

Frustrating Forgiveness

Review: Jacques Derrida: *Perjury and Pardon: Volume I*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022, 368 pp., 44,99 USD.

“Perjury and Pardon” is the title of the seminars Jacques Derrida held at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in 1997 – 1999, that is, during two subsequent academic years. The word “seminars” might mislead, because even though there were some discussion sessions, only extracts of which are included in the volumes here reviewed, Derrida mostly lectured, reading texts written in advance. The present two volumes collect these lectures, with notes containing the small improvised additions Derrida sometimes made.

Despite the fact that the contents of the sessions were thus planned in advance, these two volumes give the impression of improvisation, not the least because Derrida only loosely sticks to the titles of the seminars. In other words, these books are far from books about “perjury and pardon”; if one is reading them because of their title, one is making a big mistake, and the intended audience is rather people interested in their author. Partly this is the result of translation difficulties. The French noun “pardon” is in the books themselves mostly translated “forgiveness”, and rightly so, which means that “pardon” in the English sense is only briefly touched upon. Even though “forgiveness” could be said to be the main topic of the volumes, this does, however, not mean that it is in focus the whole time or even most of the time.

For the readers of this journal, this improvised character is particularly obvious as regards Derrida’s treatment of Arendt. The first and third sessions of the first volume contain Derrida’s most closely connected discussion of forgiveness, in critical dialogue with Vladimir Jankélévitch’s texts on the topic. Derrida seems to have clear plans here for how the seminars are supposed to continue, as he makes repeated references to Arendt as someone he will soon discuss, even states that, next to Jankélévitch, Arendt is the central discussion partner for him as regards forgiveness. However, Derrida then seems to have changed his mind, forgotten his plans or lost his ways, for he never comes to Arendt and his discussion of forgiveness becomes far less focused.

One possible explanation of this to my mind strange character of the seminars is that Derrida wanted to prepare less and therefore used material already written for other purposes. However that might be, *Perjury and Pardon* contains many texts that were later published elsewhere, in slightly different forms.

In volume 1, Derrida spends most of his time on giving detailed summaries of philosophical texts he is referring to, proceeding by means of association. In volume 2,

however, his main focus is not philosophical texts but contemporary events, mostly as they are reported in newspaper articles, specifically regarding the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee and the impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton (that is, pardon and perjury, respectively). People who want to learn more about the Truth and Reconciliation Committee would certainly not pick up Derrida's book (and they would be wise not to, since Derrida's discussion contains factual errors and misrepresentations), and his treatment of it is not very deep, so they would not benefit from being given a philosophical discussion either. Derrida's discussion of the impeachment proceedings against Bill Clinton is in that regard much more interesting, since he enters into the discussion as someone personally involved. The reason for this is the claim, found in some of the newspaper articles Derrida is referring to, that Clinton's possible perjury was the result of him making use of "deconstructive" methods, a claim that made Derrida evidently indignant. Even though he sometimes seems to attempt a reply to this criticism, he never really starts, strangely enough. In any case, this discussion is of great interest from a contemporary perspective, because it shows that debates around "post-truth" and its possible philosophical sources are not new phenomena, as well as from an Arendtian perspective, as Derrida identifies Arendt as an opponent of deconstruction *avant la lettre* here, specifically regarding the topic of truth and politics.

In order to understand Derrida's interest in forgiveness one must however see it as an attempt at escaping a rigid deconstructive framework, I believe. Derrida's famous claim, repeated here many times especially in the early seminars, that only the unforgivable can be forgiven,¹ means that the concept of forgiveness – and is "concept" really the right word here? – means that "forgiveness (granted or requested) [...] must forever remain undecidedly equivocal, by which I do not mean ambiguous, shady, in shades of grey, but heterogeneous to every determination in the order of knowledge, of determinate theoretical judgment, of the self-presentation of an appropriable meaning" (I: 22 – 23). In addition, this means that Derrida is critical of all culturalist approaches to forgiveness, not because there is nothing to be learnt from them, but because "one may wonder whether forgiveness [...] isn't always, structurally, in the situation of being *foreign*, [...] heterogeneous in relation to this or that economic inside of culture or politics, [...] necessarily incarnated by some transcendence coming to break open the economic inside of a city, a culture, a nation, a family" (I: 184). But why is this so? This question Derrida never asks. In the spirit of Arendt, one could begin answering it by referring to, say, the who/what-distinction. There is much more to say about this, of course, but it shows that forgiveness is not a special case, and that what Derrida has discovered would change philosophy's way of approaching its concerns much more fundamentally than he realises, if one takes it on board.²

1 A misleading way of making an important point, I believe; see Hugo Strandberg, *Forgiveness and Moral Understanding* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 40.

2 Cf. Strandberg, *Forgiveness and Moral Understanding*, esp. chs 1, 2, 9.

What makes these seminars frustrating is thus the way in which Derrida is struggling with insights such as these, making important points as regards forgiveness while at the same time relapsing into the perspective he is evidently trying to liberate himself from. But this is also the reason they are highly interesting.

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