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Colleagues with Conflicting Perspectives

Karl Barth and Karl Jaspers on Responsibility

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Abstract: What does it mean to be a responsible subject, and what kind of subject would such a responsible subject be? These are philosophical questions highly pertinent to such global and planetary challenges of our time as the climate crisis, but they were also important for the philosophical and theological discussion on the reconstruction after the Second World War and the threat of the nuclear bomb. In this essay, I approach these philosophical questions through a historical exchange between two of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century who were between 1948 and 1961 colleagues at the University of Basel: the philosopher Karl Jaspers and the theologian Karl Barth. Both were highly involved in the discussion of social and political issues of their time. Their starting points for their intellectual endeavors diverge, however: Jaspers departed from human experience, and Barth from the interruption of human experience through divine revelation. While Jaspers emphasized the universal dimension of this experience, Barth, for his part, accentuated the particular and concrete. The critical and crosswise comparison of their understanding of responsibility is constructive—precisely because of their conflicting perspectives—in the search for a more complex understanding of who and what a responsible subject might be that could take on challenges that are both particular and universal in scope.

Keywords: Guilt and responsibility; philosophy and theology; configuration of a responsible subject; global responsibility; loving struggle; exclusivism and relativism.

Barth, Jaspers, and the Question of Responsibility

It is a curious fact that two very influential European thinkers of the twentieth century were colleagues at the University of Basel between 1948 and 1961, namely Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) and Karl Barth (1886–1968), without their interaction drawing much attention in intellectual history.¹ Both of them lived and worked through turbulent times, and both

reflected intensely on those times; the Second World War and the question of responsibility became an existential as well as an intellectual challenge for both of them too. Jaspers was a German native, and lived in Germany during the Second World War, yet took up a position at the University of Basel in 1948, and eventually became a Swiss citizen; Barth was a Swiss native, educated in Germany, where he also spent his early years as a university professor, moving back to Switzerland and Basel due to of the political climate in 1935. Jaspers started out as a psychiatrist, however, gradually took up philosophy

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barths Lebenslauf: Nach seinen Briefen und autobiographischen Texten*, München, DE: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1975.

as his main interest and academic discipline; Barth was a committed Christian theologian all his life, writing one of the main works of theology in the twentieth Century as a pastor in a small village in Switzerland called Safenwil. Jaspers was friendly with Martin Heidegger in Germany, but their friendship went awry because of the latter's affinities with National Socialism; Barth was educated by the foremost German liberal theologians of his time yet was disappointed with respect to their pro-war stance in the First World War and transformed his theology (and his politics) accordingly. To critically compare what these two thinkers have to say about responsibility might be a constructive way for an inquiry into the complexity of the concept as such.

Barth and Jaspers were, of course, not unique in their being *in medias res* during their times; defining what it would mean to take responsibility posed surely a challenge to many of their contemporaries too. The literature on responsibility has meanwhile become extensive. The most well-known work in their tradition of Existenzphilosophie is Hans Jonas' *Das Prinzip Verantwortung*, published in 1979.² However, for the specific inquiry of the concept of responsibility I undertake here, Donna Haraway's work is important, especially her rendering of responsibility as response-ability, the ability to give a response to whatever circumstances humans find themselves in.³ While both Jonas and Haraway react to climate politics, in some respects their discussion of responsibility has surpassed both Barth and Jaspers' reaction to war politics.

Nonetheless, for a critical discussion of the concept of responsibility there are several reasons that make their comparison fruitful. First, their proximity in Basel for more than a decade needs mentioning. It led to some collegial exchange, although there are no traces to be found regarding the discussion or influence on the topic of responsibility. Second, their separate but related academic disciplines are important in this context; Jaspers was a philosopher with interest in theology, and Barth a

theologian with some interest in philosophy. Third, the fact that philosophy and theology are usually treated as being separate impacts the discussion, for it means that there is a theological deficit owing to a secularistic prejudice in much intellectual history; Barth was influential in broader academic and intellectual circles than just his own discipline to an extent that is usually neglected in today's accounts of Barth, so including him in a conceptual-historical discussion of the idea of responsibility thus adds a theological aspect to scholarship that is often overlooked. To this point, Rudy Koshar addresses the question why Barth is missing in intellectual history.⁴ Fourth and finally, and most importantly, such a comparison can, potentially, allow one to obtain complex perspectives in this inquiry of two aspects of the concept of responsibility that I wish to pursue here.

Given their diverging starting point for their intellectual endeavors, where Jaspers took his departure from human experience and Barth from the interruption of human experience by divine revelation, it is fruitful to critically and crosswise question their understanding of responsibility. Who is the responsible subject and what kind of human being would it be – and did Barth and Jaspers have any mutual exchange on questions related to the concept of responsibility, despite their conflicting perspectives?

In this short essay, I explore the concept of responsibility in Barth and Jaspers, especially two different but related aspects of it, namely, it is being examined what the extent of responsibility in general is and what kind of subjectivity it presupposes. Beginning with the latter, the focus on subjectivity concerns the question of what kind of character traits a human being must have in order to be responsible. This should not, however, be taken as an interest in a human being who is isolated from all relations to other beings or things, that is, from the cultural, natural, and political environment. The aspect of subjectivity I am interested in exploring in Barth's and Jaspers' concepts of responsibility is what one could call the *Weltbeziehung* of the human being, that is, one's relation to the world. While the term has recently

² Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, transl. Hans Jonas and David Herr, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

³ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

⁴ Rudy Koshar, "Where is Karl Barth in Modern European History?," *Modern Intellectual History* 5/2 (August 2008), 333–362.

been made popular by Hartmut Rosa,⁵ he is not the first to bring attention to it, as the concept can be traced back at least to Friedrich Schleiermacher. Essentially, one's relationship to the world concerns how one experiences the world and takes a position toward it. Or, to speak with Haraway mentioned above, it concerns a subject's response-ability, how a subject responds to the circumstances that one always already is a part of. In other words, the kind of subjectivity that I am interested in here is a relational one. How one comprehends one's relation to the world determines the way one constructs responsibility and *vice versa*. Open questions regarding this aspect remain, such as, what significant relations to the world would a responsible human being stand according to Barth and Jaspers, and how are these relationships configured together among humans and their environment? Regarding my other aspect, the question is what the extent of responsibility could be said to be for a relational subject. If the human being acts relational, it means that one is situated, but what would it mean to speak of one's global or universal responsibility? These questions, due to their scope, will be answered tentatively, in the form of suggestions for further investigation.

This exploration of responsibility in Barth and Jaspers proceeds as a critical comparison between the two, it is a comparison with the primary intention of inquiring into the complexity of the concept as such and only secondarily to come to any conclusion about the relation between Barth and Jaspers or any possible influence between the two. Overall, it is a limited comparison, but nevertheless a critical comparison. Inspired by Jaspers' concept of "loving struggle," that is, the notion that existential communication is a struggle with the other and a struggle with oneself as well as a common struggle toward truth.⁶ I hope that such a comparison, where I let the two thinkers critically illuminate each other through mutual questioning, can help me answer the general question of what kind of subjectivity responsibility presupposes. Even if my primary aim, thus, is to discuss the concept of responsibility as such, I am also

interested in the historical question of the relationship between the two in order to find a clue as to how they formulated this configuration.

Barth and Jaspers, and the Configuration of Responsibility

How did they interact? In 1949, Barth and Jaspers both participated in the conference *Rencontres Internationales de Genève* for ten days of public discussion on the theme of finding a new humanism in the wake of the Second World War.⁷ They corresponded by letter and also polemicized against each other in their academic works. This is an interesting exchange in itself, yet I will limit myself here to noting it as background for what they have to say about responsibility. Suffice it to say, then, that Jaspers accuses Barth of being exclusivist, whereas Barth counters with suggesting that Jaspers' position is an absolutistic relativism. None of them agrees with the other's characterization, of course, and my contention is that most of the time they were talking past each other. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in how they construe the configuration of a responsible subject, differences that warrant a fuller interpretation but that will be summarized here.

One way of approaching their philosophical differences is through their distinct accounts of transcendence. When Barth, the theologian, speaks of transcendence, he speaks of God, which he regards as a genuine counterpart to humanity, a counterpart that is an Other, a limit to anything human. God, however, is not something one experiences in an ineffable beyond for Barth, but paradigmatically through the person of Jesus Christ, who is witnessed by the church, especially through its preaching, but also through its life. God is, then, not approached by the Christian through taking leave of the ordinary and of the material things of everyday life. On the contrary, it is in the midst of things that the relationship to God is established, and this occurs not primarily through human experience or yearning for the eternal, but through God's initiative. God's

⁵ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*, transl. James C. Wagner, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press 2019, p. 7.

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.

⁷ Karl Barth, "L'actualité du message chrétien," pp. 37-47, and Karl Jaspers, "Conditions et possibilités d'un nouvel humanisme," pp. 181-209 in *Pour un nouvel humanisme: Textes des conférences et des entretiens organisés par les Rencontres Internationales de Genève, Histoire et société d'aujourd'hui*, Neuchâtel, CH: Éditions de la Baconnière, 1949.

address to human beings, not just as individuals but as communities, is primary, and humanity's response follows this address. In more philosophical terms, universality (God) is not something one gets to know beyond particularity (the finite condition of human existence), but through this particularity. For human beings, this means that receptivity is prior to activity and that the finite is where humans meet the infinite, if at all. Barth's configuration of human subjectivity is decidedly other-related.

For Jaspers, the accent falls differently. Jaspers is sometimes happy to speak of God, especially in his *Der philosophische Glaube* from 1948. Still, he is more comfortable using the more neutral term "transcendence," for instance, in his *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* from 1962. His concern is that the cipher "God" will be taken both literally and too intimately associated with a particular religion.⁸ His understanding of this transcendence, then, is different from Barth's. Thus, Jaspers suggests that all mythic language, such as the one of God as a counterpart, should be regarded as ciphers that are not possible to pin down to a literal meaning (PGO 268). Jaspers references the Mosaic injunction against idolatry from Leviticus 19:4 against making an idol of God, suggesting that any positive proposition of God, any statement about God not understood as a cipher, is an act of blasphemy, as it turns God into an object (PGO 476). This is why he accuses Barth of idolatry: on the grounds of Barth's claim that God can be a counterpart to human beings. Jaspers' concern is that any fixation of a particular standpoint or celebration of a particular language will eventually result in intolerance towards the other. In his configuration of the particular and the universal, his philosophical aspiration is always to go beyond the literal use of language, the merely embodied, specific institutions, toward an unattainable universality.

Against the backdrop of this admittedly too short summary of Barth's and Jaspers' position, one can perhaps understand their mutual accusations concerning Jaspers' absolutistic relativism versus Barth's exclusivism. One should, however, avoid too simplistic ascriptions of such epithets. The more careful examination must wait until another

occasion, yet what is interesting here for the theme of responsibility is the different understandings of the configuration of a responsible subject that one finds in them. Whereas human existence, according to Jaspers, is signified by transcending, the subject, according to Barth, is always already transcended. In other words, Jaspers puts more of an emphasis on human agency, whereas for Barth, human subjectivity is characterized by passivity (or rather mediopassivity). Jaspers recognizes the inevitability of human embodiment in all its aspects but strives to transcend it toward a global responsibility, whereas for Barth, theological reasons require that finite embodiment be not merely inevitable but actually a condition for human responsibility even in its global dimensions. Or so I suggest in my presentation, which follows their more explicit discussion of responsibility.

Responsibility

If one wants to learn what Barth and Jaspers have to say about responsibility, the obvious means to turn to are two books by Jaspers, namely *Die Schuldfrage* from 1946 and *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* from 1957, and one book by Barth entitled *Eine Schweizer Stimme: 1938-1945* from 1945. These are very different types of sources, two published books by Jaspers stand in contrast to several shorter texts by Barth, some of which were intended for publication, some not. Nevertheless, there are several reasons for selecting these materials for my comparison. To begin with, each of them is related to specific historical events, namely the Second World War in the case of the books *Die Schuldfrage* and *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, and the Nuclear Bomb crisis of the 1950s with regard to publishing *Die Atombombe*. Given that they are so significant to Jaspers' and Barth's existential concerns, one may further assume that their theoretical formulations take one straight to the heart of the matter of how both of them imagine the configuration of a responsible subject. Finally, the fact that they actually do deliver on this promise, I hope to show through careful exegesis of these texts as well as through reading them against the broader horizons of their philosophies, as presented in the preceding sections.

Die Schuldfrage, to begin with Jaspers, is the published version of lectures Jaspers held once reinstated as a professor in Heidelberg just after the end of the war in 1945/1946, before he moved

⁸ Karl Jaspers, "Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung," in *Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe, Band I/13*, ed. Bernd Weidmann, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2016, pp. 95-517, here p. 248. [Henceforth cited as PGO]

to Basel in 1948. The reception of his lectures and his book in Germany was not always appreciative. And Jaspers' message here was a stark summons to the German people (including himself, of course) of the need to "find a spiritual common ground with each other" after the Second World War.⁹ According to Jaspers, the German people were divided, and securing a common future required finding common ground. The twelve years of the National Socialist regime, which had just passed at the time, had, due to public propaganda, suppressed free speech and public debate. The vast differences between the inner, implicit, and the public, more explicit attitudes toward the regime as well as what Jaspers himself calls the liberation by the occupying powers, resulted in the fragmentation of society and the loss of any common ground (SF 13). To move toward a common future, he found it imperative to address the question of guilt for what had happened during the Second World War; hence, he composed *Die Schuldfrage*. The calling of philosophy as well as theology is "to shed light on how acute the question of guilt is" (SF 17). This is what Jaspers wants to do in his lectures and consequently in his book.

For Jaspers, the question of responsibility, including guilt, is a central existential question for all human beings. Without coming to terms with it, there is no way one can live up to the dignity of human existence. For a defeated Germany that had, willingly or not, maintained an oppressive and murderous government for twelve years, the way forward must lead through facing up to what the fascist nation state and its citizens have caused and their responsibility for what has happened. This is an individual responsibility, not just a political one.

Jaspers distinguishes between four different concepts (or, perhaps more accurately, aspects) of guilt: criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical, all of which are interrelated. Even metaphysical guilt, which is a consequence of the co-responsibility of all human beings for all that is not right or righteous in the world, is of importance. When I am not doing what I can to prevent wrongdoing in the circumstances in which I find myself, I am guilty before the ultimate instance, God (SF 20). Criminal guilt is before the law; political guilt is before the power of the state; moral

guilt before one's own conscience as well as one's fellow human beings; yet without some metaphysical sense of guilt, the other three dimensions would be insubstantial (*gegenstandslos*) (SF 21). Jaspers' concept of God is, as noted before, neither religious nor theological in the Christian sense and could perhaps be interpreted as an ultimate instance before which human beings become what they are, but which has neither worldly institution nor office. This ultimate instance relates to each person individually.

In the Preface, Jaspers begins with the question of fragmentation and what is needed for the German people to come together and form a common future; clearly, the answer for Jaspers lies in the spiritual transformation of the individual. Although he reasons as a philosopher, he borrows language from religious traditions in speaking of conversion or of purification. Yet it is not just a question of terminology however, but of establishing a whole paradigm for spiritual transformation: insight, confession, penance, and reorientation. This paradigm is not confessionally intended and is interpreted in an individualistic manner. Even if an exchange with others is possible, this does not mean that someone can judge others' moral or metaphysical guilt. In his 1962 Epilogue he argues that such spiritual transformation is nevertheless imperative for any successful national transformation. Jaspers writes:

Without the path of purification stemming from the profundity of the awareness of guilt, no truth can be realized for the Germans. [SF 89]

Purification must take political form in reparation or atonement (*Wiedergutmachung*), both in terms of emergency aid and recompensation, yet it is above all a matter of inner conversion. Without such purification, no political freedom is possible, according to Jaspers. The reason is that the consciousness of guilt and the subsequent purification are the prerequisites of political liberty. How far one has come on the way to purification is shown in the way one reacts toward another's moral reproaches: with endurance or counterattack. Jaspers' suggestion inspires hope:

In the face of total demise, the pure soul can truly live in the tension of working tirelessly in the world for the possible. [SF 89]

A quick glance at Jaspers' *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, published a decade later, can

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage: Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands*, München, DE: Piper 2020, p. 8. [All translations are mine. Henceforth cited as SF]

help one confirm his position regarding the question of responsibility. Here, the question becomes global, for, as he states in the Introduction, the issue—the total destruction of life on earth—is global.¹⁰ The question that the atomic bomb and the threat of annihilation pose to all of humankind is not just a separate issue alongside many others, but rather the existential question of our future as humanity as such. The answer, however, is recognizable from *Die Schuldfrage*, namely the urgent need for solutions that go beyond the political (AZM 48), the concern for the transformation of one's way of thinking away from being a mere individual (AZM 49), and the need for conversion (*Umkehr*) to survive as humanity.

Without conversion, human life is lost. If the human being wants to continue living, he must change. [AZM 49]

The path goes through the conversion of individual human beings. [AZM 323]

The philosopher is there to help us human beings to achieve just that.

Die Atombombe is a large and broad book that covers various topics. Yet, essentially, Jaspers' conclusions are similar to those he offers in *Die Schuldfrage*: human beings require a transformation for which they are individually accountable. It is a precondition for novel political action that assumes responsibility for the precarious global situation. Philosophy, in the sense of understanding (*Verstand*) rather than reason (*Vernunft*), is there to aid one through knowledge of the given situation, to help one with what one needs to do, but also to initiate the transformation and enlighten one about the transcendent ground for hope. The subjectivity expressed by Jaspers is that of an individual human being, responsible in both thought and action (AZM 26, 457). As in *Die Schuldfrage*, Jaspers emphasizes the responsibility of the individual and expresses a suspicion against all instances that make some kind of claim of mediating between the particular and the universal, whether made by nation-states, political parties, or religious communities. The one and only authentic community recognized

by Jaspers and to which all other significant, yet relative communities must submit is the community of those led by understanding. But such a community must remain an invisible church, whose actual presence can never be established (AZM 310). Here, one can discern some of the traits of Jaspers' philosophy that I have presented in the previous section: his aspiration to always go beyond the literal, the merely embodied, the particular, and to advance toward universality.

Let me now turn to Barth. The book by Barth that will be my case in point for this comparison, *Eine Schweizer Stimme*, is of a different character than both of the above-mentioned Jaspers' books. It is a collection of letters, talks, and essays from 1938 to 1945, of various lengths. All of them were collected and published in 1945, just after the end of the Second World War. Barth sought to provide an account of what he had said and what he had not said during the Second World War, for the sake of the renewal of the Protestant church in Germany.

It might be important, initially, to be precise about in what capacity Barth says he expresses himself in this collection. He is quite clear that, even when he speaks about the Christian church, he does not do this with any religious authority, nor on behalf of Switzerland with any political authority, but only with the authority of a university professor in theology who is also a citizen of Switzerland. In other words, Barth locates his position of enunciation with the help of distinctions between different institutions, namely, the reformed Christian community, the Swiss nation-state, and the university, all of which are important to him but in different ways. To each institution belongs another kind of responsibility, and what anyone can do responsibly, as, for instance, the bearer of an ecclesiastical office, differs from the responsibility the same person might have as a university teacher. Barth was at the time already a well-known theologian throughout the world, both for his theology and for his critical stance toward the National Socialist regime in Germany. As various foreign interlocutors sought his opinion, he took care not to overstep his official role.

Barth repeatedly emphasizes that one's responsibility is bound to the place where one finds oneself situated. If, on the one hand, Barth's main

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1960, p. 17. [All translations are mine. Henceforth cited as AZM]

issue is Christianity,

above which there is no higher authority and for which there are no national borders...his responsibility, on the other hand, is still for Christianity...not just in any place, but in the particular Swiss space.¹¹

This does not mean that he has no responsibility for global Christianity; rather, this responsibility is contextually bound and mediated through Christianity in Switzerland. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a Swiss version of Christianity; instead, there is only the specific instance of Christianity in Switzerland. And, further, Christianity in Switzerland stands in critical solidarity to Switzerland as a country but is not a function of it; this is imperative for Barth, as he has experience of the opposite through the German Christians movement that was active between 1933 and 1945 and propagated that church and state are distinguished and that Christians owe their fundamental loyalty and debt, not to the church as an institution but to Jesus Christ. Finally, Barth's voice counts as merely one Swiss voice among others. By specifying in what capacity and from what place he speaks, Barth carefully delineates how he wants to be heard but also, at least implicitly, how he regards responsible subjectivity.

A way to characterize Barth's political and theological stance during the Second World War is that he takes care to draw what he considers to be the proper distinctions. The church cannot and should not become a state, nor should the state become a church, even though church and state, as collective bodies, cannot and should not be disconnected. He is also careful to draw the proper distinctions concerning the issue in which capacity he expresses himself regarding these matters. Appropriate distinctions go together with adequate responsibility. In a letter to France from 1939, he discusses Swiss neutrality and its significance for the rest of Europe; such neutrality is not a form of indifference to the fate of Europe, but "the particular form of our European responsibility" (SS 109). As can be seen from his letters and talks, Barth is deeply concerned with a free and just Europe, yet he nevertheless believes that all people must take

responsibility for holding their own embeddedness (SS 125). To do that, which is our part (*das Unsrige*), is central to Barth's understanding of responsibility, as is the sensibility for both the particular temporal and spatial situation. In other places, he insists that the war against Germany is righteous; whether to uphold neutrality or actively fight is a matter of judgment about the situation as a whole, including not merely regarding what happens but also one's location.

What is interesting about the above quote about European responsibility, for my purposes here, is how Barth does not shy away from the question of a more extensive responsibility, one that goes beyond individual, national, or religious borders, yet underscores that this responsibility always takes a particular and concrete—sometimes even institutional—form. Being Swiss does not absolve him of European or even global responsibility, but, as a finite human being, his broader responsibility must necessarily take a particular form, conditioned by where he finds himself situated. As a Swiss citizen, he assumed political responsibility, for instance by joining the Home Guard. He holds back from pronouncing what citizens of other nation-states should do (SS 155-6). This is not to suggest that Barth thinks that all political responsibility must take the form of allegiance to a nation-state, nor that any international collaboration is out of the question. On the contrary, it is a conviction of his that is informed by his theology that as a finite being, a human person, whether this person is a Christian or not, cannot short-circuit access to universality. Responsibility belongs to the actually existing institution—church, state, university—not to some invisible abstraction. This substantiates the interpretation I made of Barth's theology in the previous section: universality is not to be sought beyond the finite conditions of human existence, but through this particularity, as human subjectivity is other-related.

Distinctions between the local and concrete and the global and more abstract are important for Barth, but for him, distinctions do not mean disconnectedness. In 1957, he reacted against the accusation from political leaders supported by the media that the so-called Göttingen Manifesto,¹² a declaration of eighteen leading nuclear scientists

¹¹ Karl Barth, *Eine Schweizer Stimme: 1938–1945*, Zürich, CH: Theologischer Verlag 1985, p. 8. [All translations are mine. Henceforth cited as SS]

¹² <https://www.uni-goettingen.de/en/54320.html>.

from West Germany who warn about the nuclear bomb, was an allegedly "unauthorized interference" in an area where only they had authority.¹³ If the politicians would not listen, then it falls to those such as himself who had the public ear to appeal to the public, encouraging them to take this matter into their own hands and put pressure on their government and the media. Whether they belong to the West or to the East, they should make it clear that

they neither want to exterminate nor be exterminated, not in defense of the "free world," not in defense of socialism. [EL 262]

The German title, *Es geht ums Leben!* clearly captures the message: Life itself is at stake! Here, Barth's appeal to take responsibility is directed toward humanity as a collective, beyond nation-states as well as to confessions. This is, with a few earlier exceptions, rather atypical for him. Perhaps Barth, too, was influenced by the heightened awareness among academics and intellectuals of the importance of internationalism and global unity in the face of the threat of nuclear war. Despite his emphasis on the concreteness of responsibility, it has indeed, for Barth, an irreducibly global dimension too.

Critical Comparison as a Conclusion

What, then, can one learn from Barth and Jaspers, two colleagues with conflicting perspectives that sometimes are involved in a loving struggle and on other occasions discuss similar questions about responsibility? What do they have to say about the configuration of the responsible subject and the extent of responsibility to be assumed? I shall leave their obviously more nuanced accounts behind for the sake of making the differences clearer. The reason for doing this is, of course, to explore whether such a critical comparison might shed light on responsibility more generally, especially on the complexity of the phenomenon and the concept.

To begin with, they differ in how they perceive the configuration of the subject and its relation to the world. For Barth, the subject is finite in that it stands in relation to an other that Barth calls a genuine counterpart or true other, that is an absolute

limit for human beings. The subject's responsibility, which is, for Barth, the more important concept, rather than debt or guilt, is the ability to give a response to this genuine counterpart. In relation to this genuine counterpart, that is, God, or to fellow human beings, the subject is always already situated, which has consequences for how responsibility works out in concrete matters. Even if, for Barth, the relation to God is necessarily a transcendence toward universality, this universality is mediated through concrete, worldly, historically given social institutions, such as the church, the university, and the state. This became clear in how he perceived his own practice of responsibility in his letters and talks during the Second World War.

Thus, according to Barth transcendence is always mediated through immanence, which, for him, means that responsibility, even if universal in scope, always must pass through the local, the particular, and the situated. Responsible action is contextually bound and shaped by the practice of those institutions humans unavoidably inhabit and are a part of. This does not mean, for Barth, any uncritical allegiance to those particular institutions one belongs to. Although Barth recognized his duty as a Swiss citizen, he was no nationalist. Quite to the contrary: against the current of his German teachers and colleagues before the Second World War, he repeatedly and publicly criticized nationalism, both on the left and on the right. But even if the particular is never absolute—neither the church nor the state can raise such a claim—there is no shortcut, no way around the mediation of both righteousness and justice through these or other institutions.

Taking responsibility, therefore, means examining how responsibility is shaped by those institutions one is a part of, even if this entails a critical solidarity in the form of active resistance. The individual subject does indeed have a responsibility of one's own, yet that individual responsibility is mediated through the social institutions, even if it can stand in contrast to them (that is, the possibility of critical solidarity). This is in line with his Christian doctrine of incarnation, which means, philosophically interpreted, that if God becomes known through Jesus Christ, the Word that became flesh, then there is no way for human beings to bypass their own situatedness, even in their answerability to transcendence. Barth's anthropology—anthropology here understood as the *Weltbeziehung* of the subject,

¹³ Karl Barth, "Es geht ums Leben!" *Stimme der Gemeinde* 9/9 (1 May 1957) 262, <https://kba.karl-barth.ch/objects/6046>. [All translations are mine. Henceforth cited as EL]

its relation to the world—is relational through and through, and so is his concept of responsibility. His subject is constituted through its relationship with God, with other human beings, and with itself—notably, however, with regard to later environmental concerns, less so with non-human nature.

Compared with Barth, Jaspers' anthropology seems to be more abstract and even individualistic. It is, as Jaspers emphatically states, the individual who stands before God as the ultimate horizon in the metaphysical dimension of debt. Unlike Barth, who wants to draw distinctions between different concrete embodiments of responsibility, for Jaspers this fourth and final dimension is a matter of responsibility of each and all human beings. This collective of all human beings has no embodiment other than the totality of all human beings as such; it is an invisible church. When Jaspers speaks about transcendence and the responsibility before God, he perceives God as an ultimate horizon, not necessarily as a counterpart that limits the striving (the aspirations or the hubris) of human beings. Jaspers also emphasizes that all significant change occurs through the individual. Even when the task is the renewal of the German people, it remains a matter of the individual's inner conversion.

This hesitation of Jaspers to let responsibility be defined in practice by the relations that an individual happens to find oneself in is both a strength and a weakness. The strength of this position is found in the refusal to identify an individual with any of its given social relations; thus, responsibility always aims at the universal and cannot be confined by the particular. Yet this upside comes at a cost: the task of responsibility becomes infinite, which is not primarily a psychological problem for the individual, but a practical problem if responsibility is to be an embodied answerability to the present circumstances one finds oneself in, as well as a political issue, provided that collective action and responsibility are needed. The demarcations Barth draws between different responsibilities depending on where one finds oneself are, at least in principle, more concrete. This difference between Barth and Jaspers depends, or so I have argued, on a different configuration of subjectivity and the relation to the world. For Barth, transcendence is mediated through immanence, whereas for Jaspers, transcendence is a transcendence of immanence. Jaspers seems to lack

what Barth, the theologian, would call a doctrine of incarnation, that is, an account of how responsibility takes social flesh.

Talking about responsibility and the configuration of its subject in a responsible way is, of course, not easy. A reason for turning to Barth and Jaspers to address this issue is that their conflicting perspectives might help one think and discuss responsibility more adequately, certainly going further than they did. Such an endeavor would be an engagement in what Jaspers has helpfully named a loving struggle. This was also what occurred between them on a personal level, as reflected in their correspondence. Let me conclude with a brief reflection on this correspondence as a loving struggle put into practice.

As mentioned above, Jaspers worried that Barth's insistence on distinctions would eventually lead to "communication breakdown, intolerance, and war," so he wrote him a letter.¹⁴ Barth had two days earlier accused Jaspers of an absolutistic relativism on grounds of his interpretation of Christianity as a phenomenon among other phenomena in a general Pantheon.¹⁵ Their correspondence is an example as good as any of what it means concretely to be responsible—to be accountable for what one has written, and to be able to give a response to objections. It is, in practice, neither an example of a communication breakdown nor of an absolutistic relativism on either side, but a concrete example of what Jaspers means by loving struggle, namely,

a joint fight against oneself and the other, but solely for truth.¹⁶

Consequently, it is a struggle with and against a genuine counterpart that can be witnessed. These are actual exchanges between colleagues with conflicting perspectives who both recognize that engaging in communication with the other, as a kind of response-ability, must not cease.

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers an Karl Barth, 18 September 1949, Karl Barth-Archiv Basel, KBA 9125.354, <https://kba.karl-barth.ch/objects/50849>.

¹⁵ Karl Barth an Karl Jaspers, 16 September 1949, Karl Barth-Archiv Basel, KBA 9249.194, <https://kba.karl-barth.ch/objects/50843>.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume 2*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1970, p. 60.