roundtable discussion) exemplifies the deconstruction of a concept. Moreover, he resists the effacement of the idea of forgiveness, which is consistent with his work on metaphor. Deconstruction is based on a series of contradictions, so pointing out contradictions as flaws in the puzzle of forgiveness is a limited strategy. However, a critique of forgiveness in relation to Derrida’s liberal praise of Nelson Mandela reveals important tensions. A consideration of this aporia in contrast to his political engagement in the Mandela piece, discussed below, offers new routes of critique and new uses for his deconstruction of forgiveness.

Counterexample: Rwandan Forgiveness

Seemingly impossible pure forgiveness resonates with instances of forgiveness in postgenocide Rwanda. Survivors there have achieved something resembling Derridian forgiveness—forgiveness of seemingly unforgivable crimes, with the necessity to forgive anew over and over. The genocide in 1994 involved neighbors killing neighbors, resulting in one million deaths in one hundred days. The reintegration of perpetrators into their communities alongside the survivors whose families they killed creates a unique political-historical context for forgiveness as a necessity for daily life to continue. Women in the countryside near the city of Butare have formed a farming cooperative with the men who killed their husbands, forgiving the unforgivable every time they interact with the perpetrators in daily life. This example shows that while Derrida’s concept of pure forgiveness resonates with the impossibility/possibility dynamic of forgiveness in Rwanda, Derrida’s refusal to allow political or social outcomes for forgiveness is a flaw in his theory.

Forgiveness versus Mandela Piece: Economic Exchange

In On Forgiveness, Derrida explicitly resists the use of pure forgiveness for political purposes. Explaining what he sees as the danger of overusing forgiveness, he writes,

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.

Pure forgiveness must not be “contaminated by political agendas,” an idea that stands in stark contrast to his earlier veneration of Mandela’s use of the ideal of justice in politics.

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222 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, 27.
223 Kearney 53.
Derrida’s moral and extralegal concept of justice in a contribution to a 1987 volume about the imprisoned Nelson Mandela points to a tension within his philosophy of political justice versus abstract forgiveness. This essay admires Mandela for his “admiration of Mandela, a double genitive: the one he inspires and the one he feels … he becomes admirable for having, with all his force, admired, and for having made a force of his admiration.” Although Derrida later deconstructs democracy as thus both self-improving (constantly aspiring to be more democratic, exhibiting “perfectibility”) and self-destructing (providing weapons for its own destruction, as in the case of September 11th), in the Mandela piece he is fairly uncritical of the democratic ideal and the universal moral concept Mandela invokes. He admires Mandela for admiring “law itself, the law above other laws” and the English system of parliamentary democracy, separation of powers, and human rights. He finds universal potential in a teleological democratic ideal, represented by the “seed,” or the “filling out” of the democratic form. He praises Mandela for fighting apartheid from within the apartheid government’s constitutional framework and for calling upon a higher ideal of law based on the Rousseauian general will of the whole nation, black and white.

Despite his previous critique of teleological philosophy and metaphysics from Aristotle to Heidegger, in the Mandela essay Derrida traces Mandela’s understanding of law from Rousseau’s “general will” to Kant’s categorical imperative and Socrates’ primacy of a higher law of conscience over man-made laws. However, by following this route of deconstructive critique to support Mandela’s universal ideals of justice and equality, Derrida is ignoring his own resistance elsewhere to the entry of such universals into the political sphere.

It is not that Derrida forgets his deconstructive roots when he turns to Mandela; on the contrary, he deconstructs both Mandela’s admiration (admiring Mandela and admiring Mandela’s admiration) and the historical moment (Mandela’s reflective view toward the unjust apartheid law showing the law its own illegality). Rather, it is Mandela’s ideas and his use of them that Derrida fails to deconstruct. Derrida (almost uncritically) traces the historical narrative of Mandela’s application of a universal ideal to politics, itself an example of what Derrida usually would deride as effacement of the idea. The Mandela essay presents a liberal idea of justice (echoing Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.) that emphasizes respect for the individual and a higher morality that transcends current laws.

Despite this earlier endorsement of universal democratic ideals in political discourses, in the forgiveness essay Derrida opposes the universal of forgiveness being implemented in the postconflict politics of South Africa. Citing an example of a female apartheid victim who during her Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony resists Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s language of forgiveness, Derrida argues against the use of forgiveness in postconflict politics, saying that pure forgiveness must happen between two people:

One day a woman comes to testify before the Commission. Her husband had been assassinated by torturers who were police officers…. “A commission or a

226 Cheah and Guerlac 13
230 Guerlac 264.
government cannot forgive. Only I, eventually, could do it. (And I am not ready
to forgive.)”… the anonymous body of the State or of a public institution cannot
forgive. It has neither the right nor the power to do so; and besides, that would
have no meaning. 231

This example of Derrida’s resistance to the use of forgiveness in politics contrasts directly with
his admiration for Mandela’s political use of the idea of justice.

After a 1998 lecture at the University of Western Cape, a young South African woman
asked Derrida,

You might have made that idea of pure forgiveness with a lot of irony…. But
we [the white post-apartheid student audience] sit here as potential objects of
forgiveness, and we are all of us, including you, in a sense, guilty. Don’t you
think it fulfills an ideological function telling us we should not repent, not ask
for forgiveness, because then we ruin pure, unconditional forgiveness, when
at the same time you are telling oppressed people they should forgive without
expecting forgiveness?

In response, Derrida drew a dividing line between pure forgiveness and reconciliation
in South Africa, voicing a concern that bringing forgiveness into the political process of
reconciliation would Christianize the latter. 232 This response exemplifies the very resistance to
the economization of a concept of which he is guilty in the Mandela essay. In contrast to his
endorsement of universal standards of justice, Derrida relegates forgiveness to hypotheticals
and thought experiments.

Derrida insists that he has nothing against reconciliation, which he sees as an economic
transaction that is not equivalent to forgiveness and that can be politically beneficial in many
postconflict situations:

“Healing away” is a major term in South Africa…. But if the word forgiveness
is used in a view of such an ecology or therapy I would say no, that is not to
forgive. It is perhaps very useful, a very noble strategy, but it is not forgiveness…. 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. 233

This terminological slight of hand conveniently obscures Derrida’s failure to do anything
more with “true forgiveness” than describe its impossible hypothetical scenario. The moment
the question of pure forgiveness is raised in the wake of unforgivable crimes, Derrida shies
away from its application and turns to reconciliation instead. However, both the South African
and the Rwandan examples show the possibility of forgiveness having political and social
consequences for reconciliation. Even considering the valid concerns about the theatrical nature
of forgiveness in the South African public eye, in both Rwanda and South Africa, Derridian
forgiveness between perpetrators and survivors has contributed to the healing of society. The
caution Derrida exhibits toward the use of forgiveness in politics can temper a policy- or results-
driven approach.

231 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, 43.
232 Dick and Ziering Kofman.
233 Kearney 56.
Instead of urging postconflict regimes to attempt to legislate forgiveness, this article (with an eye toward Derrida’s apprehension about effacement) aims to parse through Derrida’s vacillation about the application of pure forgiveness. Derrida’s attempt to turn moral ideals inside out, and to posit only very specific instances in which pure forgiveness is possible, reveals not only an internal theoretical weakness but also a political one. This article reveals new discourses of transitional justice that facilitate or consider forgiveness, rather than mandate or enforce it or try to incorporate it into state procedures. While Derrida’s wariness about forgiveness being corrupted by political exposure can offer valuable caution against the mutation of forgiveness for political ends, it does not mean that forgiveness has no potential power for politics. Rather, Derrida’s inconsistency between the Mandela case and “On Forgiveness” allows for a new way of thinking about postconflict forgiveness that has political impact (such as reconciliation between groups, or stability and peace) without itself being implicitly political or corrupted by politics.

Derrida’s answer to the problem of using forgiveness after violence is reconciliation, which he sees as a more feasible alternative to forgiveness generations removed from the conflict. Forgiveness remains impossible, but reconciliation becomes an easier option. However, the incongruence between this answer and the Mandela piece provides an opening for an application of Derrida’s theory of forgiveness that is contrary to Derrida’s own restrictions for the theory. Moreover, as South Africa and Rwanda show, reconciliation can be enabled by or occur simultaneously with forgiveness while remaining a separate concept.

When Derrida turns to politics and attempts to apply the deconstructive concept to current events, he cheapens his own claim to deconstructive purity, exemplifying the usury or effacement of concepts he so fears. In his praise of Mandela’s use of the universal ideals of justice, freedom, and equality, Derrida loses his critical view of philosophical concepts being used and abused in politics.

Ideas of universal rights and crimes against humanity — the ultimate justification for the Nuremberg Trials, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda — emerged from mass violence. If these ideas are based on the sacredness of the Abrahamic man, then they represent the large-scale “theatrical space” of a “virtually Christian convulsion-conversion-confession” that Derrida criticizes for globalizing to non-Christian areas of the world. This is his main grievance with the government’s employment of the language of forgiveness in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and in international political negotiations. The African National Congress’s history of reconciliation politics and language of post-apartheid forgiveness, as well as forgiveness in Rwanda, throws this internal contradiction within Derrida’s philosophical endeavor into even starker relief. Thus, the internal contradictions between Derrida’s work on South Africa and his theory of pure forgiveness, as well as the external example of Rwandan forgiveness, point to the possibility of Derridian forgiveness having political and social significance.

236 Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, 29.
The external examples of Rwandan postgenocide forgiveness and Mandela’s political idealism serve to amplify the internal vacillations in Derrida’s theory between his work on forgiveness and his use of Nelson Mandela and their implications for opening up pure forgiveness to have political and social import. It is crucial to engage with Derrida’s aporia of pure forgiveness on his own terms before integrating it into a political theory of forgiveness. The moment of tension in the theory between Derrida’s pure forgiveness and his idealistic writing on Nelson Mandela allows for the Rwandan case to exemplify the possibility that pure forgiveness can have a political impact on reconciliation after mass violence.

Conclusion

I accept Derrida’s concept of pure forgiveness as an isolated philosophical ideal within his deconstructive framework. However, the tension between the Mandela essay and pure forgiveness weakens Derrida’s deconstructive purity: the theory attempts to straddle a simultaneous theoretical isolation and political engagement. Where these two impulses are at odds, they point to possibilities for new approaches to forgiveness through Derrida’s philosophy. The discrepancy between political-ethical discourse and deconstructive critique not only cheapens the pure forgiveness model but also insufficiently approaches political problems, doing injustice to both deconstructive theory and political solutions. The opening the theoretical vacillation gives for political import allows the example of Derridian forgiveness in Rwanda to challenge Derrida’s separation of pure forgiveness from solutions for postconflict reconciliation.
References


