



Pascal Bruckner – Guilt in Western Consciousness With Perspectives from Karl Jaspers and Viktor Frankl

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Abstract: This essay investigates Pascal Bruckner's thesis that Anglo-Europeans suffer from a guilt consciousness based on the West's history of exploitation, aggression, and oppression. It is explained that while some of his ideas have merit, he over-generalizes his criticisms of modern and postmodern philosophies, particularly existentialism. In support of this observation, the author describes Karl Jaspers' and Viktor Frankl's appraisal of the concept of collective guilt. There is a brief description of the relevance of the topic to the practice of existential psychology.

Keywords: Bruckner, Pascal; guilt; guilt consciousness; existentialism; existential analysis; Frankl, Viktor; Jaspers, Karl.

From existentialism to deconstructionism, all of modern thought can be reduced to a mechanical denunciation of the West, emphasizing the latter's hypocrisy, violence, and abomination.¹

In 2010, Pascal Bruckner's work, *The Tyranny of Guilt*, was published in English. In this essay Bruckner argues

that Western² social and political consciousness is plagued by self-imposed, pathological guilt resulting from Europe's history of enslavement, imperialism, racism, and exploitation of much of the world. This guilt is purportedly formulated and disseminated by European intellectuals who negate the essential values of progressive democracy and fail to recognize the serious threats to a free society that exist in the world today. He describes a double-standard wherein the dominant culture is perceived as shameful while all other groups are considered less culpable when engaging in forms of oppression and violence because these behaviors are perceived as reactive to poverty and exploitation, conditions attributed to Western oppression and interference. Bruckner asserts that there is a self-loathing that pervades Western consciousness, which subtly disempowers the rest

¹ Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010, p. 2. [Henceforth cited as *TG*] Bruckner is considered the most well-known of the French *Nouveaux Philosophes* (new philosophers). This group of intellectuals includes Bernard-Henri Levi, Alan Finkielkraut, Andre Glucksmann, and several others who share a belief that Western civilization is dominated by oppressive systems of thought. Before becoming a writer, Bruckner studied philosophy under the French structuralist Roland Barthes. Throughout his career, he has written and published several essays and works of fiction, many of which are available in English. He considers Nietzsche a major inspiration and his essays tend to reflect this influence by conveying a rhetorical, invective, polemical style.

² By "West" or "Western" Bruckner generally refers to Anglo-European civilization.

of the world by fatalistically externalizing blame, thereby discouraging expectations for responsibility and self-determination. He is critical of the thesis that Western nations are solely and perpetually responsible for global problems and argues that this is a form of paternalism insofar as the non-Western world is considered too incompetent to solve their own problems and incapable of acting responsibly; consequently, the West, like a parent, views itself as superior enough to correct the problems of the rest of the world. This alleged paternalism and arrogance is assimilated and imputed to certain minority groups that are perceived as incapable of forging their own destinies. Consistent with the *idée fixe*, Bruckner criticizes the excesses of political correctness, multiculturalism, and political philosophies that supposedly perpetuate a guilt consciousness and aggrandize Anglo-Eurocentric political and cultural hegemony.

Bruckner argues that this perpetual guilt has its origins in the Christian doctrine of original sin, but in a secular culture, guilt is no longer associated with church doctrines and instead is a psychological effect of the West's history of oppression and exploitation in its various manifestations, including current military and economic activities. He alleges that Western guilt results in a form of social and intellectual self-criticism that paradoxically serves as a force of re-oppression. Euro-American self-hatred is actually self-glorification: the agent of problems is also the messiah of remedies. Other nations are not as able to face the global challenges of today; therefore, it falls to Europe and America to be the cure for the very sicknesses they have caused. Western guilt appears to be a form of masochism, but in actuality is reversed sadism wherein the progressive and so-called civilized national powers voluntarily submit to self-imposed psychological punishment. The so-called French ailment, in particular, is "a unique combination of arrogance and self-hatred" (TG 156). Thus European guilt not only harms from within, it also perpetuates the very paternalism that has always underlain the forces of European oppression. Moreover, when Europe does not wish to intervene in the world, it justifies its passivity by recalling historical errors and criticizing America as a source of global interference.

Following this assumption, Bruckner argues that Third World nations and minority peoples are considered exempt from criticism and guilt because they have been the victims of Anglo-European tyranny. He asserts that endlessly atoning for the sins of the past essentially emasculates and infantilizes the victims of

history: while Europeans and Americans are considered perpetually culpable, the rest of the world is considered innocent on a moral and historical level. Bruckner states that this is condescending in that "innocence is the lot of children, but also that of idiots and slaves" and, "A people that is never held accountable for its acts has lost all qualities that make it possible to be an equal" (TG 42). The purported double standard is obvious: when the West harms, it is responsible; when others harm, they are not responsible. Bruckner points out that this world-view sometimes takes extreme forms as it did in the aftermath of the destruction of the World Trade Center in 2001, which "the cream of European intelligentsia" viewed as "ruthless punishment" and the "execution of immanent justice" for the wrongs committed by the United States (TG 14). He notes the ease with which Christianity is criticized and even mocked in Europe, while the governmental authorities quickly crush any anti-Islamic sentiments, even to the point of curtailing free speech. The excesses of tolerance and multiculturalism include differing legal standards for minorities, separate beaches for Muslims, and a tolerance for domestic violence if it is culturally based.³ He considers these forms of separation as an erosion of the Enlightenment's values of equality and progress.

Furthermore, Bruckner has criticized existentialism by name as being one of the many modern philosophies that have denounced the West by rejecting the values of the Enlightenment. Liberty, emancipation from authority, the primacy of reason, anti-imperialism, and free thought are described as Western values that have been eroded by philosophies based in relativism and multiculturalism that are in effect an attempt to disown the highest values and ideals of Western civilization. This reportedly developed as the West has grown to loathe and hate itself because of the evils it has created. Thus it has become its own enemy, playing down its accomplishments and surrendering to defeatism. The modern European is not proud, but astonishingly embarrassed by continental achievements. Multiculturalism allegedly fills this

³ Pascal Bruckner, "Fundamentalismus der Aufklärung oder Rassismus der Antirassisten?" in *Perlentaucher*, 24 January 2007 (<http://www.perlentaucher.de/essay/fundamentalismus-der-aufklaerung-oder-rassismus-der-antirassisten.html>), translated as "Enlightened Fundamentalism or Racism of the Antiracists?" (<http://www.signandsight.com/features/1146.html>) last accessed 5-9-2013. [Henceforth cited as *EFR*]

void by downplaying Western accomplishments and portraying Anglo-Euro influences as inherently oppressive.

After Heidegger, a whole run of thinkers from Gadamer to Derrida have contested the claims of the Enlightenment to embody a new age of self-conscious history. On the contrary, they say, all the evils of our epoch were spawned by this philosophical and literary episode: capitalism, colonialism, totalitarianism. For them, criticism of prejudices is nothing but a prejudice itself, proving that humanity is incapable of self-reflection. [EFR §8]

The Claim of Post-Guilt Multiculturalism and Victim Identity

Multiculturalism, according to Bruckner, is superficially an attempt to protect women and minorities, but in reality it is a "legal apartheid" that increases inequality and victimization in society by discouraging integration, oppressing individual liberties with legal double standards, and fostering hatred of conventional Anglo-European culture (EFR §22, TG 140-54). These phenomena, he claims, represent an erosion of the Enlightenment values of equality and democracy. According to Bruckner, multiculturalism is a product of twentieth century relativism which "demands that we see our values simply as the beliefs of the particular tribe we call the West" (EFR §13). However, "The Enlightenment belongs to the entire human race, not just to a few privileged individuals in Europe or North America who have taken it upon themselves to kick it to bits like spoiled brats, to prevent others from having a go" (EFR §22).

In some of his other writings, Bruckner expands his criticism of multiculturalism to argue that as it becomes the norm to view oneself as oppressed, societal values devolve into a nearly a complete culture of victimhood. This has occurred, he argues, because no one is immune from finding some external reason to attribute their problems to as a source of blame. Women claim oppression from men; criminals blame their crimes on abusive childhoods, insanity, or genetics; others claim poverty or some minority status, such as homosexuality, as reasons for oppression.⁴ The effective corollary to this is that anything reminiscent of the masculine,

strong, and Caucasian is viewed as destructive and evil. It is now considered desirable to claim the identity of the victim and the sufferer.

Such is the message of modernity: you are all disinherited and have the right to cry over your fortune. You survived your birth, your puberty, you survived that veil of tears we call existence.... The victim market is open to all, provided that you can display a beautiful open wound; and the supreme dream is to become a martyr without having suffered anything but the misfortune of having been born. [TI 149]

Guilt as a Guise for Power Disempowering the Victims of History

Bruckner argues that the West's self-denigration is really a disguised form of self-glorification and aggrandizement of power. Only the West can be evil; the rest of the world acts from ignorance or justifiable anger against oppression. The belief that the West is responsible for historical crimes, but the rest of the world innocent, is a form of arrogance that infantilizes the rest of the world. Like a wise parent, the West is viewed a responsible and knowledgeable; like a child, most developing and third world peoples are viewed as not responsible and unable to autonomously act to help themselves. Bruckner cites as evidence several contemporary events. Most prominently, when Arab terrorists killed innocents in the September 11th attack on New York, many Western intellectuals were sympathetic or even adulatory and assumed the attitude that the "Americans deserved what they got" (TG 14). Hypocritically, Western nations are condemned regardless of their action or inaction. When the West acts, it is condemned for not doing it right or not doing enough, as with Iraq or Palestine, but the West is also condemned for inaction, as with the Rwandan genocide or Russian bullying of Moldavia and Georgia (TG 14). Thus the West can do no right; outside nations and peoples can do no wrong.

It is clear that if tomorrow terrorists should blow up the Parisian Metro, topple the Eifel Tower, or destroy Notre Dame, we would hear the same argument. Sensitive people on both the left and right would urge us to blame ourselves: we have been attacked, so we are guilty, whereas our attackers are in reality poor wretches protesting against our insolent wealth, our way of life, our predatory economy. [TG 17-8]

He argues that there is a fixation upon intro-

⁴ Pascal Bruckner, *The Temptation of Innocence: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, New York: Algora Publishing 2000, pp. 126-40. [Henceforth cited as TI]

punitive self-critique and guilt in the West that is excessive and self-defeating in that it ignores the fact that while Europe has given birth to monsters it has also destroyed these monsters. Slavery was followed by the abolition of slavery; feudalism gave way to democracy; the Enlightenment came out of religious oppression; wars have given way to anti-authoritarianism; nationalisms evolved into the unity of Europe. While Europe, especially, has caused many global problems, its contributory good has been indispensable.

Europe, like a jailer who throws you into prison and slips you the keys to your cell, brought into the world both despotism and liberty. It sent soldiers, merchants, and missionaries to subjugate and exploit distant lands, but it also invented an anthropology that provides a way of seeing oneself from the other's point of view, of seeing the other in oneself, and oneself in the other—in short, of separating oneself from what is near in order to come closer to that from which one is separated. [TG 29]

According to Bruckner, as a consequence of the anti-Occidental currents in social, political, and academic spheres, the West has abandoned the values of the Enlightenment. True equality, individual freedom, and progressive democratic values have been eroded by intellectuals and politicians whose guilt consciousness stems from a Western history characterized by wars, economic exploitation, imperialism, fascism, and the oppression of other peoples. Most modern and postmodern philosophies, including existentialism, allegedly emphasize a skepticism about Western values that has led to defeatism and nihilism, further weakening the highest values of Western civilization. Europe and America are experiencing an undermining of their highest values, as if historical crimes cancel out the enormous good and progress undeniably attributed to Western civilization. The West is incapacitated by "endlessly atoning for what we have inflicted on other parts of humanity" (TG 34).

Relevance to Existential Analysis

Bruckner's essay seems superficially irrelevant to the practice of existential psychotherapy. After all, the existential analyst works with individual patients who do not generally associate macro political and social concerns with their own psychological disturbances. With perhaps a few exceptions, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where the grand themes of Western consciousness would become the focus of

psychotherapeutic dialogue. Whether Bruckner's theses have merit or not, it might be assumed that it is too far removed from clinical work to be of serious concern. But the critical observation which makes Bruckner's arguments relevant is that existential analysts themselves are intellectuals; consequently, they are, if we accept Bruckner's thesis, the ones most infected with the intro-punitive consciousness of which he speaks. This infection, if indeed present, is likely to underlie the analyst's preconceptions in any number of ways that could interfere with authentic therapeutic discourse via perceptions of power, normative assumptions, sympathies, and counter-transferences. The philosophical framework of existential psychotherapy takes into account the totality of individual conscious experience, and the analyst must understand (a) the various ways in which cultural phenomena influence individual perceptions and (b) how underlying structures of cultural consciousness cannot be divorced from the professional ethos or subjectivity of existential analysis. Beyond that, if the analyst wishes to maximize the patient's potential for authenticity and awareness of subjective freedom, there must be a concomitant awareness of those macro forces that direct the analyst and patient either away or toward an authentic response to guilt. As existentialists, we must question whether Bruckner is correct—not necessarily in order to agree or disagree with his invectives, but to assess our level of conformity.

If existentialism is a sickness as Bruckner would have us believe, then existential psychotherapy is perhaps a purveyor of the sickness. How do we reconcile, then, the idea that disturbed patients undergoing analysis are indirectly guided by assumptions underlying our philosophy, such as our pluralism, subjectivism, and cultural sensitivity? Several questions merit consideration: is there a relationship between Bruckner's conception of Western guilt and existential guilt? Is Bruckner correct in decrying Western guilt as excessive? Is guilt in this case subsequent to choice or to conformity? Finally, what are the overall implications for the work of existential analysis? Bruckner—right or wrong—discloses to us new ideas that challenge our ready made interpretations. We are now compelled to choose how to respond.

Of the existential analysts qualified to address the subject of guilt consciousness resulting from Western oppression, two important figures stand out. Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) and Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) lived before, during, and after the era of Nazi fascism and

subsequently wrote about the subjects of individual and collective guilt and victimization. Frankl, an Austrian Jew, barely survived the onerous conditions of three concentrations camps, and most of his family was murdered by Nazis. Jaspers, a German, and his Jewish wife, were under constant suspicion by the Nazis and remained in Germany until 1948. He wrote the essay *On the Question of German Guilt* shortly after World War II ended, during the Nuremberg trials.⁵

Frankl on the Myth of Collective Guilt

Frankl might have agreed with Bruckner that there exists a measure of collective guilt consciousness in the Western mind, which has its origins in historical atrocities, most especially, the holocaust. However, Frankl was critical of the very concept of collective guilt and argued that authentic guilt can only occur with subjective responsibility. According to Frankl, even the idea of collective guilt effectively dehumanizes the individual insofar as the person experiences guilt as "a victim of circumstances and their influences."⁶ Furthermore, phenomenologically and existentially, collective guilt "is a concept that has no meaning" because the individual can only be authentically guilty after exercising free will irresponsibly.⁷ Assuming guilt for actions other than one's own is even a characteristic of melancholic neurosis.⁸ In some instances, Frankl argued, even belonging to an immoral or violent organization is not enough to condemn someone's actions if their knowledge and role within the organization was limited. Frankl was once booed during a lecture after saying "that there were even some good people in the Nazi government" (*LWL* 120). In Frankl's existential model (logotherapy), authentic guilt cannot arise unless the individual participates, condones, or does not attempt to prevent harm to self or others. Flowing from this premise, only a Nazi who acted violently, or who had knowledge of Nazi organizational crimes, or did not act to prevent harm, would be existentially

culpable. Moreover, the mere fact that someone is German does not mean they should feel personally guilty for Nazi crimes, let alone guilt for the oppressive activities associated with Western civilization of which Bruckner writes.

As for the concept of collective guilt, I personally think that it is totally unjustified to hold one person responsible for the behavior of another person or a collective of persons. Since the end of World War II I have not become weary of publicly arguing against the collective guilt concept.⁹

There is, according to Frankl, a form of authentic guilt that is "simply inherent in the human condition."¹⁰ This guilt results from our inevitable imperfection in balancing responsibility and freedom (*PE* 90). However, this guilt should not be perpetual; once it is recognized, the human onus is to transcend our guilt consciousness with attitudinal change, forgiveness, and personal responsibility. Frankl was fond of the quote from Paul Valery, "we do not only want to remember the dead, but also to forgive the living" (*PE* 111). We are indeed free to feel guilty, but it is also our "responsibility to overcome guilt."¹¹ However, failure to overcome collective guilt can create a kind of "collective neurosis" characterized by nihilism, conformism, and an "ephemeral attitude toward life" (*PE* 119-20), the very issues Bruckner identified as our current problem in the West, as allegedly apparent in modern and postmodern philosophies. Psychiatrically, excessive guilt accompanied by lack of a future orientation is an indication of neurosis and melancholia. Frankl was not alone in declaring that a plethoric guilt is a symptom of melancholia; Jaspers, Erwin Straus, Viktor von Gebsattel, and Eugene Minkowski, among others, shared this opinion.¹²

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *On the Question of German Guilt*, New York: Capricorn Books, 1947. [Henceforth cited as QGG]

⁶ Viktor Frankl, *The Will to Meaning*, New York: New American Library 1969, p. 74. [Henceforth cited as WM]

⁷ Annete Redsand, *Viktor Frankl: A Life Worth Living*, New York: Clarion Books 2006, p.111. [Henceforth cited as LWL]

⁸ Viktor Frankl, *Doctor of the Soul*, rev. ed., New York: Random House 1980, pp. 203-5. [Henceforth cited as DS]

⁹ Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press Books 1992, p. 150.

¹⁰ Viktor Frankl, *Psychotherapy and Existentialism: Selected Papers on Logotherapy by Viktor E. Frankl, Author of Man's Search for Meaning*, New York, NY: Washington Square Press 1967, p. 23. [Henceforth cited as PE]

¹¹ Viktor Frankl, *The Unheard of Cry for Meaning*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster 1978, p. 51.

¹² Alina N. Feld, "Jaspers on Melancholy," *Existenz*, 2008 Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 10-20.

Jaspers on the Question of German Guilt

Of Jaspers' writings *On the Question of German Guilt* is perhaps most relevant to reflect upon in addressing some of Bruckner's arguments and observations. It was written during the Nuremberg trials, perhaps the lowest point in German history, when Germans were compelled to experience the demoralizing consequences of the fall the Nazi regime. At this point in time, guilt, confusion, and defeat compelled Germans to become introspective and question their role in the world. In this essay, Jaspers explores with brutal honesty the extent of German culpability and clarifies the problem by distinguishing between four kinds of guilt. He never argues that being guiltless is a possibility, but carefully differentiates "in what sense each of us must feel co-responsible" (QGG 61).

Political guilt is imputed to the citizens and political leadership of a state that has lost its power in military defeat and must experience the consequences of the perpetration of evil. Here Jaspers argues that all Germans are guilty, as citizens, "for the crimes committed in the name of the Reich," and again asserts, "We are collectively liable" (QGG 61). These statements initially seem very distinct from Frankl's assertion about the "myth of collective guilt" in any form; however, Jaspers clarifies that political guilt is proportionate to the degree that a citizen lived "by the order of the state" (QGG 62). He argues that unless a citizen of Germany actively opposed Nazi crimes, he or she was culpable for supporting the regime. Although Jaspers does not identify who, if anyone, could be inculpable, the derivative implication is that resisters, perhaps such as Dietrich Bonnhoffer, would be immune from political guilt. A second factor Jaspers considers is the era in which one lives. In a brief digression about Napoleonic era in France, Jaspers seems to imply that political guilt is narrowly specific to the population living at the time of a given national crime, thus it is not authentically inheritable (QGG 77).¹³

¹³ Also, for further clarification about Jaspers' concept of political guilt as it relates to collective guilt, Alan M. Olson succinctly stated the following: "Jaspers makes it absolutely clear that political culpability is not to be confused with the notion of 'collective guilt,' for guilt has to do with the consciousness of individuals and not with groups. On the other hand, when it can be determined that certain collective entities, for example political parties, have directly contributed to and/or are responsible for specific crimes, reparations

The closest Jaspers comes to identifying a concept of guilt that is possibly relevant to Bruckner's assertions is his concept of *metaphysical guilt*; however, a proper explanation is needed to make this claim because the ubiquitous and ontological aspects of Jaspers' metaphysical guilt are mostly immaterial to Bruckner's assertions. For example, Jaspers described metaphysical guilt as something universal to all human beings which ultimately has its basis in a transcendent source (QGG 39). In this sense, we are all "co-responsible for every wrong and injustice in the world" (QGG 32) and, "Every human being is fated to be enmeshed in the power relations he lives by; this is the inevitable guilt of all, the guilt of human existence" (QGG 34). Olson explains how in Jaspers' philosophy metaphysical guilt is logically a priori and therefore does not require any specific human activity for it to manifest (MG 19). Metaphysical guilt represents the inherently defective tendencies in human nature that makes all human beings universally culpable and prone to violence (QGG 53).

While the above aspects of metaphysical guilt appear irrelevant to Bruckner's claims, Jaspers also links human activity to metaphysical guilt in a manner quite relevant to the discussion at hand. Metaphysical guilt is based upon "lack of absolute solidarity with a fellow human being," and adds that "This kind of solidarity is wounded, if I am present, whenever a wrong or a crime takes place."¹⁴ According to Jaspers, it is this aspect of metaphysical guilt that makes most Nazi era Germans culpable. Jaspers believed that with certain notable and courageous exceptions, the majority of Germans were passive in their response to Nazi oppression. But Jaspers was not fatalistic: for Jaspers, guilt does not represent perpetual condemnation; in every circumstance, guilt leads human beings to seek transformation and liberation from vice and spiritual immaturity.

The third form of guilt, moral guilt, Jaspers explains as the pains of conscience suffered by those "who knew, or could know" about the activity of the state, but volitionally acted to either support the state or passively endure without objection to obvious wrongs (QGG 63). He explains that there is usually an element of self-

may or may not be due depending on the outcome of international litigation and adjudication." See Alan M. Olson, "Metaphysical Guilt," *Existenz*, 2008, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 9-19, here pp. 12-3. [Henceforth cited as MG]

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt," in *Karl Jaspers: A Biography: Navigations in Truth*, ed. Suzanne Kirkbright, New Haven: Connecticut 2004, p. 196.

deception involved in assenting to "blind obedience" to the state, justified by any number forms, including religion, patriotism, and the "intoxication" of group identification (QGG 64-6).

Finally, Jaspers refers to *criminal guilt*. This simply refers to guilt subsequent to (a) violation or manipulation of just laws, or (b) violation of basic human standards of dignity and rights. Jaspers considers rights an indispensable requirement for just laws, without which the law has no meaning (QGG 45). Interestingly, he points out that many members of the Nazi regime that were indeed criminally guilty would be incapable of empathy and remorse; thus they are criminals, but do not feel any form of guilt. It is then left to the legal systems to execute justice.

Lessons from Frankl and Jaspers

The historical facts of the multifarious human rights failures associated with the activity of Western nations are not in question; neither Frankl, nor Jaspers, nor Bruckner delegitimize the sources of Western guilt, such as slavery, religious oppression, economic exploitation, or imperialism. For Frankl and Jaspers, the question is one of responsibility; those who came after historical eras associated with crimes are not guilty for those crimes; nor does living within a nation whose government engages in human rights violations make all citizens of that nation share in culpability. For Frankl, especially, the question is ultimately one of conceptual invalidity: collective guilt has no meaning and is therefore inauthentic if it is vicariously shared by individuals not responsible for the crimes of national regimes. Bruckner's emphasis is very different; he voices certainty and dictation in exposing what he views as hypocrisy and intro-punitive tendencies that weaken Western resolve and erode the influence of the West's highest values. In essence, what Bruckner views as intellectual complicity in undermining Western values, Frankl interprets as symptomatic of an existential crisis. However, it is uncertain whether Frankl and Jaspers would have agreed with Bruckner that multiculturalism is a problematic symptom of guilt consciousness and that it is a guise for power. Bruckner asserted that the current prevailing perception in multiculturalism is self-defeating: assuming that the West is responsible for the world's ills effectively undermines non-Western self-determination. This could be interpreted as somewhat analogous to Frankl's argument that fatalism is dehumanizing and disempowering (WM 74). Another

possible point of agreement is Frankl's assertion that the guilt-ridden melancholic believes that "his guilt can never be atoned for" (DS 205), which appears congruent with Bruckner's social observation that Euro-Americans are plagued by the "one obligation: endlessly atoning for what we have inflicted on other parts of humanity" (TG 34).

Thus we can conclude that neither Frankl nor Jaspers would concede that we who feel guilty in contemporary Western society for crimes committed in the history of Western civilization prior to our birth—and prior to our growth to an age at which we could know of our complicity or counteract our complicity—would be experiencing authentic guilt. Both men agreed that contemporary Westerners are responsible for challenging the evils of our time; otherwise, we do share collective political guilt; however, merely being a citizen of a Western nation is insufficient to create authentic guilt. Authentic guilt, however, does result when individuals ignore or participate in the evils of their time. Frankl and Jaspers were emphatic in asserting that the human experience of authentic guilt should be followed by responsible, transformative actions that ensure a degree of amends and a commitment to avoiding a reoccurrence of socially sanctioned immoral behavior. In effect, they argue that true responsibility results in our guilt being temporary, not perpetual, as Bruckner argues it has been.

Jaspers, Frankl, and many other existentialist philosophers have argued that in the postmodern world, guilt is one of the existential experiences that, when confronted, can be a source of personal transformation. Jaspers referred to guilt as one of the "boundary situations" (*Grenzsituationen*) that allows us to experience self-reflection.¹⁵ Similarly, Frankl asserted that guilt is a form of suffering that can be turned into a "heroic achievement" (PE 111). George Berguno, a thinker who has written extensively about existentialism and postmodernism, has argued that guilt, as a boundary experience, can either be imposed by history or created by one's actions, but in any case, it is an existential challenge for the West that beckons change rather than rumination.¹⁶ Guilt can be transformative and purgative; in fact, all

¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, trans. E. B. Ashton, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932.

¹⁶ George G. Berguno, "Towards a New Conception of the Human Condition," *Existential Analysis*, 2008, Vol.19, pp. 247-8.

human beings have a responsibility to profit from guilt as a source of self-improvement, collective improvement, and human growth. While Bruckner may be correct in arguing that multiculturalism has serious defects, in terms of law and institutional policy, it has been one attempt to responsibly rectify the biases of Western exclusivity and preference. If, however, Bruckner's observation of perpetual, excessively self-critical guilt is accurate, most existentialists would also view this as an issue in need of critical reexamination. Existentialists, however, would be more careful than Bruckner in ensuring that the Subject (i.e., the person) is not lost in political-historical generalities. Echoing Kant, Jaspers once opined that underlying all activity as an antecedent to guilt is the loss of the Subject as having his or her own worth. In response to reading Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Jaspers stated that modern "evil" is no longer characterized by violating religious commandments, but occurs when human beings are used as merely a means to an end.¹⁷ Bruckner, however, never emphasizes the relationship between the personhood of the Subject and macro societal tendencies that subsume the individual as a means to some end, such as consumerism, political conformity, or oppressive ideologies.

The Need for Clarification

Bruckner's sweeping condemnation of modern philosophies fails to account for the diverse history of existentialism and its various forms of expression. German, French, and Anglo existentialism are very different and vary in schools of thought internally. Beyond that, it is arguable whether the modern and postmodern philosophies specifically criticized by Bruckner are contributors to the self-hatred he describes. Irrationalism, relativism, nihilism, and other currents of modern philosophy found in some of the existentialist schools of thought are creations of the West; however, Frankl, Jaspers, and many other existentialist and humanistic thinkers believed in an objective reality with moral absolutes.¹⁸ Defending existentialism

from Bruckner's criticisms is necessary, because his assumptions are inaccurate. It is odd that given his background in philosophy, he makes such sweeping generalizations that are easily objected to, once scrutinized. It can be argued that while the nihilistic, relativistic traditions in existentialism are in Bruckner's sense skeptical or dismissive of the classical primacy of reason in Western civilization and are therefore anti-Occidental, other existential traditions and certain derivative psychotherapies, on the other hand, have historically been more optimistic and positive in their ideational structures, emphasizing freedom with ethical responsibility.¹⁹ Viktor Frankl, for example, praised the merits of free society and generally limited his criticisms of the West to normative opinions about the excesses of consumerism, hedonism, and social conformity — all concerns repeatedly expressed by Bruckner.

Beyond this, there is a strong tradition in existentialism that affirms equality, democracy, progress, and in fact all the prominent values of the Enlightenment. Even the more nihilistic and solipsistic strains of continental existentialism represent a liberation from conformity and blind faith in religion — an observation even acknowledged by Bruckner.²⁰ Certainly in the tradition of existential analysis, especially, the voice of optimism, personal responsibility, and individual empowerment is clear and distinct, perhaps partially due to a hybridization of medical practice and

in detail the Kantian structure to Jaspers' epistemology, which excludes the possibility of relativism and total subjectivity. While Frankl never developed a formal epistemology, he too was influenced by Kant and was extremely critical of relativism and subjectivism. See PE 50, also Viktor Frankl, *The Unconscious God*, New York, NY: Simon and Schuster 1975, p. 58.

¹⁹ This quote from Robert Olson is apropos: "The existentialists do not always agree among themselves either as to the precise nature or as to the relative ranking of the values which they say accompany a deliberate espousal of anguish and suffering... Generally speaking, however, freedom of choice, individual dignity, personal love, and creative effort are the existentialist values, and, generally speaking, the most important among these are freedom of choice and individual dignity." Robert G. Olson, *An Introduction to Existentialism*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications 1962, pp. 17-8.

²⁰ Pascal Bruckner, *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

¹⁷ Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, eds., *Arendt, Hannah, and Karl Jaspers: Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926-1969*, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company 1992, p. 165.

¹⁸ In *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 1979, p. 72, Alan M. Olson describes

philosophy, as especially obvious in the writings of the mid-twentieth century founders of existential analysis. Regardless of these historical foundations, in light of Bruckner's powerful arguments, it might be wise to recall the voice of Heidegger from *Being in Time*, in which he establishes that knowledge about history is insufficient to comprehend Dasein in-the-world; our "being" and "the world" must be understood together: "It is only on the basis of Dasein's sense of its own past that anything like a 'world history' is possible."²¹ Frankl and Jaspers also identified authentic guilt with subjectivity, but independently agreed that as a positive psychology, guilt requires human activity in the form of a responsibility to transform and grow. Perpetual, excessive, and ruminative guilt is anathema to the core premises of existential authenticity.

Another critique is evident when we consider that it may have been an error for Bruckner to write about the influence of the Enlightenment as if it was completely distinct from non-Western traditions. For many, including Jaspers, the Enlightenment was indeed a Western movement; however, he considered it part of a grand universal theme of human progress, not isolatable from Eastern religions and ancient philosophies.²² It is easy to confirm this thesis in Voltaire who frequently referred to ancient and multicultural sources in justifying his arguments on freedom of thought and equality.²³ Bruckner at times appears to ignore or refuse to acknowledge the collective nature of human progress, and ironically this may contribute to the intellectual divide that Bruckner criticizes. On the other hand, Bruckner balances this dubious omission by declaring the universality of the Enlightenment: "The Enlightenment belongs to the entire human race, not just to a few privileged individuals in Europe or North America" (*EFR* §20).

If we believe Jaspers and Frankl, we must believe that ultimately and existentially, only individuals, not societies, can be authentically guilty. While Jaspers described metaphysical guilt as being inherent to human existence, even this form of guilt qualitatively increases on a subjective level when an individual acts anti-socially. Jaspers also implied lack of culpability for historical events outside of the individual's lifetime. In distinction from this, when Bruckner describes guilt consciousness, it is conceptually as a social state of consciousness rather than an individual consequence of moral volition or reactivity. The quality and intensity of this guilt may also vary. Bruckner makes it clear that the typical American is more likely to be optimistic than the European, and those who view themselves as oppressed will feel more victimization than guilt. In a manner of speaking, Bruckner leads us to back to existential anxiety: there is tension between Western guilt – authentic or not – and the responsibility to move beyond guilt in some productive way. The existentialists' call is to transform the residual guilt of history into personal growth and values affirmation. As noted by Wong,²⁴ many existentialist thinkers have already been working to link meaning-centered psychologies with social responsibility. Regardless of his sometimes sweeping generalizations and his reluctance to suggest alternatives to the status quo, Bruckner nonetheless moves us forward by creating discomfort with ruminative, directionless, and excessive self-critique.

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York, NY: Harper Collins 1962, p. 41.

²² As acknowledged by Jaspers: See Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957.

²³ As evident throughout: Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay, New York, NY: Harvest Books 1962, original work published in 1756.

²⁴ Paul T. P. Wong, "A Quiet Positive Revolution," *International Journal of Existential Psychology & Psychotherapy*, 2008, Vol. 1, pp. 1-6.