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## The Image of Jesus in the Philosophy of Vladimir Jankélévitch

### Abstract

Does Jankélévitch identify the Source of creation with that thorne-crowned one of the nonsense of the cross? It seems that Jankélévitch is not only very close to the teaching of the church, but also identifies himself with its most important element, the redeeming death of Christ. And this is not only valid for the young philosopher before the War, but also for the mature thinker in the years following the Holocaust, the author of the Moral philosophy.

But in his writings an existence defined by the gaze directed to God, or simply the existence in front of him, *coram Deo*, is not an ontological basis that makes everything possible and is an inexhaustible source of love for every virtue, but – strangely – a competitor for the attention and love directed to man. He does not recognize the drama of the cross as the infinite, divine repository of the solidary love of anyone humiliated and tormented. He also does not see the prayer as a possibility and gift of grace of a personal relationship with the *Quod* which is able to refill the easily emptying spiritual reserves of the commitment to the starving and persecuted.

Jankélévitch's hyperbolic ethics cannot be rooted in the soil of eternity.

**Keywords:** life's journey, Jesus, St. Paul, cross, love, forgiveness, Schelling, Early Christian hymn

Who was Vladimir Jankélévitch? Joëlle Hansel, connoisseur of contemporary French philosophy and recognized authority on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Judaism and the philosophy of Lévinas, offers a comprehensive introduction to Jankélévitch's thought in her 150 page book entitled *Jankélévitch: Une philosophie du charme*, one of the most recent additions to scholarly literature.<sup>2</sup>

With a richness of biographical references, the introductory section sketches the intellectual path of the philosopher, born to a Russian Jewish family on 31 August 1903 in Bourges.<sup>3</sup> The sensitivity and dynamism so characteristic of Jankélévitch's thought, and the constant activity and restless vibrancy of his spirit, obviously have a close connection

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2. HANSEL, Joëlle: *Vladimir Jankélévitch: Une philosophie du charme*. Éditions Manucius, Paris 2012.

3. For a portrayal of Jankélévitch portrayal, see also Lubrina, Jean-Jaques: *Vladimir Jankélévitch. Les dernières traces du maître*. Éditions du Félin, Paris 2009. More detailed historical elements and a complete biography of Jankélévitch are available in Schwab, Françoise – Bouratsis, Sofia Eliza – Brohm, Jean-Marie: *Présence de Vladimir Jankélévitch. Le Charme et l'Occasion*. Beauchesne, Paris 2010. 437–461.

with how the Jewish diaspora perceives existence, which he confirmed in his comments on the Parisian events of 1968:

“Je suis suffisamment français pour parler cette langue qui est mienne, et en même temps assez étranger. J’étais donc du dehors et du dedans.”<sup>4</sup>

His father, Samuel Jankélévitch, was a renowned physician who, incidentally, translated Hegel, Schelling, and Freud into French.<sup>5</sup> After the family moved to Paris, from 1922 Vladimir studied at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, where two years later, under the supervision of the eminent philosopher, Émile Bréhier, he graduated, writing his paper on Plotinus. There he built a close relationship with the two most renowned philosophers of that time, Léon Brunschvicg and Henri Bergson. The former anticipated a “path of wide horizons” for him, while the latter, after reading the first scholarly paper of the 20-year old student, stated:

“Ou je me trompe beaucoup, ou ce premier travail présage des oeuvres qui seront une importante contribution à la pensée philosophique.”<sup>6</sup>

In a letter to Jankélévitch twenty years later (10 September 1939), Bergson was gratified to confirm the fulfilment of his prophecy: “I was not mistaken.” In 1931, the young philosopher published his work on his master, entitled *Bergson*, which has been an invaluable source of reference to this day. The master received it with great appreciation, finding that the book was not only an accurate and precise mirror of his thought, but, as he commented,

“... souvent mon point d’arrivée a été pour vous le point de départ de spéculations personnelles originales.”<sup>7</sup>

Jankélévitch did not derive satisfaction from the strict rationalism of his other master, Brunschvicg, being more concerned with the contemporary Russian philosophy of religion of Léon Shestov, Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyaev, whose writings were translated from Russian into French by his father. The two major trends in contemporary spiritual movements, openness to the transcendent and an ethically oriented spirituality (Bergson, Martin Buber, Jean Wahl, Gabriel Marcel, Lévinas), in addition to the Russian mystical existential interpretation of being, marry in the philosophy of *charme*,<sup>8</sup> ensuring it produces lifelong fruitfulness.

The doctoral thesis of the 30 year old young man (in 1933, the very year of Hitler’s rise to power) concentrated on the late Schelling, clearly indicating the young author’s affinity to irrationalist tendencies. At the same time, engaging in this activity during the Hegelian renaissance was a kind of position statement; he always preferred the company

4. HANSEL, Joëlle: *Vladimir Jankélévitch. Une philosophie du charme*. 18.

5. Regarding the father–son relationship, see Lé, Linda: Jankélévitch père et fils. In: *Critique. Revue générale des publications françaises et étrangères*. Tome XLV. No. 500–501 (Janvier–Février 1989). 42–46.

6. Hansel, Joëlle: *Vladimir Jankélévitch. Une philosophie du charme*. 20.

7. *Ibid.* 22.

8. For the concept of *charme* as a designation of Jankélévitch’s philosophy, see Apter, Emily S.: *Le charme philosophique*. In: *Critique. Revue générale des publications françaises et étrangères*. Tome XLV. No. 500–501 (Janvier – Février 1989). 12–20.

of the non-fashionable, the marginalized, as noted by Xavier Tillette,<sup>9</sup> to that of the *main-stream* people. Pleased to discover the connections between the German Idealist master and Bergson, he wrote in a letter dated 1931:

“Je crois m'être assez bien installé dans la pensée de Schelling. Elle répond à mes préoccupations, apaise mes inquiétudes au-delà de toute espérance. Son affinité avec le bergsonisme va au-delà de tout ce qu'on peut attendre. Le centre de cette pensée, à mon avis, c'est l'intuition de réalités qui sont toujours complètes et totales.”<sup>10</sup>

In an era when Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's ontology swept away thinkers such as the young Lévinas, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, our Jankélévitch, alongside Georg Simmel and the aforementioned contemporary spiritual movements, was interested in the Early Church Fathers (in particular, the Cappadocian fathers and Clement of Alexandria), Pascal, La Rochefoucauld, Fénelon, Kierkegaard,<sup>11</sup> and Tolstoy. He was fascinated by the deeper flow of intuitive total thought, which albeit not fashionable, is always relevant: “I am writing for the twenty-first century.”<sup>12</sup> In spite of his commitment to left-wing views, he joined the company of neither the Marxists, nor the psychoanalysts, nor the existentialists, and never associated with the Neo-Thomists or the structuralists; he can be seen mostly perhaps as an *existential spiritualist*.

From the late 1920s to 1933 he taught at the French Institute of Prague, then at the universities of Caen, Lyon, Besançon, Toulouse, and Lille. His writings published during this period clearly indicate that the issue of morality was the focus of his thought: *Valeur et signification de la mauvaise conscience* (1933), *L'ironie ou la bonne conscience* (1936), and *L'Alternative* (1938).

Almost one third of Jankélévitch's complete works – some five thousand pages in all – was dedicated to musicological writings. In the year when *L'Alternative* appeared in print, a concept which concentrates on the dramatic nature of man's obligation to make an existential choice, he published his first work on a musical theme, dedicating it to Gabriel Fauré, a composer he idolized.

The trauma of war marked a real watershed in his life. “War tore my life apart. There is nothing left from my existence before 1940, not one book, nor one photo, or one letter.”<sup>13</sup> He then enlisted in the French army; in this year of brokenness, he was wounded during the German occupation, spending two months in hospital. As his parents were not French citizens, he lost his teaching job; then, after reacquiring it for a short time, in December 1940 he was again divested of his position under Vichy's Jewish policy. Bitterly he wrote to his friend:

9. TILLETTE, Xavier: *Une Kitiège de lame. L'éthique de Vladimir Jankélévitch*. In: *L'Arc*. No. 75 (1979). 66.

10. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Correspondance. Une vie en toutes lettres*. Éditions Liana Levi, Paris 1995. 194.

11. Cf. POLITIS, Hélène: *Jankélévitch kierkegaardien*. In: *L'Arc*. No. 75 (1979). 76.

12. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Correspondance. Une vie en toutes lettres*, 331. From his letter to his friend, 17 August 1954.

13. POLITIS, Hélène: *Jankélévitch kierkegaardien*. 12.

“On m’a découvert 2 grands-parents impurs, car je suis, par ma mère, demi-juif; mais cette circonstance n’aurait pas suffi si je n’avais, de surcroît, été métèque par mon père. Cela faisait trop d’impuretés pour un seul homme.”<sup>14</sup>

He stayed then in Toulouse, in the free zone, where he taught groups illegally in the town’s cafés and published his writings with help from his former students. In that troubled period, he published his writings *Le malentendu* (1941), *Du mensonge* (1942), and *Le nocturne* (1942). After the German tanks had invaded even the French free zone, two even more tormented years followed, and he narrowly escaped arrest by the Gestapo. He experienced the city’s liberation on 19 August 1944 as a scarcely credible miracle, and his entire life was marked by the fundamental experience of survivors: the infinite and incomprehensible possibility of his own existence.

In 1946 he completed *Traité des vertus*, a written work also monumental in scope which, on account of the publishers dragging their heels, saw the light of day in 1949. In 1947 he married Lucienne, the daughter of a military officer serving in Algeria, and when he was fifty, their only child was born, whom they named Sophie (what other name could be given by a philosopher who read the Greeks always in the original?). In 1951 he was appointed professor of moral philosophy at Sorbonne, where he taught, wrote, and published with undiminished energy for nearly three decades until his retirement. He penned classics of contemporary moral philosophy such as *Le je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (1957)<sup>15</sup>, signalling the key concepts of the philosophy of *charme* even in its title; *Le Pur et l’impur* (1960), an analysis of the purity of moral action; *La Mort* (1966), tackling the problem of death with stern disconsolation, followed shortly by *Le Pardon* (1967), which is in our focus here. His other works include *L’irréversible et la nostalgie* (1974), a nostalgic, almost musical evocation of the irreversible flow of time; *Quelque part dans l’inachevé* (1978), in which he dialogues with Béatrice Berlowitz; and finally, *Le Paradoxe de la morale* (1981), as a legacy of the 78 year old master. Meanwhile, a dozen volumes evidenced his musicological preoccupation which paralleled his philosophical activity: his preferred choices being Fauré, Ravel, Debussy, Chopin, and Liszt.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of his popular appearances on radio and television, he gradually and increasingly emerged from the obscurity of initial neglect, to the end of his life enjoying respect as an active public personality and one of the most well-known and most authentic French philosophers. He died on 6 June 1985. Even the very last line he penned was about his prevalent concern: the breathtaking one-ness of events (*semelfactivité*) in the drift of

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14. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Correspondance. Une vie en toutes lettres*. 265.

15. For an interpretation of these concepts, see MONTMOLLIN-ROULET, Isabelle de: *Vladimir Jankélévitch, philosophe du voyage*. These présentée à la Faculté des lettres de l’Université de Lausanne pour obtenir le grade de docteur en lettres. Lausanne 1999. 78–83.

16. Cf. Jankélévitch, Vladimir: *Liszt. Rhapsodie et Improvisation*. Flammarion, Paris 1998, 168.: »La rhapsodie lisztienne est toute prélude, et prélude perpétuel. S’étant trouvée elle continue de se chercher. Mais la vie entière, mais la vie de l’homme en général, dont cette rhapsodie nous est le sublime raccourci, qu’est-elle d’autre qu’un prélude, et le prélude de tous les préludes?«

irreversible time, “the most unseizable of all unseizable things”.<sup>17</sup> “He was so young!” an observer remarked on the event.

For the philosopher, Jesus of Nazareth means first of all the tormented and humiliated figure of the Passion, the man of sorrows, the Christ sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, who cried on Good Friday: “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” His Jesus is the man who, unlike Socrates, would refuse the cup of poison, who does not want to face death as serenely as the Greek philosopher. In this metaphysical drama the Father behaves *as if* he forsook his Son, and not the Son cries *as if* he had been forsaken. Because that is what he truly is: the man left alone in front of death. Jankélévitch quotes Pascal: Jesus is all alone at that moment, at the mercy of his Father’s wrath.<sup>18</sup>

In one of his first works, his doctoral dissertation published at the age of thirty, Jankélévitch analyses the late philosophy of Schelling; within it, the problem of the person of Christ and the drama of salvation is of utmost importance for him. Analysing Schelling’s ideas, especially his interpretation of the salvation, he presents a paraphrase of the author’s statements on Christ’s death as salvation, as follows:

„Jésus-Christ ne crucifie en sa personne qu’une fausse royauté, ce qui dans sa divinité est extra-divin.”<sup>19</sup>

The incarnation of Christ “n’est pas la suspension de quelque chose (...) mais une opération absolument positive et effective”.<sup>20</sup> However, Jankélévitch often puts forth his ideas in such a way that it is not always easy to separate which statement mirrors his own views and which describes Schelling’s ideas.

„Le sacrifice de Bacchus est donc toujours à recommencer. Christ, au contraire, meurt une seule fois, pour tous les hommes.”<sup>21</sup>

It seems quite plausible, however, that Jankélévitch also agrees with these statements, as he – for instance – explains and defends the views of his German master against the uncomprehending “moralists”.

„L’idée de la mort de Dieu scandalise nos moralistes (on sait combien Nietzsche la trouvera monstrueuse) et choque la raison naturelle. En réalité ce qui meurt en Jésus-Christ est quelque chose d’inessentiel:

17. Cited by Clément ROSSET, in *Critique. Revue générale des publications françaises et étrangères*. Tome XLV. No. 500–501 (Janvier – Février 1989). 10. »Le temps n’est pas seulement le plus insaisissable d’entre les insaisissables puisqu’il est, en tant que devenir, le contradictoire même de l’être: à peine avons-nous fait mine de définir le devenir, le devenir est déjà un autre que lui-même: le devenir est essentiellement instable. Tout ce qu’on peut dire est encore trop appuyé, trop brusquement marqué pour ne pas immobiliser le temps dans sa détermination la plus trivialement grammaticale. Avant tout: le temps n’est pas une chose, *res*, un ceci ou cela; il ne répond pas à la question: qu’est-il en soi? Et encore moins à la question, en quoi consiste-t-il? Il sert à comparer entre elles les durées commensurables, à les évaluer l’une par rapport à l’autre, sur une commune échelle, mais il reste muet quant à leur nature intrinsèque, quant à l’indéchiffrable énigme qu’elles représentent« – this is where the oeuvre stops, without a full-stop marking the end of the sentence.

18. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Traité des vertus II. Tome. Les vertus et l’amour*. 369.

19. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *L’odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*. 303.

20. Ibid.

21. Jankélévitch, Vladimir: *L’odyssée de la conscience dans la dernière philosophie de Schelling*. 301.

c'est la mort qui est morte. La Colère paternelle ne peut pas demander plus que la mort: Jésus, en se dévouant, a tué la mort."<sup>22</sup>

It seems here that Jankélévitch is not only very close to the teaching of the church, but also identifies himself with its most important element, the redeeming death of Christ. And this is not only valid for the young philosopher before the War, but also for the mature thinker in the years following the Holocaust, the author of the *Moral philosophy*. Here, for example, he writes that the *mania* in Diotima's speech of Plato's *The banquet* "est comme une sorte de prélude païen à la folie de la Croix dont parle Saint Paul"<sup>23</sup> What does he refer to here? Obviously, to the first chapter of the Letter to the Corinthians: *For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. [...] Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* (1Cor 1,18–25)

Then the author cites the imperial governor Porcius Festus, who called Paul a madman in the presence of King Agrippa during his hearing at his residence in Cesarea.

But what was it that Paul said in front of Festus? Verses 2–23 of chapter 26 of the Acts of the Apostles describes this dialogue in great detail: the Apostle reports how he persecuted the Christians until, on the road to Damascus, seeing "a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun," he fell to the earth. A voice asked him: *Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Who art thou, Lord?* The voice presents himself: *I am Jesus whom thou persecutest.* And he gives a new commission to Paul: *now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.* Saul who is now becoming Paul replies in his lively speech: *I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.* This is too much for the aristocratic ears! Festus interrupts him with a sarcastic remark: *Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad.* (Acts 26, 24). The reply comes without delay: *I am not mad, most noble Festus...* King Agrippa answers: *Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.* To which comes the conclusion: *may God make you all be like me.* Humour is not absent from Paul's speech either: of course, I do not mean my bonds!

The Apostle speaks in fact of two things: the hope of the resurrection in the End Times (which the Pharisees, as opposed to the Sadducees, also believed in) foretold by the resurrection of Christ, and of the forgiveness of sins through the faith in him. Jankélévitch's remark is surprising in this context:

„Mané Paule! crie Festus à l'apotre: *Insanis Paule...* Sans doute, Festus prenait-l pour déraison ce qui est source irrationnelle de toute rationalité, source illégitime de toute légitimité, principe révolutionnaire de

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22. Ibid. 305.

23. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Les vertus et l'amour. Traité des vertus II.* Tome 2. Flammarion, Paris 1986. 309.

toute ordre, origine violente de tout amour: car le *Quod* pose l'ordre et crée la loi."<sup>24</sup>

How? Does Jankélévitch identify the ancient source of creation with that thorn-crowned one of the nonsense of the cross? Similar references appear also on the pages of the *Philosophie première*. Struggling with the inexpressibility of the name of God – a mixture of old Jewish tradition and Neo-Platonic influence – he reaches the conclusion:

„... 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*."<sup>25</sup>

The expression “above every name” in the hymn of the Letter to the Philippians clearly speaks of the Christ who *thought it not robbery to be equal with God, and he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*. With respect to this incomprehensible divine self-emptying, kenosis, *God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*. (Phil 2, 6–11)

How should we understand this? Does Jankélévitch merely borrow an expression while talking about God's apophatic inexpressibility? Is it all there is to it? But then why does he borrow it from an Early Christian hymn quoted by Paul which means the very core of the Christian teaching on Christ? Or does it refer to even more than that? Can we perhaps see the essence of Jankélévitch's never systematically exposed image of Christ in the sentence above and in what he states about the nonsense of the cross?

There is no clear-cut answer to this question. Talking about Plotinus, the author claims that every apophatic formula for him means the rejection of the fact that the *One* may state anything about oneself. He cites approvingly:

„... l'unité ne peut s'affirmer de l'Un; l'Un ne peut dire: *agathon eimi*, ni *ego eimi* – je suis le Bien, Moi je suis; ni en général *eimi tode* – je suis ceci. Il n'est même-pas le «*Il est*», *ești ou de to ești*, ni à plus forte raison le «étant» (*on*)."<sup>26</sup>

However, Jesus often states the same about himself in the Gospel of John than the God of the burning bush: *ani hu, ego eimi, I am*. Whether he presents himself as the light of the world, the good shepherd, the heavenly manna, or the true vine, he always speaks about himself and about whom he reveals: his Heavenly Father.

The French thinker's God is a sparkle that lights up and dies out in darkness. Although he mentions the „nonsense of the cross”, but its two features appearing in the Apostle's above quoted apology – the forgiveness of sins gained through faith in God, and the hope of resurrection – have no significance in either his anthropological or his ethical views. The traditional theological teaching of the love of man and forgiveness is foreign to

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24. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Les vertus et l'amour. Traité des vertus II*. Tome 2., 310.

25. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 124.

26. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Philosophie première*, 127.

him; he thinks that it somehow diminishes the unconditional love of man if we “merely” practice it because of God, and do not love man just for himself or in himself.

„... notre frère 'en Dieu', c'est-à-dire notre frère tout court, veut être aimé directement et en lui-même, sans détour ni périphrase, sans médiation ni réfraction; l'amant va à l'aimé transitivement: pourquoi passerait-il par l'Ecclesia? Il ne faut pas aimer son prochain en Dieu, mais il faut aimer Dieu en son prochain, puisque c'est l'existence même de ce prochain qui est le mystère gratuit et pour ainsi dire surnaturel.”<sup>27</sup>

An existence defined by the gaze directed to God, or simply the existence in front of him, *coram Deo*, is not an ontological basis that makes everything possible and is an inexhaustible source of love for every virtue, but – strangely – a competitor for the attention and love directed to man. He does not recognize the drama of the cross as the infinite, divine repository of the solidary love of anyone humiliated and tormented. He also does not see the prayer as a possibility and gift of grace of a personal relationship with the *Quod* which is able to refill the easily emptying spiritual reserves of the commitment to the starving and persecuted. Instead of the dialectical heartbeat of the spiritual refill and the committed practice, he states with a rather plain onesidedness:

„On n'aime pas Dieu en délirant sur les clous de la croix, mais on aime Dieu en aimant sa compagne, en portant secours à ses frères affamés ou persécutés, et ceci par des actes plus que par des prières.”<sup>28</sup>

Jankélévitch's hyperbolic ethics cannot be rooted in the soil of eternity.

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27. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Les vertus et l'amour. Traité des vertus II. Tome 2.*, 209.

28. JANKÉLÉVITCH, Vladimir: *Les vertus et l'amour. Traité des vertus II. Tome 2.*, 209.