

THE EVENTS OF MORALITY AND FORGIVENESS: FROM KANT TO DERRIDA

by

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will perform a “step back” by showing how Derrida’s analysis of forgiveness is rooted in Kantian moral philosophy and in Derrida’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s concept of decision. This will require a discussion of the distinction that Kant draws in his *Groundwork* between *price* (the economic) and *dignity* (the incomparable), as well as a discussion of the underlying notion of singularity in Kant’s text. In addition, Derrida universalizes Kierkegaard’s concept of the agent so that, with this perspective in view, the interpretation of Kantian morality as something that must be described in a paradoxical way, becomes fully transparent. Whereas the interpretation of Kantian morality will provide us with a concept of morality that remains a “blind spot” for the agent, with the help of Derrida’s Kierkegaard interpretation we can see that the concept of decision remains ultimately ambivalent. In conclusion, both (a) the deconstructed concept of morality and (b) the concept of decision will finally (c) let us understand Derrida’s radical concept of forgiveness, which is both a non-economic act of morality in the sense explained and an unpredictable, uncontrollable decision and event.

We do not indeed comprehend the practical unconditional necessity of the moral imperative, but we nevertheless comprehend its *incomprehensibility*.
Kant¹

The rationality of the rational has never been limited, as some have tried to make us believe, to calculability, to reason as calculation, as *ratio*, as account, an account to be settled or an account to be given. . . . The role that “dignity” (*Würde*), for example, plays in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* belongs to the order of the incalculable.
Derrida²

I. Introduction: *The Non-Economic*

One motive for thinking about the instrumentality, utility and practicality of reason, and therefore of philosophy itself, is rooted in the social, economic, and political development of Western history during

the last two hundred years. Today, the problem of the instrumentality of reason seems to come even more to the forefront, since it is obvious that genetic *reproduction*, economic *calculation*, international *globalization*, as well as universal *exchange*, and unifying *translation* all are “instrumental” concerns and are fundamental considerations of our age. Economy, we might say, maybe is all there is. We know that Marx as well as Heidegger, Foucault, Levinas, and Derrida were each deeply troubled by this “economic” rationalization within the process of modernity. In what follows, I will perform a “step back” by showing how some of the most pressing contemporary philosophical questions are situated within, or find their genealogy in, Kantian moral philosophy and Kierkegaard’s concept of decision. By providing this background, we will pave the way for grasping what Derrida has in mind when he analyzes concepts such as forgiveness. Ultimately, this will require an interpretation of Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (PP, 37–108) that is rather uncommon, as it connects Kant’s work with Derrida’s claims regarding the non-economic and the non-instrumental.

As we will see, in order to understand the underlying Kantian structure in Derrida’s thought, we must understand Derrida’s appropriation of Kierkegaard, for Derrida universalizes Kierkegaard’s concept of the agent so that, with this perspective in view, the interpretation of Kantian morality as something that must be described in a paradoxical way, becomes transparent. Whereas the interpretation of Kantian morality will provide us with a concept of morality that remains a “blind spot” for the agent, with the help of Derrida’s Kierkegaard interpretation we can see that the concept of decision remains ultimately ambivalent. Both (a) the deconstructed concept of morality and (b) the concept of decision, will finally (c) let us understand Derrida’s radical concept of forgiveness, which is both a non-economic act of morality in the sense explained and an unpredictable, uncontrollable decision and event.

In the following [first step], I will begin by laying out the historical field of the problem of the incalculable and the non-economic in Kant’s *Groundwork*. I shall then [second step] try to clarify the paradoxical situation of the Kantian agent by dealing with Derrida’s interpretation of Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*. Both my interpretation of the concept of Kantian morality as well as the further interpretation of the Kierkegaardian agent will help us to understand why, according to Derrida [third step], the act of forgiveness is both a non-economic

act of morality in the sense explained and an unpredictable, uncontrollable decision and event. On the basis of this analysis, I will try to show evidence for Derrida's thesis that forgiveness is based on a performative moment that locates forgiving beyond the distinction between rational and irrational, given that forgiveness must be conceived as a "blind" act *when* performed.

II. *First Step: Deconstruction of the Concept of Morality*

In the following first part of my paper I will attempt to shed light on the roots of the discussed problem in Kant, without whom it is hardly possible to understand Derrida's radical reflections. Due to the overall purpose of this essay, I will discuss neither the general distinction between rationality and reason in Kant in general, nor the unconditional nature of the moral law in any detail, but only insofar as it is of importance for the overall topic of this paper. This will require a discussion of the distinction that Kant draws in his *Groundwork* between *price* (the economic) and *dignity* (the incomparable). I should also remark here that I will not reflect on the second source of the "non-economic," which is, of course, Marx's early writings.³ Finally, I should emphasize that my rather uncommon interpretation is motivated by Derrida's remarks on Kant (as is indicated in the epigraph of this paper), which lead to the insight that the phenomena of morality and forgiveness show striking similarities, since both—in Derrida's words—belong to the "order of the incalculable."

I shall begin my analysis by extracting from practical philosophy the dialectical notion of singularity and morality, as it is presented in Kant's *Groundwork*. The Kantian moral discourse is a crossing of three discourses: (a) the discourse about reason, (b) the discourse about morality, and finally, (c) a discourse about ontology. The famous statement that he makes in his *Logic* (1804) in which he claims that *all* philosophical questions are rooted in the question "What is man?" is not a side remark only; rather, it calls for an ontology *of what we are* as the primary center of philosophical thinking. With the exception of Heidegger's attempts to appropriate Kant, the contemporary discourse tends to overlook and to suppress this ontological questioning within Kant's ethics. As is well known, a proper understanding of Kant's moral philosophy is tied to two things: (1) on the one hand, Kant's theory deals with a general account of what it means to be moral; while, (2) on the other hand, his discussion of morality is deeply

interrelated with his attempt to solve the problem of causality and freedom, which was left unsolved in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's moral philosophy is supposed to show that the autonomy of pure reason is not a mere chimera but that it is, rather, the source of genuine human freedom.

At the end of section II of *Groundwork*, Kant introduces the idea of a "kingdom of ends." To review briefly, the kingdom of ends represents Kant's conception of the ultimate end of our actions, so long as they are conceived under an *ideal* perspective, that is, so long as we *idealize* our own status and ask: how would we treat each other as rational (*vernünftig*)⁴ agents if we would live in an ideal situation within which we were bound neither to circumstances, nor to individual situations, nor to peculiar, merely personally binding, natural self-interests but only to our capacity to *determine ourselves purely through ourselves* "from the inside," so to speak. "Morality," as Kant puts it, "consists, then, in the reference of all action to the lawgiving by which alone a kingdom of ends is possible" (*PP*, 84). Of course we might say, with Kant, that in such an ideal situation we would not refer to any strategic calculation of what we must do, since we would always treat each other as ends, and not as mere means. In such a "kingdom" we would indeed be *autonomous*, since we would not only treat others as ends, but we would also treat *ourselves* as ends. Put simply, in such a kingdom I would (paradoxically) treat myself both "like a king" and "like a subject" at one and the same time. Kant's conception of the moral and, hence, human situation, can, if laid out as a phenomenology of moral action, be reconstructed as a situation for and of the self, in which the self confronts itself with itself. This is to say that the moral self opens up a relation to itself in a moral situation. Kant writes: "The will is not merely subject to the law but subject to it in such a way that it must be viewed as also giving the law to itself and just because of this as first subject to the law (of which it can regard itself as the author)" (*PP*, 81). The notion of the moral and non-economic subject, which is characterized by the double structure of *reception* and *giving*, can be clarified with the double paradox of response and answer. As Kant tells us in the quote, moral autonomy must be understood as a structure within which the subject is both *subject to the law and law-giver* at the same time. In other words, Kant describes a paradoxical situation in which the *reception* of the moral law must be conceived as something that is given to itself. If we take into account that morality is the essential feature of our being, then we must conclude that through

morality we are given to ourselves by receiving *and* giving our own being to ourselves. Since the categorical imperative forces the self to go *beyond* the self, the self *returns* to itself. The Kantian consideration about the subject as both lawgiver and law receiver is indeed puzzling, since the status of the moral law is itself paradoxical. On the one hand, Kant does not mean that we *arbitrarily* create and “invent” the moral law; rather, the moral law must already *determine* our creation when we create or “choose” it. We are determining ourselves in a moral situation *out of* the moral law. On the other hand, the moral law cannot determine our creation, since then it would already have been created *before* we create it. However, the moral law does not have an objective status; it is not “there” before we act. Otherwise it would destroy our autonomy. It is rather the case that we *choose* the moral law, since we *are* the moral law. This point becomes important for Derrida’s conception of the agent [see step 2 below], since, on Derrida’s view, Kant did not reflect enough on the problem of decision that is presupposed for his conception of moral action.

Furthermore, we are unable to ascribe to the moral law a reality that is independent from the act of *confirming it*. Kant says explicitly that the subject “gives” itself the law, which in German is derived from “*Gabe*,” which can mean both a talent and a gift (present). In other words, giving oneself the law has a passive *and* an active moment, since a talent is something that is *given to* someone. Giving the law, therefore, means that the self *presents* something to itself; it gives something that is already given to it. The moral self *responds* to itself by *calling* itself into its being, that is, into its morality. In Kant, the autonomy of the subject ultimately is a paradoxical relation of the self to the self, though Kant himself did not reflect on the paradox of the relation between individual response and universal law.

The consequence of this is that I would treat myself as constituted through myself, since I would be both *subject to and inventor of* this morality. In this moment, Kant argues, we would actually do something decisive; namely, we would treat ourselves and others *as what we are in ourselves*, namely: free. Moreover, we would both *recognize ourselves and be recognized by others* through the *realization* of our own being. In other words, *real* freedom is the mutual situation within which we treat ourselves and others in the form of humanity *as* truly free, which is to say that we respect one another *as* autonomous beings. Put differently, we treat each other *as others*, since the moral situation is a situation in which all actions are based “merely on the relation of rational beings

to one another" (*PP*, 84). The crucial step for my consideration is introduced by Kant through the following words:

In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity. (*PP*, 84)

What does Kant have in mind here? When I recognize myself and others as what I and they are, that is to say, as *moral* actors, then I, indeed, treat myself and others as beings who do not have their worth granted from the outside or from any external source. Rather, since morality for Kant is based in a pure, non-instrumentally motivated act, moral actions must come from *within*; they must be, in other words, internally motivated. Put differently, through a moral action, which is part of the kingdom of ends, I *recognize* and *respect* the dimension of pure reason as such (within me and others), and this sublimity elevates my being to something that is *beyond* every entity in the normal sense of the word. It is, as if—through the attempt to transform myself into a member of the kingdom of ends—I *overcome* and *cancel* my status as something that is simply an entity *in* this world. In this way, we might say that I *transgress* my boundaries of being a mere thing. Kant explicitly says that such treatment would put us “infinitely above all price, with which it cannot be brought into comparison or competition at all without, as it were, assaulting its holiness.” (*PP*, 85).

However, this statement is puzzling, since Kant shifts the whole problematic of freedom, morality, and ontology to a level that is *in itself* (a) beyond any rational, that is, calculating use of reason, and consequently, (b) beyond any *economic* use of human reason. In other words, being moral, according to Kant, *is identical* with—or at least relies upon—the establishment and the possibility of a radical non-instrumentality and a *non-economic relationship* between us as rational actors and us as our own selves. It is as if we *bracket* or *neutralize* our instrumental rationality in the moment of realizing our morality, and therefore our (empirical) being. Put paradoxically, we bracket our being in the moment of *bringing about our true being*. We become what we are, namely, something *incomparable*. However, if it is true that “moral worth” points to something that is *absolutely* incomparable, and in addition, if it is true that rationality, especially theoretical rationality, is always *relational*, then it follows that the true realization of man and his emancipation cannot be reached through *any* form of instrumental and

relational thought. In other words, since rationality (instrumental reason) relates every thing to something else, it therefore robs both sides of the relation of their inherent *singularity*. It is quite remarkable that despite the fact that we usually regard Kant's theory as having to do with mere universalism, upon closer examination we should see that he actually implies something different on the ontological level of his thought.

Moreover, we must come to the conclusion that, in a certain sense, "*a-rationality*" must be identified as the inner core of pure reason itself, since as a moral agent, according to Kant, I can no longer *legitimate* myself and my action through instrumentality. In other words, I cannot give a *reason* at all for my moral action, since in doing so I would refer to a goal, intention, or purpose that either explicitly or implicitly refers, necessarily, to a utilitarian means-end structure. Kant's conception of the moral event goes far beyond every calculation, including foreseeing, planning, and indeed any general form of rationality, which is related to the temporal structure of a moral situation, that is to say, to past, present, and future. The *realization* of a moral action, the *event* of morality itself, and therefore of my own *becoming myself*, can only be performed in a situation, but it cannot be legitimated and foreseen *before* it occurs. In this sense, it belongs, in Derrida's terms, to the "instantaneous." For instance, I cannot determine my will *now* so that a *future* action will follow. The determination of my will must happen *instantly*. A difference between present and future would include a reference to a *calculation* (of this future). In addition, *after* an action the agent is unable to answer the question *why* he or she acted morally, since every reference to a "cause," besides the moral law (which is identical with the self), would push the agent back into the order of hypothetical imperatives. Asked why we acted morally, as Kant puts it, we could give "no satisfactory answer" (*PP*, 97). But what does it mean to "not have an answer?" Not having an answer indicates that one does not have a response in the form of a *legitimation* of the moral action. Thus the moral act itself is a form of *blindness*, we might say.⁵ The force of the categorical imperative goes *beyond* the self, since the self is unable to respond to it, to answer to it(self), to include it in any logic of exchange. The categorical imperative, seen from this point of view, is not a principle that has *explanatory and legitimizing* power; rather, it is beyond expression and explanation. The act of morality, similar to Kierkegaard's leap of faith, cannot be *expressed*, since every act of expression is necessarily dependent upon the universal structure of language. Since

the moral act constitutes ourselves as a singular, as a *solus ipse*, it cannot be described in and through language. Strictly speaking, the consequence of this consideration is that the moral agent must remain silent about the moral action that defines her ownmost self. It is indeed the case that we *mean* our singularity when we try to show worth through morality, but at the same time, it is also true that the moment of worth can never be expressed in language. It is as if the categorical imperative remains “hidden,” and, as Kant reminds us, “*incomprehensible*.” In this way, the moral agent’s self remains, as Derrida puts it, a “secret” (*GD*, 59).

On this view, the moral action—seen as an event and an occurrence—is something that does not fit into any form of rationality; it is, in Kantian terms, “based on no interest” in the morality of the action (*PP*, 82). *If* the moral situation is of *no* interest, then *any* relation to calculation and economy is cut off and left behind, and as such, it ultimately leads us to the insight that morality must be conceived as an *unconceivable event*, which is certainly underscored by the Kantian remark that it could be the case that so far *no one* has ever acted morally, and even if someone had, we might not know it. If this is true, then we must come to the surprising conclusion that the act of morality is *performed*; it can never be *predicted* and therefore has to be conceived as an event (I will come back to this point later). It is based on a moment of decision that cannot be rationalized, which totally escapes any attempt to frame it in what we usually call “reason.” This result is indeed quite astonishing, and we will soon see how the “ultra-Kantian” Derrida implicitly works into his considerations what I have pulled out of Kant about the phenomenon of decision and forgiveness. Let me summarize the first step: (1) the act of morality is radically unconditional; (2) it is unpredictable, as well as (3) it belongs to the order of the non-economic, which ultimately leads to the insight that (4) the situation of a Kantian moral agent must be conceived as a paradoxical situation.

III. *Second Step: Deconstruction of the Concept of Decision/Performance*

In the next part of my paper I shall try to clarify the paradoxical situation of the Kantian agent by dealing with Derrida’s reconstruction of the concept of decision, especially as it is developed in *The Force of Law* and in *The Gift of Death*. As we will see, Derrida universalizes Kierkegaard’s concept of the agent so that, with this perspective in

view, the interpretation of morality as something that must be described in a paradoxical way becomes transparent. Whereas the interpretation of morality provided us with a concept of morality that remains a "blind spot" for the agent, with the help of Derrida's Kierkegaard interpretation we can see that the concept of decision that underlies Kant's conception at the same time remains ultimately ambivalent. Both the Derridian concept of morality and the concept of decision shall lead us, finally, to understand Derrida's radical concept of forgiveness, which is both (1) a non-economic act of morality in the sense explained and (2) an unpredictable, uncontrollable event in the form of a performance. Derrida claims that a decision is characterized by the following features: (a) it is based on a radical concept of future, (b) it is irreplaceable because it expresses singularity, and (c) it escapes the difference of law and application. The most important feature of decisions is undoubtedly (a), for, according to Derrida, every decision is temporally structured by a fundamental "blindness," which is to say, that it is not self-transparent when performed. Consequently, Derrida must claim that "real" decisions abandon the conceptual difference between law and application altogether. In the following I would like to further elaborate on this thought.

(a) DECISIONS AND FUTURE

One might argue that moral actions and decisions are not as exceptional as Derrida tries to show, especially since decisions are not only embedded in our everyday worldly actions and world horizon but also tied back and only understandable if connected to a concept of intention. This framework is ultimately challenged by Derrida's considerations, inasmuch as Derrida claims that the concept of a decision as something that has not yet happened can only be fully laid out if the notion of future is clarified. Accordingly, the concept of future is the condition of the possibility for every notion of intentionality and mental concept of action, simply because actions and decisions would not be actions and decisions if they would be related to the concept of past. The moment in which a decision breaks through the average course of life is always thought of as a form of rupture and in relation to at least a minimal notion of freedom. If this is true, then we must indeed claim, as Derrida does, that the concept of decision presupposes a temporal difference between present and future. Having an intention, expecting a decision, preparing oneself to act, only makes sense if what

I expect and intend has not yet happened, which presupposes a notion of future. As is well known, Derrida radicalizes this notion of future. For the purpose of this paper, however, it is not necessary to go into extensive details, but we should nonetheless closely analyze Derrida's argument in his interpretation of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. As Derrida argues, an agent can only tremble in the face of an event or a decision if we take into account two elements of this relation. On the one hand, trembling presupposes a relation towards the *future*, that is to say, to something that has *not* yet arrived. An agent can certainly not tremble over something that happened in the past; rather, trembling, fear, and anxiety are only possible because they are related to possibilities in the agent's life, and hence they are related towards the future. On the other hand, trembling presupposes a *relation towards* the future, for if the agent would not expect or intend anything in the face of what *could* happen, trembling would not appear at all. Now, according to Derrida, both the negative moment of the future itself *and* the relation towards the future unfold a dialectic that limits itself through the moment of *the* future in general, which ultimately escapes the intentional relation towards a *specific* future. As Derrida points out, future is "anticipated but unpredictable; *apprehended*, but, and this is why there is a future, apprehended precisely *as* unforeseeable, unpredictable; approached *as* unapproachable" (*GD*, 54). The status of the future is precisely open *because* the agent knows that she can only *attempt* to expect or *attempt* to predict the future, since there is something about the future that can neither be expected nor predicted. Accordingly, the concept of future itself presupposes a moment that must be conceived as being totally outside of any instrumental relation towards the future. An expecting, and therefore calculating, relation towards the future (instrumentality) is possible *because* there is something *that* we try to rationalize, which is outside of this form of rationality. According to Derrida, Kierkegaard's "tremble" expresses precisely this: "I tremble at what exceeds my seeing and my knowing although it concerns the innermost parts of mine" (*GD*, 54). Derrida's strategy culminates in his claim that Abraham's situation should not be seen as something exceptional; rather, *every* situation in which an agent is forced to decide is exceptional. Abraham's situation, in other words, is our situation; it is, as Derrida puts it, "the most common thing" (*GD*, 67). What Kierkegaard reserves for the religious act and the leap of faith is, in Derrida's interpretation, just the expression of the general situation of an agent. Kierkegaard (and with him Kant), we might conclude, did

not consider the temporal situation of the religious and moral agent, and hence overlooked the extremely paradoxical character of the moral agent.

(b) DECISIONS AND SINGULARITY

If it is true that the future component of the agent's situation does not allow for a full intentional interpretation of this situation, then it is consequent, as Derrida further claims, that the moment of decision implies a moment of ignorance and non-knowing. If it would be possible that the agent's decision to act could be fully determined through a "law," a "rule," rational knowledge, or instrumental considerations, then the temporal difference between the present and the otherness of future would disappear and the decision would no longer be a "real" decision. Of course, we might say, that what rational accounts of decisions and actions overlook is that even the best deduction and the most logical consideration will *never* fully determine the decision. For, if this would be the case, the decision would no longer be a decision in a genuine sense. However, if the future moment does not allow for a full determination through knowledge and rationalization, we must conclude, with Derrida, that the agent ultimately "is given over to absolute solitude" (*GD*, 57), since the decision contains a moment of a-rationality that *even the agent* is unable—necessarily—to explain.⁶ *Why* an agent acts *when* and *in the moment* of decision remains a secret, unexplainable and outside of any concept of rationality. Of course, after a decision an agent will always find an explanation for her decision, but it is important to stress the point that this explanation always comes *after* the decision. However, an explanation or rational legitimation will never necessarily lead *to* a decision. Derrida's point is simple, but hard to integrate into traditional accounts of reason and rationality, insofar as it tells us that this moment of a-rationality is the very condition for the possibility of rationality as such. "Such, in fact, is the paradoxical condition of every decision," as Derrida puts it, "it cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explication. It structurally breaches knowledge and is thus destined to nonmanifestation; a decision is, in the end, always secret" (*GD*, 77). No one can decide for me, as no one can die for me. The decision pushes me back onto my own self and leaves me without answer.

(c) DECISIONS AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LAW AND APPLICATION

A last aspect of Derrida's deconstruction of the moral agent has to do with the relation between law and individual case. According to Derrida, as he especially underlines in *The Force of Law*, the concept of decision is torn between the tension of rule and the application of the rule, for the deciding agent not only needs a general faculty of judgment to apply a rule to a given situation, but she also tries to be appropriate *in regard to* the content of the decision. However, as Derrida powerfully maintains, a law can *never* be fully appropriate to a single case and a single instant, precisely because a law per definition does not allow for an exception. Accordingly, the agent's attempt to apply a law or rule necessarily is at the same time, so to speak, a misapplication and a failure. As Derrida underscores, the paradox and dilemma that underlies the concept of decision is not a dilemma of two or several equally possible decisions; rather, the singularity of a decision itself leads, if taken seriously, to the aforementioned paradoxes. The reason is this: a decision is always an application of some general knowledge, rule, or rational consideration, according to which we decide in a given situation for a *specific* content. A decision, in Derrida's terms, tries to "do justice," either justice to what has to be decided or justice to another person, in the face of whom the decision must be made. But is this even possible? If an agent makes a decision for 'a' and against 'b,' then the agent tries to do justice to that about what she is deciding. However, deciding for 'a' makes it impossible to do full justice to 'b.' In addition, since the decision is not itself the general rule, but the *singular* instance and situation in which the rule is applied to a case, the decision *itself* receives the status of a singularity and uniqueness, given that in the moment of its performance the decision is *neither* application *nor* rule. In the moment in which the rule or the general underlying knowledge has to be applied, the rule itself must be neutralized and bracketed, for the rule, as we said before, does not necessarily lead to a decision. Consequently, the decision puts the rule—even if the decision finally does not decide against the rule—into question during the moment of its performance. An agent who can affirm a rule implies the possibility of a negation, the moment that Derrida calls "undecidability" (*FL*, 252). Moreover, the delay that the decision introduces puts even the Kantian categorical imperative into question. In addition, when the decision is made and the law or general knowledge is applied, the generality of what is applied to a case cannot fully "do

justice” to the singularity of the moment, within which the agent moves beyond the order of rationality.

We should summarize what we have found out so far: the performative moment, that is to say, the performance of an action and decision, must be conceived as being beyond both poles that usually let us speak of actions and decision. Decisions are beyond a full rational insight *when* performed, the consequence of which is that they contain a moment of “blindness.” In Derrida’s conception, every performance is “blind” and beyond knowledge. A decision, as he states, “remains secret in the instant of its performance” (*GD*, 77).

IV. *Third Step: Forgiveness as an Event of Morality and Performance*

(1) After having introduced the thesis that the act of morality is a non-economic, paradoxical act by dealing with a radicalized interpretation of Kant’s *Groundwork* and (2) after having further clarified the agent’s situation of this act by dealing with Derrida’s concept of decision, we are now in the position to understand Derrida’s analysis of forgiveness as, in his words, an “impossible possibility.” In what follows I will show—with Derrida—that the act of forgiving is an event that escapes instrumental rationality because it is based on both (1) the unconditionality of “morality” and (2) the event-character of the act and decision itself. Forgiveness, according to Derrida’s unusual notion, is a combination of Kantian and Kierkegaardian elements and must be understood as both a radical unconditional act of morality and a radical performative act of an agent. Let me at this point only outline the main line of thought: If forgiveness is *truly* exceptional and incalculable on the basis of what we have pulled out of Kant and Kierkegaard, then it can no longer be conceived as belonging to the order of intentionality, for if I would *will* or *desire* that the event of forgiving has certain *consequences*, then I would open a gap between my present and the future, the relation of which would *already* be infected by a prediction: “*if* one wants to be released and equality emerges, *then* forgiving must occur.” If forgiveness is *truly unconditional*, as Derrida claims, then it cannot place any demand either on the wrongdoer or on the forgiver, which, to be sure, is a deeply troubling thought, since it opens up a range of new and perhaps dangerous possibilities for thinking about forgiveness. Forgiveness, therefore, should be understood as something that goes beyond the logic of exchange in the traditional sense, especially since it can not be predicted and escapes

any form of necessitation (duty, "I must," force). This is, of course, an anti-Kantian element. It would, as Derrida has put it, "carry us unconditionally beyond the economic circle of duty or of the task (*Pflicht* or *Aufgabe*)" (*WE*, 44).⁷

Let us further reflect on this concept. It seems to me that—if forgiveness is in some sense an absolute phenomenon that escapes the logic of exchange—in his interpretation Derrida radicalizes the Kantian and Kierkegaardian notions, though at the price of ultimately pushing us into an aporia. Derrida certainly goes far beyond other conceptions of forgiving, since he (implicitly) claims (1) that forgiving does not belong to the order of punishment,⁸ (2) that it must be conceived as something that is beyond functionality, and finally, (3) that it is not a possibility of mutual recognition and love; rather, according to Derrida, forgiveness is the very event that must be conceived as a "phenomenon" that escapes the structure of giving and returning (economy).⁹

Let us start again with one part of Derrida's thesis, namely, that forgiveness can not be predicted, from which it follows (as I explained above) that forgiveness is an *event*. But what is an event? An event must be conceived as something that is *unconditional*. But what does unconditionality mean?¹⁰ It means (1) that forgiving is not only given for hypothetical reasons (for instance, *if* the guilty person changes and becomes a new person), (2) that it would not be given *for* something or *to* someone (this presupposes language and exchanges), but rather, (3) that it would just be given, *for no reason at all*. In the case of an unconditional forgiveness it would not even be allowed to say that it would be given *by* someone, especially because this would presuppose an intention and an expectation in that person. We must therefore conclude—if we think the concept of forgiveness as an event—that the event of forgiving would just "happen," unexpectedly, without any intention and unforeseeably:¹¹ "One no longer," as Derrida puts it, "*sees it coming*" (*WE*, 27).

This leads to paradoxical consequences. On the one hand, as soon as we declare that forgiveness is a possibility within our empirical lives, we are thrown into the world of economic exchange. Seen from this view, forgiving seems to be *impossible*, since it is impossible *not* to expect anything, *not* to intend, and *not* to foresee. On the other hand, *if* it is really true that genuine (pure) forgiveness must be conceived as an *event*, then, indeed, it must be (*always*) *possible*.¹² An unconditional event is not conditioned by anything. It can happen now or tomorrow. Maybe it happened yesterday. Who knows? Derrida must answer: we

cannot know it. "An event as such," as Derrida puts it, "cannot be known as an event, as a present event" (*OG*, 60).¹³

Moreover, if forgiveness is an event rather than an exchange, then *everything* is possible. To put it in Derrida's words, it is *possible as impossible*; it is possible *because* it is impossible. In this vein, consider the following example: Let us assume that someone murdered your son or daughter. Let us further assume that this person is still alive and was *never* punished for his or her deed. Moreover, let us assume that you know the murderer and that you go to him/her in order to kill him or her. Assume that *without* condition and *without* interest, *without* expecting it, "it" happens, it just *gives itself*: forgiveness happens. Such an event would undeniably, as Derrida writes, appear "as if it interrupted the ordinary course of history" (*CF*, 32). It is exactly this inexpressible and "secret" situation that Derrida has in mind when he claims that—reminding us again of his radicalized notion of decision—forgiveness should be conceived as madness. Indeed, "forgiveness," he writes, "is mad, and . . . it must remain a madness of the impossible" (*CF*, 39).

Derrida's attempt to radicalize the concept of forgiveness has consequences for another central aspect of it, namely, the problem of the unforgivable. Only an unconditional view on forgiveness includes both: (1) that it can never be demanded, never be expected, and never be foreseen that the unforgivable should or will be forgiven, and (2) that, *therefore*, forgiving the unforgivable must always be possible. I would like to give another example: There is no hope, there is no expectation, and there is not any demand on the Jews to forgive what the Germans did during the years of 1933–45. It is *absolutely* unforgivable and therefore *impossible*. However, if forgiving does not, as Derrida claims, belong to the order of *exchange*, then we cannot a priori exclude the possibility that it *can* happen; for it *could* happen, but no one may ever know when and where.¹⁴ There is, however, another complication to this: paradoxically, as soon as I utter these sentences, Derrida would point out that I am already operating within economic thinking, since I cannot speak about the *mere* possibility of forgiving; rather, I already—by speaking about the unforgivable—refer to something that *could* happen—one day. In other words, I would already consider its possibility. In contrast, forgiveness conceived as a genuine event would happen *independently* from any and all intentions, expectations, personal relations, and from subjectivity in general. I could not say "one day." It would be a gift to which I could *only* respond, to which

I would have *already* responded when it happened, and therefore, it would really not be a *response*, since a response without alternative is not a response. As usual, Derrida does not give us simple solutions.¹⁵

V. Conclusion

As a result of my foregoing considerations, we should now be able to see that what holds the Kantian and the Derridian discourse together is their concern with the non-economic, insofar as it shows up both in Kantian morality as well as in Derrida's analysis of forgiveness. Interestingly, this can be seen in one of Derrida's statements about forgiveness, within which he claims that the amazing feature of forgiveness is "the nonnegotiable, anti-economic, apolitical, non-strategic unconditionality that it prescribes" (*CF*, 50).

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NOTES

1. *PP*, 108.
2. *WE*, 25.
3. In his *Comments on James Mill* (1843; *KM*, 211–28), Marx shows that the economic system has transformed and infected the *totality* of our social relations. "Credit," as Marx puts it, "is the *economic* judgment on the *morality* of a man" (*KM*, 215), and, according to Marx, this leads to a transformation of human beings into a general exchange value, which is to say, into money. Marx points out that the economic relationship between persons reduces every absolute worth into a value, the main characteristic of which is its relational structure. A "value" is something that can only be conceived in relation to something else, and, therefore, it must be interpreted as a destruction of what man originally is. Marx says: "Instead of its immediate unity with itself, it [the individual] exists now only as a relation to *something else*." (*ibid.*, 219). The basic structure of a value has to do with the idea of *equivalence* (see *ibid.*, 221), whereas for Marx the un-alienated relationship is one that escapes *every* value and, hence, *every* economic relationship. In this way, morality is *beyond* economy. "Value" is just another expression for instrumental rationality in general. Put differently, Marx follows the idea that the *uniqueness* of moral actors transgresses and goes *beyond any value*. Worth, to state it bluntly, cannot be understood as a value, since it is incomparable. The roots of this assumption seem to lie in Kant's moral ontology. Put differently, *human beings are valueless*, and *therefore* they have dignity.
4. The distinction between two types of reason, the instrumental and the normative, has one of its roots in the simple fact that the German language has two words for two types of reason, namely *Verstand* (rationality) and *Vernunft* (reason). As Horkheimer (following Kant) points out in his *Eclipse of Reason*, *Verstand* refers to the faculty of calculating means, whereas *Vernunft* refers to the faculty of determining ends, and as such it is the primary source of freedom, morality, autonomy and emancipation (see *ER*, 3–7); the German word "Vernunft" (*vernehmen, noein*) is hardly translatable into English, especially since the English translation as "reason" goes back to the Latin word "*reri*," which means "to calculate").
5. This would lead us to a reflection on the connection between moral action, conscience, and faith, as it is especially carried out in Fichte's *System of Ethics* (1798). According to Fichte, faith is a necessary moment of *every* decision (= conscience), the topic of which I cannot unfold in this essay.

6. In this vein, Derrida has claimed the following: "The singularity of the 'who' is not the individuality of a thing that would be identical to itself, it is not an atom. It is a singularity that dislocates or divides itself in gathering itself together to answer to the other, whose call somehow precedes its own identification with itself, for to this call I can *only* answer, have already answered, even if I think I am answering 'no'" (*PI*, 261).
7. See Derrida on responsibility and the moment of decision in *AD*, 16–18. He calls himself an "ultra-Kantian" (*OF*, 66).
8. "Forgiveness," as he puts it, "does not, it should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation" (*CF*, 39); see also *OF*, 57; *TF*, 30–32.
9. The topic of forgiveness is related to what Derrida calls "the gift;" see, for example, *DN*, 18–19; *TF*, 31, 48. Bernasconi summarizes the problem of the gift in the following words: "if what defines the gift is its difference from the object of exchange, then any form of reciprocity or return to the giver destroys the gift precisely by turning it into an object of exchange. There is, therefore, a problem of how one accepts a gift, a question of whether one can even receive a gift without destroying it *qua* gift. It is not only that an exchange of gifts is, on these terms, strictly speaking not an act of giving. Even gratitude returns the gift to the giver and comprises its gratuitous character. Even to refuse it, is to acknowledge it and so, in a sense, give a return" (*LG*, 256–73).
10. For additional, very clear remarks on the topic of unconditionality, see *WE*, especially 26–29, for a remark on forgiveness, see 40.
11. "In contrast to revenge . . . the act of forgiving can *never be predicted*. . . . Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and *unexpectedly, unconditioned* by the act which provoked it" (*HC*, 241; emphasis mine)
12. For the difference between "pure" and "impure" (conditioned) forgiveness see *TF*, 45.
13. Indeed, in his writings, this is what Derrida usually calls "the gift." For a brief introduction to the problematic, see *TG*, 117–20. I am far from a complete understanding, but in the context of the discussion of forgiveness, the following is of importance: in a discussion with Jean-Luc Marion Derrida explains the complex situation in the following way: the gift, as soon as it enters the sphere of givenness (= presence/phenomenon/*Gegebenheit*), cancels itself as a gift. Therefore the gift "as such" (*OG*, 60) is impossible. Because the gift "as such" is impossible, the gift cannot be known, that is to say, it can never enter our representation (*Vorstellung*): "The event called gift is totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification" (*ibid.*, 59). However, although the gift does not exist (as such) and is unrepresentable, according to Derrida, it can be thought of. In other words, "impossibility," in Derrida's use of the term, refers to the fact that something "is there" that is inexpressible; this might be similar to how we conceive of a trauma. He says: "I never said that there is no gift. No, I said exactly the opposite. What are the conditions for us to say there is a gift, if we cannot determine it theoretically, phenomenologically? It is through the experience of the impossibility; that its possibility is possible as impossible" (*ibid.*, 60).
14. For a further explanation, see *OF*, 53–54.
15. The problem of "how not to speak" is a topic that is explored in a couple of texts. For example, speaking itself belongs to the economy of time. Derrida writes: "Forgiveness is inscribed in the very first speech act. I cannot perform what I would like to perform." (*OF*, 56). Forgiveness has to do with an expected speech act, an utterance and words; for this see *TF*, 46–47. The topic goes back to (1) Kierkegaard's "inexpressible" in *Fear and Trembling* as well as to (2) the distinction that Hegel draws between meaning and saying (for example, in relation to the singularity of the "I" see his *Encyclopedia Logic*, §24, 57). In addition, it is related

to speech acts. Finally, the problem is connected to the problem of death. In his Heidegger interpretation Derrida lays out that our relation to death is a relation of "awaiting," and especially of "awaiting oneself" (*AD*, 65), since death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. On the other hand, as Derrida points out, the "time" between my awaiting and the event of death is "incalculable" (*ibid.*, 69); it is a "yet to come." This topic is first laid out by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, see *TI*, 234; and it is also anticipated in Benjamin's famous essay "On the Concept of History," in which he claims that Historical Materialism should be combined with Messianism: "... 'the revolutionary situation,' which, as we know, has always refused to arrive. — A genuinely messianic face must be restored to the concept of classless society" (*SW*, 402). What Benjamin has in mind here is the aforementioned temporal moment of the "yet to come." A messianic event (absolute future) is a temporal moment because it not only does not arrive, but it is awaited on as not arriving, that is to say, it arrives as not arriving.