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On Metaphysical Guilt and Infinite Responsibility: K. Jaspers and E. Levinas

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Abstract. This paper discusses guilt and responsibility in Jaspers and Levinas. First, it explores the concept of guilt in Jaspers and shows that while "metaphysical guilt" deepens the existential dimension of human life it remains indifferent to the moral dimension of guilt and responsibility uncovered by Levinas. Second, the paper explores the notions of guiltless responsibility and unavoidable guilt in Levinas and shows that responsibility is not limited to specific wrongdoing or explicit acknowledgment of guilt. By drawing out these differences between Jaspers and Levinas, the author asks if Levinas's approach might provide illuminating guidance to talk about our guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust as well as other social events.
Keywords: guilt, responsibility, Jaspers, Levinas, Holocaust

Metafizinė kaltė ir begalinė atsakomybė: K. Jaspersas ir E. Levinas

Santrauka. Straipsnyje svarstoma kaltės bei atsakomybės samprata Jasperso ir Levino filosofijoje. Pirma, aptariant Jasperso kaltės sampratą parodoma, kad nors „metafizinė kaltė" ir pagilina egzistencinę žmogaus gyvenimo dimensiją, ji lieka abejinga Levino atskleistai moralinei kaltės ir atsakomybės prasmei. Antra, darbe nagrinėjama Levino atsakomybės be kaltės ir neišvengiamos kaltės samprata ir atskleidžiama, kad atsakomybė neapsiriboja konkrečiais nusižengimais ar aiškiu kaltės pripažinimu. Išryškinant šiuos Jasperso ir Levino skirtumus, straipsnyje klausiama, ar leviniška prieiga gali pasiūlyti būdą, kaip kalbėti apie mūsų kaltę ir atsakomybę už Holokaustą ir kitus socialinius įvykius.
Pagrindiniai žodžiai: kaltė, atsakomybė, Jaspersas, Levinas, Holokaustas

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Introduction

Karl Jaspers raised the question of guilt right after World War II by asking, "Are the German people guilty?" in lectures at the University of Heidelberg. He was giving these lectures under the title "The Intellectual Situation in Germany" during the winter semester 1945-46. In 1947 they were published as a book, *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of German Guilt*, 1947). By distinguishing political, criminal, moral and metaphysical guilt Jaspers tried to define German guilt for the Holocaust. Criminal guilt results from crimes committed by individuals and can be proved by objective facts. Political guilt, in contrast, is borne by every citizen of the state because "everybody is responsible for the way he is governed" (Jaspers 2000: 25). This definition of political guilt raised a lot of debate as it indicates collective guilt[1] for crimes not committed by you but by other members of society. Moral guilt derives from the human ability to make moral judgments. Unlike criminal or political guilt, it is strictly personal; no outside jurisdiction can make a judgment. Each person must face his or her moral responsibility for all their deeds, "including the execution of political and military orders" (Jaspers 2000: 25). Acknowledging moral individual guilt for the Holocaust was seen by Jaspers as essential to produce change in post-war German society inasmuch as "Moral failings cause the conditions out of which both crime and political guilt arise" (2000: 28). The fourth type of guilt, metaphysical, comes from the solidarity among humans in acknowledging the impossibility of overcoming or completely eradicating injustice in the world.

Despite certain expectations, the lectures were not very well received. Jaspers' listeners were skeptical regarding his arguments on guilt and responsibility. As some listeners recall, "students attending his lectures on the spiritual regeneration of Germany 'started laughing and scraping their feet on the floor at the mention of democracy, in connection [with] the spiritual situation of Germany'" (Clark 2002: 211) and "They reacted to this responsibility that the world public and thinkers like Jaspers assigned them with rejection, with anger, and with cynicism" (Grunenberg et al. 2007: 1013). Later, in 1949, such disappointment was expressed by Jaspers himself, in a letter: "I am horrified by the thought that the German public spirit has remained fundamentally unchanged since the nazi period" (Clark 2002: 218).

This atmosphere and attitude toward the question of guilt, strange as it might appear at first sight, is confirmed by Hannah Arendt who had visited Germany in 1949. In her report "The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany" she recalls a general indifference to the Holocaust by Germans in Germany:

> A lack of response is evident everywhere, and it is difficult to say whether this signifies a half-conscious refusal to yield to grief or a genuine inability to feel. <…> This general lack of emotion, at any rate this apparent heartlessness, sometimes covered over with cheap sentimentality, is only the most conspicuous outward symptom of a deep rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened. (Arendt 2005: 249)

[1] More on the political and collective guilt see in Saldukaitytė, J., Anckaert, L.(eds.), 2023. *Morality on the Edge. Modernity and the Holocaust in Lithuania*. Münster: Lit-Verlag (forthcoming).

Perhaps what surprised her most was that instead of expressing some or any sympathy Germans were fixating on how they themselves had suffered: they "proceed to draw up a balance between German suffering and the suffering of others, the implication being that one side cancels the other" (Arendt 2005: 249). Even more disturbing that fifty years later the situation had not significantly changed. Susan Neiman in her book *Learning from the Germans* (2019) reflects on the Wehrmacht Exhibit which opened in Hamburg on 5 March 1995 and travelled to various cities in Germany and Austria. The exhibit not only commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, but more specifically – and controversially, in Germany – brought to light that Nazi crimes were not limited to SS unites. Germans were genuinely upset, for they could not accept the fact that a much larger part of society was involved in the Nazi crimes. The exhibit evoked not deeper understanding and self-examination but huge protests and criticism. What the negative reaction towards the exhibit exposed, for non-Germans if not for Germans, however, was that "the gap between historical scholarship and public memory proved tremendous" (Neiman 2020: 22). Nevertheless, as Neiman underlines, this exhibit represented a turning point for Germans to come to grips with their past.

These reactions not only show the difficulty talking about, how to put it, a non-heroic past, but in particular the great difficulty accepting that evil is not limited only to some small number of "defective" people, criminals, "bad eggs," as it were, but raises the most disturbing questions of guilt and responsibility for each and all. To what extent are we guilty and responsible for crimes which oat first glance seem to be committed not by us but by others? Further, what is our responsibility for the past?

This paper discusses guilt and responsibility in Jaspers and Levinas. First, it explores the concept of metaphysical guilt in Jaspers and relates it to "infinite" responsibility in Levinas. Second, the paper asks if Levinas's approach might provide guidance to talk about our relation to the Holocaust as well as other social events. Some scholars think of Levinas as a post-Holocaust thinker, meaning that he not only teaches us how to talk about morality after the failure of morality, but that his ethics is highly influenced by the Holocaust and may be understood as a reflection of and on the Holocaust.[2] Without dismissing such readings, this article takes a different angle: not how taking into consideration the Holocaust helps to understand Levinas's philosophy but how Levinas's philosophy provides guidance to understand our relation toward evil which we have not committed, or not committed directly. This way we avoid one danger of the first approach, which would be to relativize and trivialize Levinas ethics by making it too situational, confining it to the Holocaust. Levinas's ethics is not, to put it crudely, "applied Holocaust ethics", defined by historical time and space. Of course, this does not at all dismiss the enormous significance of the Holocaust in Levinas thought but insists upon the universality of his ethics, and on the importance of thinking morality outside the more limited confines of normative ethics. Jaspers also sees the limitation of normative ethics, as he indicates in the text "On My Philosophy":

[2] Manning 2022, Plant 2014, Pollefeyt 2018, Sebbah 2018, Eaglestone 2004.

> Morality is no longer adequately founded on generally valid laws. The laws themselves are in need for a deeper foundation. The Kantian question "What shall I do?" is no longer sufficiently answered by the categorical imperative (though this imperative remains inevitably true) but has to be complemented by the foundation of every ethical act and knowledge in communication. For the truth of generally valid laws for my actions is conditioned by the kind of communication in which I act. (Jaspers 1975: 167)

His discussions of guilt, in particular metaphysical guilt, like infinite responsibility in Levinas, breaks through legalistic and normative approaches.

Metaphysical Guilt and Responsibility in Karl Jaspers

The question of guilt as one of the boundary situations Jaspers addressed prior to *The Question of German Guilt* (1947). In his earlier book *Philosophy* (1932) he indicated that human being realizes human potentialities in four modes of being: vital existence, logical thinking and rationality, spirit (manifestation of ideas, beliefs, creativity) and *Existenz*. Only the last can be approached philosophically. To realize *Existenz* the experience of boundary situations and of existential communication is necessary.

For Jaspers, "as existence I always find myself in situations" (1970: 178). Human being not only moves from one situation to another but also and more profoundly finds itself in boundary situations, realizing "that I cannot live without struggling and suffering; that I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die" (Jaspers 1970: 178). Here lie the main aspects of existence. Boundary situations are understood as fundamental possibilities, situations of the human condition, similar in this regard to Dasein's authenticity. "The meaningful way for us to react to boundary situations is therefore not by planning and calculating to overcome them but by the very different activity of becoming the *Existenz* we potentially are; we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations" (Jaspers 1970: 179). But unlike Martin Heidegger, Jaspers sees boundary situations occurring not in relation to Being but in historically determined situations. So while Heidegger's interpretation is ontological, Jaspers embraces the ontical, without reference to the ontological, and does so by underlining the importance of historic *Existenz*: "I exist in certain social circumstances at a certain time in history; I am a man or a woman, young or old, directed by opportunities and chances" (Jaspers 1970: 183). Death, suffering, struggle and guilt are boundary situations encountered by each individual in their life in its concreteness, its specificity, its determinate time and place – in a word, in history.

In *Philosophy* (1932) guilt is described as a boundary situation: "in my existence I *permit my living conditions* – which are the struggles and the sufferings of others – makes me guilty of living by exploitation" (Jaspers 1970: 215). Guilt arises from being free and reveals the deeper truth about yourself. Jaspers underlines the importance of the consequences of actions in the world even if the agent did not foresee it. I choose some possibilities over other possibilities and consequences of my choice might be harmful, to others, to myself, now or later, and so on. Not making a choice is also a choice, because by not acting or not intervening consequences follow, and I am guilty in their regard.

According to Jaspers, if a person consciously permits unwelcomed consequences, he is not called irresponsible but rather "unconscionable."

Still, even if the guilt is not objectively conceivable, it "shatters self-righteousness in my *Existenz*. My active entrance into life will thus deprive others, will let entanglements sully the soul, and will hurt the possible *Existenz* which I reject in my exclusive realization" (Jaspers 1970: 216). This insight recalls that of Levinas when in his writings and interviews he poses the question: "Do I not kill by being?", "Have I the right to be?". However, Jaspers, unlike Levinas, is more preoccupied about his own existence and the transformation of the self and less for responsibility *for the other*, where the weight of Levinas's thought lies. So too, then, Jaspers is clearly more concerned about acknowledging guilt than taking responsibility. In *Philosophy* he seems to be saying that responsibility *is* the acknowledgment of guilt: "Responsibility mounts to its existential pathos of accepting that inevitable guilt, which we usually shun only to be thoughtlessly and passively entangled in some paltry guilt" (Jaspers 1970: 217). This acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility rises up to the boundary situation, when a person comes to terms with himself or herself (or, as Heidegger would say, when living *authentically*).

In *Philosophy* Jaspers does not yet draw a distinction between different notions of guilt, as he does later in *Die Schuldfrage – The Question of German Guilt* – in 1947. However, the description of guilt here is closest to the metaphysical guilt described later. Metaphysical guilt is not imposed from outside, but like moral guilt is personal. He makes clear that metaphysical and moral guilt are relations with oneself, such that only the personal conscience can judge or punish (in contrast to criminal and political guilt). Metaphysical guilt is "inconceivable and incomprehensible", it is not measured by my acts or my efforts and is not a result of wrongdoing. Guilt in this sense is understood as deriving from primordial solidarity between human beings:

> Metaphysical guilt: There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can to prevent them, I too am guilty. If I was present at the murder of others without risking my life to prevent it, I feel guilty in a way not adequately conceivable either legally, politically or morally. (Jaspers 2000: 26)

This discussion on guilt, as has been mentioned, aimed to raise awareness in post-war Germany. Alan Olson underlines that these claims about metaphysical guilt can be seen as illuminating guilt as enrooted in historicity: "Historically, it is the kind of guilt connected with what the Nuremberg Tribunals defined as crimes against humanity (*Verbrechen gegen die Menschheit*) and genocide, or what today is called ethnic cleansing (*Völkermord*) as distinct from war crimes (*Kriegsverbrechen*) in the conventional sense" (Olson 2008: 13). Let us note that Jaspers makes metaphysical guilt fundamental, because it serves as a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*, for criminal, moral, and political guilt: "If human being were able to free themselves from metaphysical guilt, they would be angels, and all the other three concepts of guilt would become immaterial" (Jaspers 2000: 27).

Engaging in this boundary situation is essential to human being. However, there is no necessity for anyone to consciously embrace in the significance of such a boundary situation. Boundary situations can be concealed or avoided, can be explained and excused away, as in (1) "that's the way it is, and I can't change it; I'm not to blame for existence being as it is; if it involves inescapable guilt, that's not my fault – so it makes no difference whether guilt falls on me" (Jaspers 1970: 217). Or (2) even more radically, the boundary situation might be concealed by misinterpreting the course of life. Here Jaspers has in mind not only orders countering morality – evil or unjust orders – but as well what he calls "straightforward morality": confusion of my own motives with the real possibilities of *Existenz*. In addition, (3) boundary situations can also be avoided in their genuine depth by claiming that guilt is somehow altogether avoidable or altogether redeemable.

Professor Jūratė Baranova recognized this dimension of concealed metaphysical guilt in her reading of the novel *Darkness and Company* by Sigitas Parulskis (*Tamsa ir partneriai*, 2012). This novel tells a fictional story of romantic love between a Lithuanian man named Vincent and Judith, a Jewish woman, during the early days of the Holocaust in Lithuania. Vincent does not get actively involved in killing people but he does accept the offer by an SS officer to take pictures of executions in exchange for security in his life. In this novel, according to Baranova, the photographer Vincent appears as a perfect bystander who lacks solidarity with the victims, someone not capable of resisting the evil by just "going with the flow" (Baranova 2016).

However, Jaspers leaves unanswered what happens if feeling of metaphysical guilt does not consciously arise, or is not accepted, or is denied and concealed. Inasmuch as guilt is what Jaspers considers a boundary situation we may assume that in its absence a human being fails to face the truth about himself and about existence. Jaspers' call to acknowledge guilt, to "feel guilty" (which means to take responsibility) is limited to coming to terms with oneself, to go through an inner transformation: "The metaphysical guilt results in *a transformation of human self-consciousness before God*" (2000: 30). So we may assume that to conceal such truth about human existence is to not live a meaningful life.

Baranova in her book *Philosophy and Literature: Contradictions, Parallels and Intersections* argues that Jaspers' metaphysical guilt is same as "disinterested responsibility" in Levinas (Baranova 2006: 268). Here too we recognize an important difference between these two thinkers: the consequences of Jaspers' concept of metaphysical guilt are existential, not moral. In this sense, then, Jaspers' approach is similar to Heidegger's inasmuch as metaphysical guilt calls for answering for yourself but not to others, not a taking responsibility as standing for the other, or as Levinas says, being for-the-other all the way to the possibility – unwanted – of dying for the other.

As it was mentioned, Jaspers' lectures were not met with a great enthusiasm. According to Arendt, this reception came from more than amorality or wickedness. In her article *"*The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany" she compares the positions of Knut Hamsun and Ernest Junger: while the latter was testifying the difficulty of withstanding the evil Hamsun was succumbing to it and denying it. As Arendt notices, "Germans who confess their own guilt are in many cases altogether innocent in the ordinary, down-to-earth

sense, whereas those who are guilty of something real have the calmest consciences in the world" (2005: 259). In brief, only the one who is already responsible for the other is going to acknowledge his or her guilt. In another article, while discussing Socrates, Arendt argues "that most evil is done by people who never made up their mind to be either bad or good" (1971: 438). For Socrates to do the Good you have to know the Good so sure is he that no one can act wrongly if he knows the difference between wrongdoing and good. Most modern thinkers are more suspicious about the power or rule of reason relative to agency. Levinas approach, however, is the most radical, because overturns this formula from the very start: you do not have to know the good to do the good. Or, to rephrase it relative to our current discussion: to be responsible you do not have to acknowledge your guilt.

Guilt and Infinite Responsibility in Emmanuel Levinas

To underline the infinity of responsibility Levinas often repeats the phrase from *The Brothers Karamazov*: "All men are responsible for one another, and 'I more than anyone else.' One of the most important things for me is that asymmetry and that formula: All men are responsible for one another and I more than anyone else" (1998a: 107), "We are all responsible for all men before all, and I more than all the others[3]" (2009: 101). Elsewhere the same phrase translates as "We are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others" (1998a: 105), "We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others[4]" (2009: 98). Just by following how this phrase reappears in Levinas texts we may notice that there is no systematic distinction between the guilt and responsibility, that these words are time to time used interchangeably or synonymously. François-David Sebbah in his study on culpability argues that in Levinas philosophy it is impossible to distinguish responsibility from culpability as he "always already converts responsibility into culpability" (Sebbah 2018: 36). Although distinction between guilt and responsibility in Levinas philosophy is indeed not a matter of a technical vocabulary, we can nevertheless identify in his writings a twofold relation between the two. On the one hand, responsibility does not follow exclusively from the subject being at fault, having done this or that wrong deed. Levinas names it "guiltless responsibility" (see below). On the other hand, the subject is always guilty, and this guilt increases his responsibility, or we can say responsibility arises in guilt. Let us elaborate these two approaches.

Guiltless Responsibility

The claim that a subject must take responsibility for what was or was not done indicates that such a subject is a free agent. For Kantian ethics the free will of the subject is the very core of ethics. For Levinas, in contrast, that kind of ethics is too easy: if responsibility follows

[3] « *Nous sommes tous coupables de tout et de tous devant tous, et moi plus que les autres* » (Levinas 2015: 95).

[4] « *Nous sommes tous responsables de tout et de tous devant dous, et moi plus que tous les autres* » (Levinas 2015: 98).

from freedom, it is also excused if my freedom is limited or I am in a difficult situation with the restricted choice. Levinas argues that responsibility does not begin in decision or commitment. I do not choose to be responsible; it chooses me: "if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his as-for-me, and the exits found in inner life" (2008: 136); and, in a striking expression: "No one is good voluntarily" (2008: 11, 138). In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas writes: "The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom" (2008: 10). Levinas here not only questions the primacy of freedom and freedom of choice but challenges the necessary link between guilt and responsibility as well. To be responsible, in other words, outside of choices, you do not have to be faulty, either culpable or blameworthy. Responsibility is not a response, not a contract; it is not compensation or economic exchange; it is not defined, as in Jaspers, by acknowledgement of guilt. A person is responsible even if not aware of being guilty. It is not by any prior commitment, choice or action; nor is it because of consequences brought about by your action or inaction.

It is important to underline that for Levinas responsibility does not follow from an action or even a character trait but is prior: "The for-the-other characteristic of the subject can be interpreted neither as a guilt complex (which presupposes an initial freedom), nor as a natural benevolence or divine "instinct," nor as some love or some tendency to sacrifice" (Levinas 2008: 124). Responsibility then is *a condition for an action*. Or more profoundly, it is a condition of the "humanity of the human." When Levinas argues for "ethics as a first philosophy" he not only challenges the primacy of the question of being (ontology) but as well means to convey that meaning – "intelligibility" – comes from relation, which is always already my responsibility for the other human being. In the article "Ethics as First Philosophy" (1984) he underlines and summarizes the priority of responsibility:

> A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before being. A guiltless responsibility, whereby I am none the less open to an accusation of which no alibi, spatial or temporal, could clear me. It is as if the other established a relationship or a relationship were established whose whole intensity consists in not presupposing the idea of community. (1989: 83-84)

Here we see the heart of Levinas's ethics, its originality and radicality – "defining" self as responsibility for-the-other before for-itself.

The subject is responsible but not because he is guilty of this or that, and not because he has *acknowledged* guilt as metaphysical or otherwise. He is guilty even if he is innocent. This tension is revealed through the figure of the "hostage" which for Levinas is the ultimate relational situation of subjectivity. Responsibility does not begin in me and because of me. Each person "is responsibility in the innocence of being a hostage" (2008: 125). In its passivity, as hostage, the subject undergoes or succumbs to the responsibility which is not his choice and does not follow from his actions. "The hostage is the one who is found responsible for what he has not done" (Levinas 1999: 105). The situation of

hostage, Levinas explains, is the most concrete situation: "When you have encountered a human being, you cannot drop him. Most often we do so, saying 'I have done all I could!' We haven't done anything! It is this feeling, this consciousness, of having done nothing that gives us the status of hostage with the responsibility of one who is not guilty, who is innocent. The innocent, what a paradox!" (1999: 106). Because of the asymmetry of responsibility for the other the so-called innocence of the subject does not give the subject the right to turn away from the other without fault. The call for responsibility is indeed extreme: "When I say 'I am doing my duty' I lie, because I am never discharged with respect to the other" (1999: 105), argues Levinas. I am never released. I have never done enough. In other words that is "impossibility of saying no". Even if you are innocent you are more responsible than the other. Actually, responsibility is my own; it is up to the other to be or not be responsible for me, that is the other's business – the relation is not reciprocal, not symmetrical:

> To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be dis-interested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other. (Levinas 2008: 117)

Unavoidable Guilt and Accusation

By emphasizing passivity, counter to long philosophical tradition, Levinas argues that "Everything is from the start in the accusative" (2008: 112). It means that from the very beginning the I is persecuted and accused; the I from the very start is guilty and in debt. This accusation precedes any particular fault and lies in being in proximity with the other and being late for his needs. It is an unavoidable guilt despite the so-called innocence of the subject. The I is constantly accused and constantly found guilty. There is no relief. "The irremissible guilt with regard to the neighbor is like a Nessus tunic my skin would be" (Levinas 2008: 109). Unlike Jaspers, Levinas does not foresee that this accusation could be challenged, concealed or avoided. For him, it is election and unreplaceable responsibility: "I cannot slip away from the face of the neighbor without avoidance, or without fault, or without complexes; here I am pledged to the other without any possibility of abdication" (Levinas 1998b: 71). Levinas denies the exception of alibi, the possibility of an excuse: "That was not my fault". To be sure, people refuse the other, turn away, excuse themselves, but it is a secondary movement, you are already guilty.

This call for responsibility – very differently than in Heidegger or Jaspers – refers not to a lack but to a surplus! Heidegger in *Being and Time* indicated certain indebtedness, guilt emerging because of inauthenticity and drifting away from being. Similarly, for Jaspers metaphysical guilt is seen as some deficiency, as impossibility to have a solidarity with the other human beings. For Levinas, proximity, being accused in front of the other person refers not as deficiency but opening toward the possibility for infinite responsibility of the subject. The other enables, imposes, commands the self to be good, even if the

self is never good enough. Levinas, although he repeats over and over that the I is more guilty than others, that I have one responsibility more, at the same time does not see this as some form of deficiency or inauthenticity. Quite the reverse. He insists that accusation without fault refers not to original sin but to "the original goodness of creation" (Levinas 2008: 121). Similarly in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* Levinas writes "I am committed, in responsibility for the other, according to the singular figure that a creature presents, responding to the *fiat* in Genesis, hearing the word before having been a world and in the world" (1998b: 165-166). It is a "witnessing" of the Infinite that is not dogma or theology but responsibility and morality.

What he means is that Good chooses me before I choose it. Otherwise it is not Good! I am called by the Other, called by responsibility before being aware of my duties, my obligations, and my abilities. "Ethics slips into me before freedom. Before the bipolarity of Good and Evil, the I as 'me' has thrown its lot in with the Good in the passivity of bearing" (Levinas 2000: 176). He underlines that "This antecedence of responsibility to freedom would signify the Goodness of the Good: the necessity that the Good choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice" (Levinas 2008: 122). This approach does not give a possibility for excuse, for escaping the responsibility: it is not an option of choice.

That Levinas claims the primacy of ethics after the horrors of the twentieth century is really extraordinary. The question Levinas puts, "Can we speak of morality after the failure of morality" (1988a: 176), is not the denial of morality but a unrelenting pursuit to find it outside the confining realm of being, despite the alleged "violence" of a goodness otherwise than normativity.

Guilt of Being and Disinterestedness

The unavoidable guilt as found in Levinas's philosophy is tied to the attempt to be. But from the very beginning for Levinas it is not a question of the meaning or question of being but of questioning my right to be, asking if I do not in my being take the place of the other, usurping the other, if I do not murder by being. Interest in being is attached to its essence, perhaps conceptual for the idealist philosopher, but socially expressed as attachment to money, honor, power and the like. It is *conatus essendi*, taking one's always rightful "place under the sun". *To be,* however, as Levinas thinks it, is constantly to look for justification: "do I have a right to be"? Why am I? For Levinas this is not a question only of the meaning of my life (which would be seen as selfish – am I really so important?), but of the meaningfulness of meaning altogether.

Levinas question is not that of *conatus essendi*, the "effort of being", not the question what the ground of my being is or why there is something rather than nothing. Rather it is whether I do not displace the Other, murder the other by being? Levinas challenges the ontological privileging of 'the right to exist' and sees as more profoundly an ethical issue where the question is 'Is it righteous to be?'. In other words, am I not taking the place of the

other, am I not living instead of the other, taking the other's food, despoiling the other's air and water, harming others? My own being, my place, my needs are always under question and the more I recognize this, the more I respond to the Other, "the more I am just the more guilty I am" (Levinas 2007: 277). The attachment to being leads to different forms of egoism and selfishness and Western philosophy and morality then is seen as based in self-consciousness and narcissism. To underline the ethical position which is not motivated by egoism Levinas introduces the notion of disinterest or disinterestedness which he sees as "opposed to the *essence* of a being, which essence is precisely always persistence in essence, the return of essence upon itself, self-consciousness and complacency in self" (Levinas 1994: 127). In the article "The Trace of the Other" he emphasizes that it is giving up the priority of interest in oneself, even to the point of indifference to my own death: "distinguished from games and from calculation, is being-for-beyond my death", it "a radical generosity" (Levinas 1986: 349). Disinterest here not to be confused with the notion of stoic *apatheia*, indifference of detachment – it has an "exclusively moral sense" (Levinas 1994: 127). To underline this Richard Cohen in his reading of Levinas brings to bear Levinas's alternative term "non-in-difference" as expressive of *dis-inter-essement, for it* "refers to the status of the I stripped of its egocentric 'inter-ests' in the intersubjective relation" and here "the I which by itself is in-different becomes non-in-different to the Other" (Cohen 1994: 163). This non-indifference has a moral meaning: as overcoming the egoism of oneself, putting the Other first, being-for-the-Other.

The theme of disinterest was analyzed by Baranova. She sees the Levinasian notion of disinterestedness as a philosophical interpretation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's concept of guilt (Baranova 2005; Baranova 2006). Baranova highlights that "this phrase [disinterestedness] comprises the core of Levinasian ethics" and is "related to compassion as asymmetrical responsibility and self-identity as a possible service to others both in Dostoyevsky's novels and Levinas' philosophical texts" (Baranova 2005: 196). A more common reading of Dostoyevsky underlines the burden of unavoidable and infinite responsibility. Baranova, on other hand, interprets disinterestedness as compassion, or what we can call a pity love (Baranova 2006: 257-265), which she finds, for instance, in the character of Myshkin in *Idiot* when he confesses that he loves Nastasya Filippovna "not with love, but with pity" (Dostoyevsky 2003: 208). While agreeing with Baranova's main argument, I would question the centrality of compassion in Levinas. He admits that compassion is "no longer suffering 'for nothing'" (Levinas 1988b: 164) and "the suffering for the useless suffering of the other person, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the Other, opens upon suffering the ethical perspective of the inter-human" (Levinas 1988b: 159). But, having in mind Arthur Schopenhauer, he underscores that "the suffering of compassion, suffering because the other suffers, is only one aspect of a relationship that is much more complex and much more complete at the same time: that of responsibility for the other" (Levinas 1998a: 107). If compassion does not come with responsibility it remains merely "the psychological event" (Levinas 2008: 146), similarly as we encounter in Jaspers the description of metaphysical guilt and the lack of solidarity. So Levinas distances himself from the concept of solidarity as fusion, unity, mutuality or sympathy and argues for

solidarity which "is responsibility – as though the whole edifice of creation rested on my shoulders" (Levinas 1986: 353). So, he sees that while compassion might open the ethical, he is also worried that it is not enough. Not compassion, not metaphysical guilt, but responsibility is the essence of the relationship.

Despite the assumption that disinterest might include compassion the deeper and broader meaning of it is expressed as being for the other. "Here I am" means "In readiness to serve the other." In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas underlines that "subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another" (2008: 13), it "is described as a substituting for the other, as disinterestedness, or a break with essence" (2008: 140). It is not only taking the responsibility for the other but such a proximity or nearness means *sacrificing* oneself for the other, in the last resort, "dying for the other". The interpretation of death in Levinas, as many commentators have noted, has an ethical significance. Here it is important to notice that the death of the other, which concerns me more than my own, is also an exposure to my guilt. In an interview Levinas acknowledges that "In starting from the Holocaust, I think about the death of the other man; I think of the other man for whom one may already feel – I don't know why – like a guilty survivor" (Levinas 2001: 126). My concern is not my death but the death of the other, as if, Levinas, writes, "I was responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving" (Levinas 2008: 91). Jaspers too, in discussing metaphysical guilt refers to the guilt of surviving: "if I survive where the other is killed, I know from a voice within myself I am guilty of being still alive" (Jaspers 2000: 65). For Jaspers acknowledgment of this guilt opens the existential depth of the self, while for Levinas it is suffering for the other, dying for the other is the "radical substitution for an other,", "ultimate nearness" (Levinas 2000: 39). While to survive when the other dies is to fail in this ultimate act of responsibility: "the sacrifice for another [*autrui*] would create another relation with the death of the other: a responsibility that would perhaps answer the question of why we can die. In the guiltiness of the survivor, the death of the other [*l'autre*] is my affair" (Levinas 2000: 39). The guilt of surviving received a lot of attention after the Holocaust. It was described in many diaries and memoirs, and we can hear an echo of it in Levinas's writings. He rarely talks directly about the Holocaust and the question whether his philosophy is defined by it remains unresolved in the secondary literature. Some readers claim that "the philosophy of Levinas must be read as a philosophy *of* and *by* the survivor, that it is singularly illuminated from this point of view, and that it tells us something original in this respect" (Sebbah 2018: 10). But at the same time, readers understand that Levinas's books and his teaching are *not* limited simply to his autobiographical insights or to historical circumstances.

Arendt was very critical of Jaspers' interpretation of guilt pointing out that he provides excuses for the really guilty ones: if everyone is guilty nobody is. The way Levinas approaches the question might seem similar insofar as he calls upon everyone's responsibility and makes everyone guilty. But the matter is quite different: Levinas is attempting to characterize the "humanity of the human" as responsible, the responsibility of each person, and I first of all; Jaspers, in contrast, defines the world as guilty, as

"metaphysical guilt," thus relieving each human of their responsibility, in the "that's the way it is" shrugged shoulders.

"Who is the hostage?", David Patterson asks in his book and answers: "It is you, reader, and it is I: we are summoned to a substitution, for the sake of an absolute dearness, infidelity fragile, that bears and absolute ethical demand" (Patterson 2018: 95). Similarly, Susan Handelman in her study points out,

> Levinas is making all persons 'survivors,' responsible without even having decided to be so and before any voluntary act is undertaken. There is no escape. The implications in relation to the events of World War II are quite clear: there are no excuses, no 'We didn't know, we didn't see, we are not responsible.' All of Levinas's writing, with is difficulty and complexity, is a direct refutation of any such position or any attempt to relieve anyone of responsibility – from even such tangentially involved figures as deMan to the notorious Klaus Barbie, who at his trial for war crimes said, 'I've forgotten about it. If they haven't, that's their concern.' But even more, it also makes responsible everyone who excuses him- or herself precisely because he or she is not a Klaus Barbie – every one of us, even every reader of Levinas. (Handelman 1991: 212)

Levinas text does not say, as in Paterson or Handelman, such straightforward moralizing statements (e.g., "you are guilty") though it would be difficult to affirm that they are not implicated: if the innocent is guilty who am I to deny it?

Conclusions

Jaspers, by discriminating between political, criminal, moral and metaphysical guilt, underlines that the latter is fundamental because it serves as a necessary condition, a *sine qua non*, for the others. Metaphysical guilt for Jaspers has a strong existential connotation and resembles the interpretation of guilt as a *boundary situation* in his earlier writings.

Metaphysical guilt is understood to be essential to human being, but Jaspers leaves unanswered the question of what happens if a feeling of metaphysical guilt does not consciously arise, or is not accepted, or is even denied and concealed. Inasmuch as guilt is what Jaspers considers a boundary situation, however, I believe we are correct to assume that in its absence a human being *fails* to face the truth about himself and about existence. So Jaspers' call to acknowledge guilt, to "feel guilty" (which means to take responsibility), is a matter of coming to terms with oneself, of going through an inner transformation, of answering before God. In other words, to conceal such truth about human existence is to not live a meaningful life.

Jaspers in his lectures on guilt was trying to present an alternative to the normative ethics which failed during Holocaust. Paradoxically, however, in a certain sense Jaspers attempt to reach his fellow Germans also failed. Not because his intentions were wrong, or that his discussion on guilt was not heard, but because it provided an excuse: the differentiation of moral, criminal, political and metaphysical guilt at the same time offered his German audience the possibility not to take any kind of responsibility because it would not have serious consequences.

For Levinas, on other hand, it would be impossible to talk about political or criminal guilt, or metaphysical guilt which is not also tied up with moral responsibility. Responsibility for the other is the precondition for all these 'others guilts', for guilt as such. Precondition here means that the subject is primarily responsible, even if he or she is not aware of, does not consciously or explicitly affirm such responsibility. Responsibility is the condition for the intelligibility of all actions: without it political or criminal guilt becomes just the legalistic play of circumstances, situations, rules and norms, and humans no better than things.

Levinas' approach, like Jaspers', goes beyond (or beneath) normativity. But unlike Jaspers, accountability matters because we are responsible even before any crime is committed. Guilt – as responsible selfhood – does not result merely from breaking a contract, say, or abrogating a law, but is the very condition of making or obeying a contract or law. Therefore, for Levinas it is "guiltless" responsibility, before crime, before disrespect, etc., objective, as it were, before any particular mishap or misbehavior. This or that deed is not the criterion of responsibility.

At the same time, seemingly paradoxically, subject is always found guilty. The unavoidable guilt as understood in Levinas's philosophy is tied to the attempt to be. But from the very beginning for Levinas it is not a question of the meaning or question of being but of questioning my right to be, asking if I do not in my being take the place of the other person, usurping the other person, if I do not murder by my very being. This explicitly is revealed by interpreting the guilt some survivors feel at having survived: to survive when others die seems like a failure in one's own ultimate responsibility. To be sure, it is not a rational guilt, nor even a necessary guilt, but nonetheless it arises from one's own infinite responsibility for the other person. For Jaspers acknowledgment of guilt opens the existential depth of the self, while for Levinas it is a suffering for the other, in the final account *dying for* the other is a radical substitution for another.

To acknowledge this guilt for Levinas means not only to take responsibility. Even more, it is just the beginning of responsibility since the more I do the more I am responsible. Responsibility constantly increases as my obligations for the other grow. To aid the other is to see more ways to aid the other, more ways in which the other is vulnerable. It is in this sense infinite: "Infinity" here means the infinite work, the unending, the always insufficient work which never can be finished. Such responsibility is therefore not limited to fixing the present but overflows the present, making us responsible for the past, certainly, wrongs still impinging upon us, even as far as a past which was never our present, and, perhaps most importantly, for the sake of the future, a future which lies beyond our own lifespan and which will never be ours, but toward which we can contribute improvements.

Levinas calls upon everyone's responsibility and makes everyone guilty by attempting to characterize the "humanity of the human" as responsible, the responsibility of each person, and I first of all.

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