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Jankélévitch's Image of God

Abstract.

The God of Jankélévitch is creative energy, eternal acting goodness and love, but it is not a person and does not personally know its creations. It does not rule, does not enter a covenant, does not bring redemption at the cost of its own heartbreak, does not judge sins and does not forgive them, does not speak, does not give commandments, does not conquer death, does not resurrect the dead, and does not offer eternal life.

Keywords: forgiveness, metaphysics, God, Jesus, anthropology, death, good, evil, scepticism.

The analysis of Jankélévitch's concept of forgiveness² reveals that no kind of personal or historical infamy whatsoever, not even Auschwitz may mean for him an absolute metaphysical exception from the possibility of forgiveness: nothing can ultimately hinder the sovereign embrace of a sacrificial, self-destructive love embodied by forgiveness. The hyperbolic nature of his moral philosophy means precisely that for him, love does not and cannot have a theoretically traceable final limit. However, the question still remains: what is it that makes his thesis articulated in so many versions in a brilliantly eloquent way questionable within his life work? What does that often seemingly insurmountable contradiction feed on, forcing apart the organic unity of the treatment of this topic? Why does this 20th-century apostle³ of the philosophy of love reach to the inexorably unambiguous statement that "forgiveness died in the death camps"? Apart from this, how do his journalistic outbursts lead him to switch at times to the voice of damnation psalms and

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² Vladimir Jankélévitch was professor of moral philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris between the years 1951 and 1979.

³ It is rare even for a theologian to dedicate more than two hundred pages (!) in one single book to the subject of love, as Jankélévitch did. See JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Traité des vertus II.*

Tome 2. Les vertus et l'amour. Champsessais, Flammarion Paris, 1986. 145–354.

how does he reach to “cursing” (Ricoeur) unacceptable even for his closest friends? And, more than that: what is the source of that inconsolable metaphysical resignation which makes the author see the duel of good and evil as an eternal cycle with no end?

My assumption is that the occasional incoherence of Jankélévitch's concept of forgiveness is connected to the inherent contradictions of his metaphysics. In what follows, I shall examine the correctness of this assumption.

In Xavier Tillette's witty statement, Jankélévitch is the most Greek⁴ of all Jewish thinkers. This description can rightly be completed by saying that he is not only that, but also the most Christian of all 20th-century Jewish thinkers. He quotes the Bible countless times, the New Testament more often than the Old Testament, and also cites the Church Fathers quite often. He, the ever uncategorizable, could probably be placed within the community of thinkers who were veritable *pontifices* in-between Jewish and Christian identity in the century of the two world wars. Similarly to Franz Rosenzweig or Simone Weil, he never converted to Christianity – he was suspicious about any form of institutionalized religion – but his work in moral philosophy is unimaginable without Christ, without the ethics of the *Sermon on the Mount*, Saint Paul's *Hymn to Love*, or John the Apostle's definition of the *love of God*.

Jankélévitch, as an explicitly leftist thinker, is not afraid to write down the name of God in the secularized, atheist-existentialist atmosphere of Paris and its famed university, the Sorbonne. And not just occasionally, incidentally, as some kind of self-flaunting spiritual defiance, but countless times, making the problem of God an organic part and founding element of his philosophy.

The abovementioned friend, L. Jerphagnon, writes in the introduction of his book on Jankélévitch about the dilemma that had accompanied his whole work.⁵ He quotes Pascal:

„La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un ouvrage est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre la première.”⁶

He rightfully claims that the series of metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics within the life-work under scrutiny should start with metaphysics, since the core of Jankélévitch's work is the *Philosophie première*, metaphysics, or in this case, metaontology. For whoever ventures through this part, will be familiar with all other decisive subjects of his life work.

⁴ TILLETTE, Xavier: Préface. La thèse de Jankélévitch. In: JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *L'odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*. L'Harmattan, Paris–Torino–Budapest, 2004. IX.

⁵ JERPHAGNON, L. : *Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité*. Présentation, choix de textes, bibliographie par Lucien Jerphagnon. Editions Seghers, Paris, 1969. II.

⁶ *Ibid.*, II.

However, this paper follows the reverse path: it aims at reaching a conclusion based on the analysis of Jankélévitch's metaphysics.

God as Creator

Jankélévitch, similarly to his ancient Greek masters, became a philosopher due to his awe about the incomprehensible fact of existence, the *thaumadzein*.

He writes from experience:

„Philosopher revient donc, en somme, à ceci : se comporter à l'égard de l'univers et de la vie comme si rien n'allait de soi.”⁷

In connection with the intention to understand and express not self-evident things, an intention that must always continue to the utmost, Jankélévitch makes a sharp difference between the fact of the existence of the universe, namely *that* there is a universe – *Quod* – from the question of *what* it actually is – *Quid*. The answers given to the questions on the ways and modes of the workings of reality cannot fully explain the problem of metaontology in the strictest sense: *Why is there something rather than nothing?* The question of *Quod* for Jankélévitch can only be answered by the *First Philosophy, Protology*, which basically refers to the creation. How does the non-existence turn into existence – whether silently and unnoticeably, or with thunder and crash? But at the moment of the turn, in the millionth and billionth fragment of this instance, in this *almost nothing* atom of time it is obviously anachronistic to speak about the sky, therefore also to speak about thunder, and just as much anachronistic to speak about sound wave or the lack of it: silence. However, this dividing atom of time should be taken extremely seriously! By comparison, man and everything else can only be treated in the *Deuterology*. The irreducible reality of human will that can never be fully deduced from chemical reactions, social processes, cultural patterns, religious traditions, psychological temperament or anything else, and the *ex nihilo* creation share an analogical relationship:

„Le commencement relatif ou petit commencement à tout moment inauguré dans les décisions du vouloir renvoie à un commencement des commencements, à une origo vraiment radical.”⁸

⁷ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie morale. La mauvaise conscience*. Édition établie par Françoise Schwab. Flammarion, 1998. 43. Cited in *ibid.*, JERPHAGNON, 80.

⁸ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2011. 174.

For Jankélévitch, metaphysics means the foundation of *existence* in the first place, while also, at the same time, as we shall see, the foundation of *values* as well. The metaphysical point of origin condensed in the creational word *Fiat* appears in his work as something that needs no preliminary philosophical or fundamental theological introduction or justification, but as something that excludes and dooms to failure any such attempt. It must be said: for Jankélévitch, metaphysics declaratively starts with metaphysics; there is absolutely no kind of gradual transition.⁹ “*Et pour quelles longueurs d’onde, s’il vous plait; l’excitant physique – couleur ou son – tournerait-il au métaphysique?*” – asks the author with overt maliciousness.¹⁰

This absolute zero point of space and time, and the entirety of reality – which has a totally different scale, and comes from a totally different order than the partial – is beyond the scope of Pascal’s *esprit géométrique*; it can only be grasped by intuition, the *esprit de finesse*.

„*Pourtant l’esprit de finesse à la recherche de l’ineffable et de l’impalpable essaye de surprendre dans les êtres eux-mêmes quelque chose qui serait d’un autre ordre que la chose.*”¹¹

This reality of a completely different order and scale is, for the author, the Numinosum, the world of the Secret, the Mystery, the realm of the hidden God, *Deus absconditus*, appearing in the writings of Prophet Isaiah, Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Augustine, Angelus Silesius, Luther, Pascal, Kierkegaard and Karl Barth. But we need to be more specific right away, for Jankélévitch speaks indeed about the reality of the *I know not what* partly as these illustrious men, but partly in a completely different way! He speaks about God in such a way that after each of his sentences we hear his little bit singing, brazen, warning voice: but this statement must be clarified! And this clarified statement must be further completed, countervailed, polished – that is, further clarified, repeatedly. In this sense, we should speak about this master of infinitesimal nuances as he speaks about God: overriding every legitimate statement on him, and not suggesting for a second the false sense that we have indeed succeeded in grasping him, that similarly to the boy that Augustine spoke to, we emptied the entire ocean with a seashell! Jankélévitch’s *Deus* is not identical with the God of the catechisms. L. Jerphagnon is right to claim:

“*Jamais en quelque cinq mille pages de texte je n’ai surprise Jankélévitch prenant le point de vue de Dieu le Père, ni considérant le monde comme il est quand*

⁹ Ibid. 12, JERPHAGNON, L. : Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l’Effectivité, 23.

¹⁰ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : Philosophie première, 3. Jerphagnon, L.: Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l’Effectivité, 21.

¹¹ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien*. PUF, Paris, 1957. 17.

l'homme ne le voit pas. (...) le climat de cette « théologie » -la n'est pas propice au bavardage réconfortant. Sera-ce là le Dieu de beaucoup qui croient en Dieu ? A chacun de répondre pour soi.»¹²

How is the author's view in this respect identical with and different from the traditional image of God based on the Bible? For the Parisian thinker, God is first of all the eternal creative energy, who is responsible for the single and unrepeatable event that took place in the beginning – *bereshit* – according to the Genesis.

“Dieu, lui, fait l'être : mais Dieu n'est aucunement ce-qui-fait-être-l'être; ce qui revient à dire: Dieu « fait », Dieu est sujet pur entièrement extroversé dans son verbe opératif.»¹³

Jankélévitch, so it seems, includes into his own concept of God the Scholastic definition that God combines in himself the possibility and the realization: He is himself the *actus purus*. This “pure initial position” is not identical with Plotinos's *arche*: The Actor uses no kind of pre-existent givenness in his creational work; his creation is indeed *creatio ex nihilo*,¹⁴ this time, in harmony with the catechisms. Jankélévitch, despite his obvious attraction to Platonism and Neo-Platonism, distances himself at this point also from the views of Plato's *Timaeus*. The answer that Plato gives to the question “Why is there creation?” is: because the demiurge “was good” (*agathos én*) according to the eternal pattern.¹⁵ But in Jankélévitch's view, the *ex nihilo* creation is so radical that in the case of the “first will” we cannot speak of any kind of previous, eternal pattern, nor about the a priori given “nature” of this will. Nevertheless, to this question we shall return.

Whereas the field called above *Quid*, covering the elements and inner movement of the world, has several stages, the *Quod* only knows the *yes* or *no* of being and non-being. The author presents the entirety of being as the result of the *Fiat*, the “original commandment”:

“Le Fiat fait place au Quod, qui est contemporain de l'être déjà posé de la décision toute tranchée, du choix tout choisi, opus operatum ou electio electa : le Quod est une réflexion non plus sur l'impératif primordial... et insondable, mais déjà sur

¹² JERPHAGNON, L.: Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 16.

¹³ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 182.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 229.

*les participes passés passifs qui résultent de l'efficacité du premier commandement, sur l'ouvrage docile qui manifeste l'effcience du premier vouloir.*¹⁶

Later on, he states:

„Dixit: Fiat lux. Et facta est lux.” [...] Dieu ne fabrique pas la lumière : il dit seulement Fiat lux. Le passage du fiat au factum est (...) n'est pas une médiation, mais une coïncidence presque immédiate et une quasi-simultanéité. (...) [...] Genetheto fós ! Káj egeneto fós... L'identité de l'impératif et du perfectif n'est-elle pas le mysterium maximum de la Création?”¹⁷

Although the imperative is ancient and unexplorable, but is it not the case that by describing the coming into being of existence explicitly with the Biblical words of the creation, Jankélévitch actually interprets the God to whom this imperative can be attributed in the context of the Scripture, or at least the Torah? The case is, however, not that simple, and needs further scrutiny. But before moving on to more precisely describe the author's concept of God, let us find its other, also typically Biblical characteristic (in addition to its obvious connection to creation), namely that God is love.

God is love

Jankélévitch's entire ethical universe is penetrated by a view that can be called a purified *sober mysticism* deriving from the atrocities of the 20th century, within which his teaching on *agape* is a true modern hymn on love. His hyperbolic ethics has its indubitable Biblical roots, often specifically quoted too. In this philosophy, love – in a way incomparably preceding and transcending man's short-lived love – is the same creative force which in Dante's vision “moves the Sun and other stars”. This is not about the divinisation of human love or its projection on the fabric of eternity in a Feuerbachian sense, nor about the pre-existential Platonic concept of kindness or its modern romanticist-humanistic versions, but about the heart of a Christian view of God, formulated by Jankélévitch in his *Fundamental philosophy* in 1953, in reference to Anders Nygren's influential 1944 book, *Éros et Agapé*:

„Dieu n'est pas bon, il est la Bonté même, la bonté n'ayant de sens qu'à partir de lui. Dieu ne participe pas d'une essence préexistante qui serait le Bien... Non ! c'est Dieu lui-même qui est la bonté elle-même ; Dieu tout entier est la bonté tout

¹⁶ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 176.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

entière, Dieu n'est pas autre chose que Bonté ; ... à moins que vous ne préféreriez dire : c'est la Bonté qui est Dieu. Dieu n'est pas bon » entre autres «, bon plus d'autres choses avec, mais il est bon comme il est positionnel : exclusivement, essentiellement, sur essentiellement ; éternellement bon. La paradoxale identité de Dieu et de l'amour-charité que Jean affirme dans sa première Épître n'a pas d'autre sens : ho Theos agapé estin (I Ép. De Jean, IV, 8 et 16), Dieu est, ontologiquement, Amour, car l'amour n'est rien d'autre que l'opération même de la bonté. Non pas : Dieu est le dieu de l'amour, comme Éros est le dieu d l'amour ; ni a fortiori : Dieu tantôt aime et tantôt n'aime pas, étant de sa personne un sujet distinct de l'opération aimante... Loin de là !"¹⁸

At this point, I arrive at the justification of my previous statement that Jankélévitch's God, by whatever name we call Him, is the founder not only of existence, but also of values.

„Cet absolu est ce qui rend toutes les valeurs valables, et c'est pourquoi il a tant d'affinités avec l'amour : car l'amour n'est pas à proprement parler le plus précieux des « biens », l'amour est, pour mieux dire, ce sans quoi rien ne vaut la peine."¹⁹

This is where the problem of God is connected with ethics, for in the continuation – and in many other places – we read that in “moments of mercy”, the love practiced by man is consubstantial with its divine origin. In this way, it can be said about both that

„[...] l'amour renverse la bienséance de la préséance ontique, selon laquelle c'est l'aimable qui attire l'amour [...]."²⁰

It is not the preliminary quality of loveableness that creates love, for it would only be an instance of natural instinct, but the creative force of a love that precedes everything, which does not only find, but creates its own object and conveys it its quality. God is therefore for Jankélévitch the author of the *fact* of the universe: the order of the cosmos can be traced back to Him just like the brilliant fullness of the world of virtue.

¹⁸ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 233.

¹⁹ Ibid. 221.

²⁰ Ibid.

„Gott ist nicht tugendhaft, dit Angelus Silesius: aus ihm kommt Tugend her, wie aus der Sonne die Strahlen und Wasser aus dem Meer.“²¹

Apophatic, negative theology

It seems that Jankélévitch focuses his metaphysics on two of the most decisive features of the traditional faith in God: the *ex nihilo* creation on the one hand, and the conviction, on the other hand, that its author is the perfect love which, as such, is also what lends the value to any kind of values. But is this indeed so? There are countless texts that talk, explicitly or implicitly, about it, while it is also true that, for Jankélévitch, God and the world of his values “dwells in an unapproachable sublimity”. Beyond the two positive statements regarding God – which in fact, condenses and contains Jankélévitch's entire “dogmatics” –, his thinking is much more focused on a negative theology more concerned about who God is *not*. We have no words about Him, we can only “stutter” about him according to John of the Cross, and Jankélévitch is very fond of the Spanish mystical author's phrase *balbutendo*.

„Celui dont toute l'essence est d'être autre, qui est, si l'on peut dire, tout autre en soi et par vocation, et toujours autre, et absolument autre, éternellement autre, puisqu'il est, à l'infini, autre que n'importe quel autre, celui-là n'est pas seulement autre part ni seulement plus tard, celui-là ne déjoue pas seulement les catégories de la naturalité contingente. Ce toujours-tout-autre que l'autre, étant autre chose que n'importe quelle chose, ne peut être qu'anti-res ou non-chose; mais il n'est pas relation non plus, comme c'est le cas pour l'Autre métémpirique de la récurrence et du report indéfinis: il est l'inassignable au-delà de toute récurrence, et l'au-delà toujours par-delà; et pour oser enfin nommer le nom de cet innommable qui est, comme dit saint Paul, et par définition même, «au-dessus de tout nom nommé», nous dirons simplement qu'il est, au nominatif, Lui-même: Autos.“²²

The emphasis on God's total transcendence, otherness, inaccessibility is a well-known motif of the history of theology, as mentioned before in connection to the tradition of *Deus absconditus*. L. Jerphagnon rightly places the author in this line of tradition, calling him a relative of Gregory of Nazianzus, who sings in his *Hymn to God*:

O Toi l'Au-delà de tout

²¹ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Traité des vertus II*. Tome 2. Les vertus et l'amour, 7.

²² JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 123.

*N'est-ce pas là tout ce qu'on peut dire de Toi...*²³

However, in Jankélévitch's case, there is a highly significant difference in this respect! The author fondly refers to the claim of John the Apostle, that "no one has ever seen God", as well as similar statements of apophatic theology stressing the inexpressibility of the divine mystery, but fails to take into account that in a context of Christian theology, this negation has a clearly correlative nature: it can only be understood in the context of God's entirely positive self-assertion. This is not the last sentence in John, but the preceding one: it refers to the pathetically limited possibilities of man regarding the knowledge of God; man finds himself in utter darkness with respect to the invisible reality as long as the object of his search is revealed in the mystery of unmasking himself. For, in his case, this negative statement is not ended by a full stop, but a colon, followed by: "but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." The negation refers here to the possibilities of man, while the statement to God's positive, self-assertive action. This is not only an isolated sentence in the Bible, but a fundamental statement that mirrors its entire point of view. Its particularity is the paradox that the event of the statement does not diminish or dissolve the mystery, for God's transcendence and sacred otherness remains, and possibly even increases by this; and on the reverse: the mystery does not overcast the statement, it does not make it insecure, it does not withdraw it, does not make its obviousness interrupted, or flashing and fading like a spark. However, this is precisely what happens with Jankélévitch: the impossibility to utter and grasp the divine reality is too emphatic in his case that it makes doubtful the possibility of any kind of positive relationship with it. "It cannot be called a relation", we read above.

He presents a series of statements which seem not only to deepen the mystery of God, but also undermine the previous positive statements about him. It seems that the author's dialectics is built on the statements about a reality that stands at the basis of the universe, and the immediate withdrawal of these statements. This method is definitely appropriate to keep permanently vigilant – this is, for him, a metaphor of a thinker's dignified human existence – not to let us grow lazy relying on the dogmatic truths claimed by others; it is appropriate to suggest, by this vibration of the style and the text, that it is indeed the vibrating current of life, which stubbornly resists being forced into the strait-jacket of final formulae. But with regard to the image of God, with statements like the following, we lose much more than what we have gained:

²³ JERPHAGNON, L.: Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 34.

„Dieu n'est ni une évidence, ni une certitude apodictique, ni un fait constatable...
Dieu est un beau pari.”²⁴

We know that Pascal's wager theory and entire way of thinking is decisive for Jankélévitch. We also know that one can indeed bet that God exists or not. But it is hard to conceive that He – to whom the author attributes the foundation of the universe and perfect love – may be identical with such a wager in any respect.

It is also quite obscure and contradictory how the author refers to the word *Fiat* in the Vulgate, the *Let there be* of Biblical creation. On the one hand, he states that this brings to life and grounds the fact of the existence of the world, as seen at the presentation of the positive statement on creation, but on the other hand, he writes in the same sentence:

„Quoi qu'il en soit, le *Fiat*, qui n'est qu'une hypothèse sur l'impératif immémorial et une manière de dire pour fixer les idées.”²⁵

What? Just a hypothesis of man? But how can the foundation of the universe and all values be attributed merely to a hypothesis, a way of expression or a bet? And how can all this be called God, *Dieux* or the source of life, as Jankélévitch calls it? The Biblical *Fiat* presupposes a personal, absolute subject who utters this creative word. For the author, however, the *Fiat* is merely a “magical soliloquium in the desert of perfect otherness”.²⁶

„Entre l'être et le néant, il y a le *Faire* qui n'est ni être ni non-être.”²⁷

In this sense, the name of God in Jankélévitch's metaphysics is the *Actor-without-being*, the *Faire-sans-Etre*. God cannot be claimed to “exist” – this statement that appears in several versions in Jankélévitch's work, is not an atheist denial of God, but the repeated emphasis on the fact that we cannot use the same designations and categories adequately with reference to the *basis of existence* that we use for all other objects or states of being. This is understandable and also acceptable, but the philosopher fails to make it clear whether this divine excess of being is indeed an excess which is by no means best described by the formula “God does not exist”, not even with the added explanation to that ambiguous formulation:

²⁴ Quoted by: JERPHAGNON, L.: Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 34.

²⁵ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 176.

²⁶ Quoted by: JERPHAGNON, L. : Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 39.

²⁷ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 179.

„L’Absolu qu’un imperceptible Je-ne-sais-quoi différencie du néant (mais ce je-ne-sais-quoi est vaste comme le ciel, mais ce presque-rien est tout), l’Absolu n’est pas quelque chose qui est. Le Lui-même, étant pur sujet, n’est pas quelque chose, ceci ou cela, fût-ce celui-qui-est par excellence, fût-ce toutes choses; le Lui-même n’est pas «étant», c’est-à-dire n’est jamais le sujet d’inhérence d’une copule qui appellerait un attribut. Et non seulement il n’est pas quelque chose, mais on peut même dire qu’il n’Est pas, au sens ontologique et absolu du verbe.”²⁸

It is an important clue for interpretation in the context of this “non-existence” of God to know that the author also speaks in the same terms about the “non-existence” of man. When someone creates life by denying oneself as a moral test, then one actually limits to a minimum or completely suspends the natural degree of one’s taking care of oneself. So, at this point, one “does not exist” actually – for existence always goes hand in hand with the selfishness, or at least helplessness and gravity of the body. It does not exist – it only loves. But the opposite is also possible, and this is the most common: the self-weight of the body without the weightless spirit of love.

„Car on ne peut à la fois aimer et être ; car il faut choisir entre l’être sans amour, qui est le dur hiver, et l’amour sans être, qui est la mort au printemps. Or il y a un point insaisissable où cette tragédie d’alternative devient une chance merveilleuse. Au fait, est-il nécessaire de courir cette très improbable chance ? On peut, après tout, vivre sans le je-ne-sais-quoi, comme on peut vivre sans philosophie, sans musique, sans joie et sans amour. Mais pas si bien.”²⁹

In the case of man, one can obviously speak about “non-existence” in a symbolic sense. By analogy, God’s “non-existence” means in fact for the author the absolute action of a pure, uninhibited spirit – but unfortunately this strong, oscillating, at times poetic style is used at times at the expense of a precise phrasing and accurate understanding, making room for ambiguities. However, with respect to Jankélévitch’s anthropological view – to which we shall return later – this dualism of “one cannot love and be at once” betrays a kind of gnostic view. For this is precisely the all-time moral commandment to follow this hardly possible chance on the accomplishment or omission of which our entire humanity depends: everything that we can live without, but “not so well”. The Biblical view of God and man strongly confronts any such Platonic dualism when emphasising that every kind of destruction of life lies not in our natural being, but in the selfishness and sin that grows from the denial of God.

²⁸ Ibid. 181.

²⁹ JANKÉLEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 266.

Well, if God does not exist this way, is it correct to say that he *happens*? The author's expositions take us to such a direction. He follows the first two sentences of the Genesis, starting with *In the beginning* and *let there be*, but it does not reach the end of the narration: that God rests on the seventh day. This extremely important clause clearly distinguishes between God's *person* and *action*; the two are obviously interconnected, but are not identical. This is no longer part of Jankélévitch's image of God, for he should then be talking about a God that somehow also *exists* independently from his actions. But this would mean for him too much of the terminology of catechisms and inflexible concepts of God, of which he is aware of. Still, how far can one go about this *passionate carefulness* without impairing the essence? Wouldn't the concepts of creation and absolute love – the basic elements of all catechisms – become mere empty formulations in the wrong hands as any other precise definition? Jankélévitch's God is *pura operatio*,³⁰ an Actor-without-Being which, in creation, creates his own self as well:

„Dieu, lui, se crée en general et l'être en general avec soi, et ne s'engage jamais lui-même, étant toute création. (...) Bergson, en formules frappantes, dira: l'Absolu n'est pas une chose mais une durée, une liberté et une vie; l'Absolu n'est pas une chose mais une durée, une liberté et une vie; l'Absolu n'est rien de tout fait, il est un jaillissement créateur. L'opération absolument prévenante et radicalement primordiale qui s'appelle Création a pour complément direct non seulement l'accusatif objectif de l'œuvre à venir, mais encore l'être même du créateur.”³¹

The conceptual model of the absolute as emanation in the description of the relationship of God and creation suggests this very impersonality which is much more a characteristic of Hinduism and Buddhism than of Jewish-Christian thinking; for a distinctive element of the latter is the differentiation of the Creator and creation. Without this, there is no creation, and no relationship of the Creator to his own creation. God, who creates himself as an eternal actor, and who “never interferes with the created existence”, is definitely not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but much rather the God of Plotinus, of whom the author states:

„La pensée qui fait penser les êtres pensants n'est pas elle-même pensante; Dieu est peut-être cette pensée parfaitement innocente et radicalement originaire, cette

³⁰ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 183.

³¹ Ibid. 184.

*pure pensée opérative qui est bien plutôt cause non pensante de la pensée causée.*³²

The author's intention is clearly to emphasise the transcendence of God: one cannot apply the same definitions for the cause than for the effect. Although it fends off this risk, but the fact that the meta-empiricism "falls outside any possible experience",³³ has too high of a price: the spring loses every contact and relation with the river that starts there, the sky with the earth, the image with the person, the Father with his children. The impersonal image of God may easily turn into a blind and deaf ideological idol which deserves the thunderous warning of Prophet Isaiah: he who created the eyes, does he not see? and the ears, does he not hear? He who is the source of the idea, does he not "think" – or does he do it in a way that exceeds any reason? This latter formulation would definitely be more pertinent for the source of existence which is love itself. Starting from this impersonal image of God, it is quite difficult to understand love and joy as identified with his image. Why is it possible to speak about love and joy in connection to God, rather than "thinking"? Why is the one less of an anthropomorphism than the other?

As we know, for Parmenides there is no radical beginning, only eternal continuation. The concept of "God creating himself" does not presuppose any time-before-time, when one can talk about God, but not "yet" about creation. But this is definitely the meaning of the Biblical *bereshit*. The Creator is eternal, but creation is not. The "prayer of an afflicted" in Psalm 102 confesses it this way: *They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end. The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee.* (Verses 26–28). However, for Jankélévitch, who does not differentiate between God's person and God's actions, the definition of the "day and hour of creation" counts as "creationism", "as if there was something already before the beginning".³⁴ Although, if we speak about creation, something – or rather, Someone – must have surely existed before the "beginning". This simple Biblical – and natural – logic cannot be obscured by any kind of philosophy without getting into serious contradictions and inconsistencies. Nevertheless, Jankélévitch's approach seems to maintain the world's Parmenidian eternity, for the total annihilation of the universe, this "speculative Good Friday"³⁵ is inconceivable for him.

In the author's view, the eternity as a founding-loving reality and all its goods only touch upon time: this is how that quality time of grace, that mathematical point without extension comes into being, which divides the interval of daily events and happening and

³² Ibid. 189.

³³ Ibid., 4.

³⁴ JANKÉLEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 176.

³⁵ JERPHAGNON, L. : Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 30.

gives them quality. *Instant, intuition, conversion, kairos, occasion, katarsis* – these are the means and modes of grasping the absolute; this is how we perceive God, the *I-don't-know-what*, the *I-don't-know-who*, the actor without being, the unutterable, the ineffable. However, we can hardly enjoy the happiness of the encounter. Eternity has no time to penetrate us, to somehow become part of us, our second nature; as the beam of the miracle's flashing sparkle reaches our retina, it is right away absorbed by the impenetrable darkness of this world. As if somebody – God or a demon? – always condemned to death the foetus of the miracle.

„Mourir en naissant, n'est-ce pas la définition même de l'avorton et de l'avortement?”³⁶

For Jankélévitch, this is the very drama of the knowledge of God: gravity pulls down levitation at any moment. The instant is the only way that the absolute is communicated to the creature.

But why is that so? Is it the fault of the divine transmitter or of our deplorably weak radio receiver? In other words, can all this be attributed to man's epistemological inappropriateness or affliction, or to the signs coming from the realm of transcendence, to the nature of the statement itself? The author hints to both factors in his texts. He refers to our unsophisticated perception that cannot gasp the mystery of *je-ne-sais-quoi*. But it is not only the limitations of our perception, but the statement itself is also a vibrating, momentary, deceptive event:

„Dire que le Lui-même n'est rien et pas même lui-même (et surtout pas lui-même!) et que c'est même à cela, si l'on peut dire, qu'il se reconnaît, c'est exprimer en termes dialectiques le caractère instantané, plus que météorique et décevant de sa révélation, c'est convenir qu'à peine trouvé il est sur-le-champ reperdu et qu'il n'est jamais capté que par acrobatie sur le seuil presque inexistant de l'allos et de l'autos. Un autos définitivement et titulairement «autiste» pourrait-il être encore position initiale? Il faudrait l'appeler, sans article, Lui-même, c'est-à-dire l'invoquer, pour lui garder son caractère pneumatique et atmosphérique, car le Lui-même défini comme concept diffère autant de Luimême que le moi diffère de moi qui présentement dis je.”³⁷

Let me emphasise: the statement-concept of the Jewish-Christian tradition formulates assertions about God, his person, will and his encounter with man by not diminish-

³⁶ JANKELEVITCH, Vladimir : *Philosophie première*, 240.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 125.

ing the ultimate mystery of the Eternal God, and vice versa: it speaks about the impenetrability of the Mystery, the holiness of the burning bush, the unapproachable nest of fire of God's love and judgment in such a way that it does not render the positive statements about it uncertain. But this is not Jankélévitch's concept of statement: it is not the dynamic space of these two points of view. The emphasis on the momentariness of the statement has its correspondence in traditional theological thinking, but it only appears there as a statement of man's limited abilities. Its function is to remind man all the time: he cannot rule over God, he cannot take him out whenever he likes, he cannot evoke him by magic, he cannot manipulate him. But God of course is free to reveal himself, according to his own sovereign decision, in his personal relationship with the individual where, when and how he pleases. However, God's freedom does not mean that he can withdraw or turn uncertain at any moment his historical revelation and promise made in the Torah, in the history of the people of Israel, in Christ, in the Scripture. This stability and continuity, this persistence of the statement-event that grounds and elicits man's devotion, is utterly absent in the author's approach. The optative "he should be addressed" is but a weak sigh in this context, rather than the statement of his own individuality, who can indeed be addressed. Are we not right to assume that the characteristics of Jankélévitch's thinking have a decisive influence on his views on moral values, on the nature of forgiveness?

Drawing all this together, it does not come as a surprise that the repeatedly quoted friend, the expert of Jankélévitch's life work, L. Jerphagnon also formulates the inevitable dilemma of a sometimes-hesitating reader: in the end, did Jankélévitch believe in God or not? But he answers the question with a question: what God do you, who ask the question, have in mind exactly? Who precisely is the God that you would like Jankélévitch to have believed in?³⁸ –

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³⁸ JERPHAGNON, L.: Vladimir Jankélévitch ou de l'Effectivité, 35.

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