

the question of  
GERMAN GUILT

KARL JASPERS

with a new introduction by  
Joseph W. Koterski, S.J.

Translated by E. B. Ashton

# THE QUESTION OF GERMAN GUILT

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By KARL JASPERS

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WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION BY  
JOSEPH W. KOTERSKI, S.J.

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# Introduction to the 2000 Edition

More than half a century has gone by since the fall of the Nazi government, but neither the simple passage of time nor the crossing of a threshold as symbolic as the new millennium has yet extinguished the question of responsibility for the carnage of the Second World War. <sup>1</sup> Certain Swiss banks are only now disclosing the records of looted gold, and we still hear of attempts to extradite and prosecute some war criminals. In all likelihood, even when the last of those then alive have passed away, the echoes of the tragedy will linger, in much the way that the effects of the Civil War are still felt long after those who were but children then have perished. History is like that.

## THE QUESTION OF GUILT

In 1945 the Nazi government had scarcely fallen when Karl Jaspers, a professor of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg who had been forced to resign from his post in 1937, broached the question of national guilt in a series of lectures that immediately attracted broad interest. (For more on his life see the second part of this introduction.) With simple directness he voiced the question many were whispering: “Are the German people guilty?” From his own conflicted feelings at being a German with an unblemished record as an anti-Nazi who had nevertheless remained within Germany throughout the war, Jaspers began to articulate a matrix of distinctions among types of guilt and the corresponding degrees of responsibility. His immediate purpose in these lectures was to warn against evasive apologies and wholesale condemnations, but his philosophical approach to the problem generated a book that has stood the test of time and offers compelling insight for situations far removed from the specific historical setting that occasioned these reflections.

Were it not for the media coverage of some of today’s refugees—in Kosovo, for instance, or East Timor—prosperity would make it almost impossible to imagine the trauma that gripped Europe after the Second World War. The raw suffering on all sides—in the lands that Hitler’s armies invaded and within Germany itself—seemed only to confirm the blanket verdict that had been of necessity very simple and without nuance in order to sustain the energies needed for the war effort: in the judgment of the victors, Germany was guilty of bringing all this suffering upon itself for having brought so much suffering upon others. The times were impatient of distinctions.

But impatient or no, the times required distinctions. Although the term “guilt-trip” had not yet been devised, the phenomenon is perennial. To separate the genuine responsibility that warrants true guilt from any guilt-trip (whether self-imposed by the vanquished in their despair or unfairly laid upon them by the victors), Jaspers brings to bear a sacred principle of ethics: one bears responsibility only to the degree that one has taken part and acted. Where one did not voluntarily consent or approve there can be no culpability assigned. The purpose of Jaspers’s distinctions is to sort out the guilt that those responsible really should feel from the ill-defined and inappropriate feelings of guilt weighing down postwar Germans like a demon needing to be exorcised.

But even when the principle is clear, assessing responsibility will never be simple. If individuals or groups are ever to deal with the feelings of guilt that tend to surge forth, the pangs of conscience that emerge, and the reparation that is owed to those who have been wronged, it is crucial for a careful assessment of one's responsibility to take place. To enable the process to begin for Germany and for Germans, Jaspers proposed a powerful but controversial fourfold schema:

(1) *Criminal guilt* belongs only to those who violated the law (taken broadly to include the natural law and international law, if not the positive law in force at the time in one's own country) and who have been convicted by a court with appropriate jurisdiction (hence the elaborate justification being offered at the time for the trials conducted at Nuremberg).

(2) *Political guilt*, by contrast, comes about for the entire citizenry of a modern state, for modern states allow no one to be apolitical. Unfair as it seems, this sort of guilt is what all citizens of a country are presumed to bear for the deeds of their governments. In this sphere, even declining to vote in elections is taken to make a person co-responsible for the way in which one is governed, for one has the chance to participate. Regardless of whether the individual citizen likes or dislikes a given regime, all citizens have to suffer the consequences that the victorious powers impose upon the whole country for the misdeeds of its regime.

(3) *Moral guilt* names the personal responsibility one bears before the tribunal of one's own conscience for one's own deeds—even for deciding to follow the orders one receives from one's superiors. Here especially Jaspers counsels complete and utter honesty, for no one can ever know another person's heart, and thus no one may ever judge another's moral guilt. But neither may anyone simply pass over assessing one's own genuine moral responsibility, even if some grand reversal of fortunes has suddenly afflicted the individual or the community with great sufferings in turn. If there really is moral guilt in one's past, the demands of conscience require the responsibility to be faced.

(4) Perhaps the most controversial category is what Jaspers calls *metaphysical guilt*, the responsibility that survivors often feel toward those who suffered and died. With a carefulness of reasoning that stems both from his long studies in psychology and psychiatry as well as from his reverential deference to God, Jaspers here delineates the feeling of guilt that can encompass an otherwise innocent person in whose presence or with whose knowledge crimes were committed. Even if one in no way consented to a wicked deed (to have done so would entail moral guilt), human solidarity will bring the sensitive person to feel a kind of co-responsibility for having done nothing to prevent the deed at those decisive moments when choosing to act might well have involved risking one's life.

For Jaspers, these distinctions emerge from the basic principle that a person's degree of responsibility is proportionate to the extent of one's participation. By distinguishing the types of participation in which one may have been involved, the truly innocent can be free of the shame of being tarred by too broad a brush. Each of these four types will require truthfulness before the appropriate tribunal—respectively, a legitimate court with formal jurisdiction in a specific case, the parley of the victors, one's own conscience, and God. Truthfulness will both allow for the genuine exoneration of the innocent and initiate the appropriate punishments, the needed reparations, and eventually the full restoration of healthy living for individuals and even for nations. On the other hand, Jaspers argues, a refusal to make the necessary distinctions is likely to reduce Germany and its citizens to the status of an outcast pariah and thus perpetuate the cycle of violence and vengeance that indiscriminate sanctions are likely to foster by provoking rage at unfair treatment.

There is just enough allusion in this volume to the events of the time to keep us alert to the specific situation that prompted the book's composition and that made it so difficult to gain any clarity at all on the problem amid the shrill accusations and woeful laments that were tearing Germany apart. By so much practiced at the detachment for which philosophy strives, Jaspers produced a study of guilt and

responsibility that can be applied in diverse scenarios far different from that of postwar Germany. Imagine the complexity of sorting out responsibility when a culture is emerging from generations of apartheid, as in South Africa, or from the genocide in Cambodia, from the culture of distrust and suspicion in the new republics spawned from the old Soviet empire, or from the culture of death spreading gripping many countries of the West. The standard techniques for cloaking violence remain the same across the whole range of examples: the use of some form of semantic gymnastics to disguise an evil action by labeling it with some euphemism (for example, the use of terms like “social parasite” or “life unworth living”); the cultural sanitization of the violent practice by having respected authorities like doctors, lawyers, or clergy give their approval; and the desensitizing of personal consciences by removing the actual process from public view (for example, the division of labor in the camps of the “final solution” or the warehousing of people who are aged and senile).

The situation today is vastly different from that of Jaspers’s time, and yet the philosophical universality he achieves keeps his message fresh. Although his audience was eagerly looking for any sign of hope and was desperately anxious for a restoration of sanity and morality, his opening remarks (before he treats the guilt question formally) should strike a chord with those tempted to cynicism today by the suspicion that all that ever matters is power. Much like his 1948 book *The Idea of the University*, the remarks in this book were also addressed to those who assembled to reopen the University of Heidelberg. In 1948 its buildings were in shambles, its professoriate decimated, its new students suspicious that all they would hear would be the new line of thinking that had suddenly become “politically compulsory” under the thumb of the Allied military government in Germany, and thus no different in principle from the propaganda of the previous twelve years of the Nazi regime. Jaspers is mindful that many of the professors had collapsed under the pressure and were now disgraced, that a few had continued to teach the truths they had always taught, that some had been dismissed (as he had been, for having a Jewish wife) or even executed for their fearless and outspoken opposition, and that still others had been timid and thus bear some of what he termed “metaphysical guilt” for the silence by which they survived.

What he counsels is a cultivation of truth—the teachers will have to show their students that they are returning to their classrooms with a difference—that there would be no more propaganda, but only a genuine truthfulness that is always the authentic goal of human intelligence by its very nature. Called upon by the Allies to be Heidelberg’s first postwar rector, Jaspers recognized that the freedom a university needs from political control demands in turn that professors not use their podiums for politically committed (we might now say “politically correct”) speech. In short, he counsels that academic freedom requires mature self-restraint and a personal dedication to keeping one’s professional remarks within the canons and methods of one’s discipline. Now as then professors have a difficult time remembering to temper their own opinions on subjects beyond their professional expertise and to revere truth above all when feelings and passions become inflamed.

But here or in any walk of life, habits of truthfulness cultivated in times of peace and prosperity will be rewarded by a clear conscience, even in the harshest scenarios. By the practice of honesty and truthfulness even in the smallest matters and most mundane affairs, one will be all the more ready to act authentically in moments of crisis, personal or social, and perhaps even to take the risks that Edmund Burke envisioned when he wrote that all that is needed for evil to triumph is for the good to do nothing.

## **JASPERS: HIS LIFE AND BASIC CONVICTIONS**

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In the history of twentieth-century philosophy, Jaspers is counted among the existentialists.<sup>2</sup> His many books, large and small, did much to bring existentialist concerns and tendencies in philosophy to public attention, for his books offered interesting analyses of many current situations but were also well written in relatively simple language, free from the neologisms that rendered other existentialist works more difficult to grasp. Not just the present volume on the question of war guilt but comparable essays that redefined the meaning of the university, examined prevalent conditions of political liberty, and promoted belief in the European spirit reflect his special brand of existentialism: one that did not just talk about engagement with social and cultural conditions but that tried to make specific and positive contributions to current problems.

A native of Oldenburg in northern Germany, Jaspers testified in his philosophical autobiography<sup>3</sup> to the spirit of critical and independent thinking that his father cultivated in him from the start. His grandfather had been a Lutheran pastor, while his immediate family seems to have been theistic but anti-ecclesial. After some initial studies in law, he changed to medicine and trained under well-known pathologists and psychiatrists in the clinic at the University of Heidelberg before the First World War. His first large-scale work, *General Psychopathology* (1913), a ground-breaking text in that field, is the result of his reflections on that experience. His second major scientific work, *Psychology of Worldviews* (1919), shows his developing interest in philosophical problems and methods.

Jaspers's formal transfer from teaching psychiatry to philosophy at Heidelberg permitted him to begin issuing a long stream of philosophical books and articles, most notably the three-volume general exposition of his viewpoint titled simply *Philosophy* (1932). The philosophy faculty proved to be a post that better suited his mind and his delicate health. From childhood he had suffered from bronchial and cardiac problems, but a stern discipline in matters of work and rest, and the constant support of his wife, Gertrude (whom his autobiography describes as his intellectual soulmate), made possible a career of teaching and writing until the Nazis severed his academic connections in 1933 because of displeasure with his acute criticism of racism and rabid nationalism. Gertrude's Jewish heritage was also held against him, but they were spared the fate of deportation or worse, and in private retirement during the war Jaspers was able to continue to write.

Although much material remains in unpublished manuscripts to this day, he did publish a score of books, including several volumes of historical commentary called *The Great Philosophers* and a thoroughgoing restatement of his own system in his treatise *On Truth*. Two of his lecture series gave more succinct expression to his ideas: *Reason and Existence* and *Philosophy of Existence*. In the studies one sees a trait that sets him apart from many of his fellow existentialists, whose suspicions about science and technology he critiques in the course of his own on-going appreciative engagement with both the fruits of modern science and the habits of thinking typical of a scientific mind. His post-Second World War books also enter the dialogue of existentialism with religion. They include a debate on the demythologizing of the Scriptures, which he conducted with Rudolph Bultmann (*Myth and Christianity*), as well as several volumes of discussions with Protestant theologians (*Philosophical Faith* and the subsequent *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*).

In 1948 Jaspers left Heidelberg for a post at the University of Basel in Switzerland. Before his death in 1969, he also published a popular introduction to his philosophy (*Way to Wisdom*), a sophisticated reflection on the atomic age (*The Atomic Bomb and the Future of Mankind*), and his long-nurtured views on the philosophy of history (*The Origin and Goal of History*). It is this book that contains his famous theory of the Axial Age of history, the period from about 600 B.C. to 400 B.C. in which Chinese, Indian, Persian, Hebrew, and Greek thinkers all independently generated many of the

political and metaphysical ideas that have been most decisive in shaping the rest of human history. In Jaspers's own judgment, the figure that was most important for the shaping of his own thinking was Immanuel Kant, but he also credits Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Max Weber with inspiring his work.<sup>4</sup> His readers, however, cannot help noticing the strongly Neoplatonist cast to much of his thought, and the four figures whom he quotes again and again are Plotinus, Bruno, Spinoza, and Schelling. The metaphysical matrix that in some way undergirds the rest of his writings, including the present volume, is Kantian and Neoplatonic. By his lights, it is simply impossible for a thinker to evade the "problem of being," and yet one may never assume that "being is something general and understood." With Kant, he repeatedly asserts the validity of the thesis that everything "objective" is always conditioned by "consciousness," and thus he regards any claim about purely objective being (in his vocabulary, *Dasein*) as invariably an illusion.

Yet we live in the reality of the life-world, and so we do well to accept the Neoplatonic heritage of the diverse spheres of being that philosophical reflection can progressively distinguish. There is a triad of levels of existence to be noticed: (1) the simple givenness of "objects" whenever individuals encounter anything real in their normal experience; (2) the human constructions of the life-world by the subject (internally within an individual and externally, for instance, in the trust-relations that constitute communities large and small); and (3) transcendent being that is always in principle beyond what any subject-mind can ever mentally encompass but to which the symbols devised by religion and philosophy regularly venture to point. Again, with Kant, Jaspers articulates a doctrine of Ideas that places him squarely in the tradition of German Idealism, yet always in a way that is tempered by the basic realism of Jaspers's own medical and political heritage.

The result is that he is the sort of philosopher who can help "realists" learn what they need to discover from "idealism" and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, Jaspers amplifies Kant's basic doctrine of the three Ideas (the world, the soul, and God) that reason must postulate in order to compensate for the fact that we are never presented with the whole of reality and yet we constantly feel the hunger to think about such wholes. We human beings know anything that we do come to know only within the boundaries of some horizon or other. Here Jaspers's point is much like both that of Aristotle, who long before insisted that we know an object only by grasping its form or structure, and that of the long tradition of realism, which has regularly identified an object's form with transcendental truth, the fundamental intelligibility of every being as being.<sup>6</sup> But thinking this problem through as a Kantian committed to the doctrine that there is "no object without a subject" and thus no access to objectivity that is not categorically conditioned by consciousness and its attendant subjectivity, Jaspers proposes that "the world" (cosmos) is the Idea that we project in order to encompass all possible objective viewpoints, even though such a whole is actually unknowable to us in principle. Likewise, the depths of consciousness that are the ground for the second level of existence are never able to be fully plumbed by anyone, and so they are equally unknowable as a whole, and yet we need some way of thinking about them. So, according to Jaspers, following Kant, reason offers the I, the soul, as a useful mode of encompassing consciousness. At the third level, God or Transcendence is the Idea by which to encompass all of being, but the reality of such being is as ineffable as the One envisioned by Plotinus.

In each of Jaspers's descriptions of the system of his thought we find him flexibly alert to the classical philosophical problem of the one and the many that these encompassing Ideas are designed to accommodate. The compelling and cogent reasoning of the scientific and technical realm, for example, belong to "world orientation,"<sup>7</sup> where Jaspers explores the mutual interdependence of fact and theory in all the empirical sciences. For him, these factors are interlocking but intrinsically incomplete, and science, therefore, can claim to offer cogent and compelling demonstrations and y

has to retain an endlessly open perspective, since the search for objective truth will always go on. One sees some of this attitude in his comments about the practical dimensions of the political context of university life in the present volume on the question of guilt. For Jaspers, there are four interconnected but irreducible spheres of reality in “the world”: matter, life, soul, and spirit. Each is real, but each demands that we recognize a different mode of objectivity. The physician, for example, needs to have appropriate regard for biochemistry, for medicine, for therapy, and for the spiritual and emotional life of a patient. The importance of each level in itself demands philosophical and practical distinctions.

Much of the discussion in the present book turns on questions of truth, freedom, and ethics. On the issue of guilt and responsibility there are necessarily going to be conflicts of freedom and authority, of religion and philosophy, and of politics and academia. For Jaspers, these are all areas in which the compelling certainties of scientific reason are unavailable and yet where choices must still be made, however large the risk of failure looms. In the face of such possible tragedy, he still insists that even failure (“shipwreck”) can be philosophically significant in the discovery of the meaning of being. In the tragic situations that are central to his meditations in this book, such failures may well prove particularly significant for coming to a proper acknowledgment of one’s level of responsibility. For Jaspers, the freedom of the *I* (the soul) is ultimately undefinable and unprovable,<sup>8</sup> but is nevertheless a reality that constantly contradicts the reductive efforts of determinists to deny it on the faulty assumption that “objective material being” is “the whole of being.” Jaspers keeps his readers mindful that human beings are conscious of their freedom in various ways, including (1) through the various existential choices, that is, the various decisions one makes in the course of one’s life by which one progressively becomes precisely who one is, and (2) through the personal unity of one’s own existence simultaneously at the levels of matter, life, soul, and spirit. By virtue of embodiment and self-consciousness, one’s freedom inescapably involves the reconciliation of necessity and free choice, although my choices are free, the world in which I make these choices is often quite recalcitrant, and yet I bind myself by them (sometimes in order to change that world), and I must accept the consequences of the choices I make. These choices are not simply determined by empirical reality, however much they are conditioned thereby.

In the present study we find Jaspers discussing the phenomenon of guilt. For him, guilt is not alien to freedom but comes precisely from being free. It comes as an intrinsic consequence of some of the choices we make and some of the situations in which we find ourselves and which we accept. Our existence requires actions of various sorts, actions that we must will, choose, and carry out. But the human condition is also such that even nonaction is really a kind of action, a result of choice. By each of my choices and my acts, I make myself more of just the sort of person who chooses that sort of action, for I have embraced one possibility and cast other possibilities aside. All this happens within groups and communities of various sorts (a part of the givenness of our “world”), and this can implicate us in guilt that would not otherwise be our own, just as it permits us to participate with profit and delight in the successes of communities to which we belong but for which we are not personally responsible. In Jaspers’s more biblical moments one even detects echoes of the “original guilt” that some religious traditions have recognized as “original sin,” but in his more philosophical moments one finds him focused more on the categories of political and metaphysical guilt that the book articulates in contrast to criminal and moral guilt.

What is perhaps especially valuable in a book like this is its integration of the speculative and the practical. Jaspers’s steady respect for staying open to truth and for acknowledging responsibility for action and choice has its roots in the quest for an adequate philosophy of being that is not paralyzed by the Cartesian split of human from nonhuman being. That split has often been invoked to justify ethical theories that attend to a person’s intention in isolation from the embodied nature of any action or from

the wide-reaching consequences of personal choices. If not everything in Jaspers's system is completely convincing (for example, his reticence about revealed truth and the ultimate inaccessibility of God as anything other than an Idea), his insights into the question at hand remain undeniable.

Joseph W. Koterski, S.J.  
Fordham University  
January 23, 2000

# THE QUESTION OF GERMAN GUILT

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## *Ladies and Gentlemen:*

Those of you who sat in these rooms as students in recent years are now thinking, perhaps, Everything suddenly sounds altogether different; the cast has changed; the course of political events presents the figures—now these, now those—as puppets; as organs of power they recite their little verses whichever way they talk, none can be trusted, for professors do not bite the hand that feeds them either.

I can understand this distrust in all young people awakened to full consciousness during the past twelve years, in this environment. But I beg you in the course of your studies to keep an open mind for the possibility that now it may be different—that now there really may be truth at stake. You are the ones who are called upon, each to help in his place so that truth may be revealed. For the time being listen to my conception of the situation of the sciences at the university, and examine it. It is as follows:

In some sciences you will hear scarcely anything different from the past years. There, scholars who remained true to themselves have always taught truth. You will have met many a teacher again who in tone of voice as well as in the contents and fundamental views of his lectures faced you the same as he was all through these years.

On the other hand, notably in the philosophical and political fields, you may receive a strange impression. There everything does indeed sound altogether different. True, if those who studied here before 1933 or even in the first years afterwards were to come back, they probably would note a coinciding basic attitude in many of us. But there, too, it may be possible to feel a change wrought by the upheavals of this decade. And the change of cast is a fact. Teachers who would expound the National-Socialist phraseology to you have vanished. Others have reappeared as old men out of the past, or joined as young ones in a metamorphosis to freedom and candor, while'til now they had to wear masks.

Again I ask you: beware the premature conclusion that only the opposite of recent values is taught that we are talking just as before though in reverse, fighting what used to be glorified and glorifying what used to be fought—that in either case, today as yesterday, the doctrine was a result of political compulsion and thus no real truth. No; at least it is not so in all places. Where it is, there would indeed be no essential difference. The way of thought would not have changed, only the direction of aggressiveness or mendacious glorification.

By our manner of teaching we professors will have to show that the radical difference—though also marked in certain contents—decisively lies in the very way of thinking. If what was taught before was propaganda, neither science nor philosophy, we are now not to adopt another point of view but to return to the way of thinking as a critical movement, to research which is true cognition. This can be suppressed. Given room, it grows out of the essence of human existence.

To be sure, all thought and research depend on the political situation. But the difference is whether thought and research are forced and used for their own purposes by the political power, or whether they are left free because the political power wants free research, a region free from its immediate influence.

Before 1933 we had permission to think and talk freely, and now we have it again. The present political situation is a military government, and a German government which, being set up by

authority of the other, is itself not yet a democratic government but an authoritarian one. But neither by the military government nor by the German one is a line of thought and research imposed upon us. Both leave us free for truth.

Today this does not yet mean that we are free to pass discretionary judgments.

The situation as a whole does not permit entirely free public discussion of every decisive world political question which now plays a part in the political struggle of the powers. This is a matter of course. Though it may be painful and not an ideal situation, political tact may at times exact silence on certain questions and facts everywhere in the world, in the interest of the most propitious solution. Truthfulness demands that we admit this, but no one has the right to lodge a complaint. Talking about all things as we like and please is license, anyhow.

Only what we say ought to be unconditionally true.

The political events of the day are not a topic for lectures at the university in the sense of our being engaged in politics. Criticism or praise of the actions of government is never the business of lecturing—but the scientific clarification of its factual structure is.

The fact that we have a military government now means, without my having to say so in so many words, that we have no right to criticize the military government.

But all that denotes no repression of our research, only a firm compulsion to refrain from doing what is never our business: dabbling in political actions and decisions of the day. To me it seems that only malice would consider that a restraint of our research into the truth.

It means, rather, that we are free to try by all means, and in all directions, to discover the truth methodically explorable. We have the chances of discussion and of our manifold views, but we also run the risks of distraction and rootlessness.

This again does not mean that we have freedom to engage in propaganda. Propaganda might perhaps be tolerated if in line with the political aims valid today. At the university it would even then be a calamity. We do not have to capture truth by quick statements. We have to test, to weigh, to reflect, to debate to and fro and pro and con, to question our own assertions. Truth does not exist as merchandise, ready-made for delivery; it exists only in methodical movement, in the thoughtfulness of reason.

What I have said so far applies to our university as such, to its doctrine and research. For our present course the suggested problems of tension are especially acute.

I want to speak to you about our situation, and so I shall constantly skirt the immediate actuality of concrete politics, which is not and should not be our theme. Yet what we want to ponder is a condition precedent for our judgment in politics as well.

I want to speak from philosophical motives, for our own enlightenment and encouragement. Truth shall help us find our way.

For these considerations we shall first visualize two necessities, the consciousness of which I deem particularly indispensable to Germans in our present situation. We must learn to talk with each other and we mutually must understand and accept one another in our extraordinary differences. The differences are so great that in borderline cases we appear to each other like people of different nations.

## **TALKING WITH EACH OTHER**

We have to get our spiritual bearings in Germany, with one another. We have no common ground yet.

We are seeking to get together.

~~Talk from the platform is necessarily one-sided. We do not converse here. Yet what I expound to you has grown out of the "talking with each other" which all of us do, each in his own circle. The manner in which this takes place everywhere is the ethos of the atmosphere we live in.~~

Everyone must deal in his own way with the thoughts I expound. He is not simply to accept as valid but to weigh, nor simply to oppose but to test, visualize and examine.

We want to learn to talk with each other. That is to say, we do not just want to reiterate our opinion but to hear what the other thinks. We do not just want to assert but to reflect connectedly, listen to reasons, remain prepared for a new insight. We want to accept the other, to try to see things from the other's point of view; in fact, we virtually want to seek out opposing views. To get at the truth, an opponent is more important than one who agrees with us. Finding the common in the contradictory is more important than hastily seizing on mutually exclusive points of view and breaking off the conversation as hopeless.

It is so easy to stand with emotional emphasis on decisive judgments; it is difficult calmly to visualize and to see truth in full knowledge of all objects. It is easy to break off communication with defiant assertions; it is difficult ceaselessly, beyond assertions, to enter on the ground of truth. It is easy to seize an opinion and hold on to it, dispensing with further cogitation; it is difficult to advance step by step and never to bar further questioning.

We must restore the readiness to think, against the tendency to have everything prepared in advance and, as it were, placarded in slogans. One requirement is that we do not intoxicate ourselves with feelings of pride, of despair, of indignation, of defiance, of revenge, of scorn, but that we put these feelings on ice and perceive reality. We must suspend such sentiments to see the truth, to be of good will in the world.

Yet this, too, applies to talking with each other: it is easy to think everything tentatively and never to come to a decision; it is difficult to make the true resolve in the lucidity of universally open thought. It is easy to shirk responsibility by talking; it is difficult absolutely, but without obstinacy, to maintain a resolution. It is easy always in a situation to take the line of least resistance; it is difficult led by the absolute resolution through all mobility and pliability of thought, to stay on the determined path.

These difficulties let us go astray in opposite directions. We make no headway if we play off the aberrations on one side against those on the other. Nor is there a middle way. Rather, man's way to truth lies in the realm of the causes to which those aberrations are due. There we go when we can really talk with each other. To that end something must constantly remain in us that trusts the other and deserves his trust. Then, amidst discussion, that silence is possible in which men listen together and hear the truth.

Therefore we do not want to rage at one another but to try to find the way together. Emotion argues against the truth of the speaker. We want to affect no fanatic will, nor to outshout each other. We do not want to engage in melodramatic breast-beating, to offend the other, nor to engage in self-satisfied praise of things intended merely to hurt the other. We do not want to force opinions on one another. But in the common search for truth there must be no barriers of charitable reserve, no gentle reticence, no comforting deception. There can be no question that might not be raised, nothing to be fondly taken for granted, no sentimental and no practical lie that would have to be guarded or that would be untouchable. But even less can it be permitted brazenly to hit each other in the face with challenging unfounded, frivolous judgments. We belong together; we must feel our common cause when we talk with each other.

When we talk aloud to each other, we merely continue what and how each individual inwardly talks to himself. In this kind of talking none is the other's judge; everyone is both defendant and judge

the same time. All our talks are darkened by such accusations, by the moralizing which has for ages mingled with so many conversations and keeps dripping into our wounds like poison, whatever it may be aimed against. We cannot remove this shadow but we can make it constantly lighter. We can have the right impulse: we do not want to accuse, except in the case of definite crimes capable of objective determination and of punishment. All through these years we have heard other people scorned. We do not want to continue that.

But we always succeed only in part. We all tend to justify ourselves, and to attack what we feel are hostile forces with depreciating judgments or moral accusations. Today we must examine ourselves more severely than ever. Let us make this plain: in the course of events the survivor seems always right. Success apparently justifies. The man on top believes that he has the truth of a good cause on his side. This implies the profound injustice of blindness for the failures, for the powerless, for those who are crushed by events.

It is ever thus. Thus was the Prussian-German noise after 1866 and 1870, which frightened Nietzsche. Thus was the even wilder noise of National-Socialism since 1933.

So now we must ask ourselves whether we are not lapsing into another noise, becoming self-righteous, deriving a legitimacy from the mere facts of our having survived and suffered.

Let us be clear about this in our minds: that we live and survive is not due to ourselves. If we have a new situation, with new opportunities amidst fearful destruction, it has not been created by our own strength. Let us not claim a legitimacy which is not due us.

As today every German government is an authoritarian government set up by the Allies, so ever since 1918 every German, every one of us, owes the scope of his activities today to the Allies' will or permission. This is a cruel fact. Truthfulness prevents us from forgetting it even for a day. It preserves us from arrogance and teaches us humility.

Among the survivors, among those on top, there are today, as ever, the outraged, impassioned ones, all thinking they are right and claiming credit for what has happened through others. The man who is well off, who finds an audience, thinks that this alone makes him right.

No one can avoid this situation altogether. Time and again, when we get on this path for an instant, we must make a real effort to find our way back to self-education. We are outraged ourselves. May our outrage cleanse itself, may it stay with us as outrage against outrage, as morals against moralizing. We fight for purity of soul in struggling against the invincible in us.

That is true of the work which we now want to do together in this lecture course. What we have thought as individuals, or heard in conversations here and there, may partly be objectivized in a reflective connection. You want to participate in such connected reflections, in questions and attempted answers in which you will recognize what lies ready within yourselves or is already clear. We want to reflect together while, in fact, I expound unilaterally. But the point is not dogmatic communication, but investigation and tender for examination on your part.

Brainwork is not all that this requires. The intellect must put the heart to work, arouse it to an inner activity which in turn carries the brainwork. You will vibrate with me or against me, and I myself will not move without a stirring at the bottom of my thoughts. Although in the course of this unilateral exposition we do not actually talk with each other, I cannot help it if one or the other of you feels almost personally touched. I ask you in advance: forgive me, should I offend. I do not want to. But I am determined to dare the most radical thoughts as deliberately as possible.

In learning to talk with each other we win more than a connecting link between us. We lay the indispensable foundation for the ability to talk with other peoples.

If I anticipate that which is to become the theme of these lectures only at their very end: for us the way of force is hopeless, the way of cunning undignified and futile. Full frankness and honesty harbors not only our dignity—possible even in impotence—but our own chance. The question f

every German is whether to go this way at the risk of all disappointments, at the risk of additional losses and of convenient abuse by the powerful. The answer is that this is the only way that can save our souls from a pariah existence. What will result from it we shall have to see. It is a spiritual-political venture along the edge of the precipice. If success is possible, then it will be only at long range. We are going to be distrusted for a long time to come.

Lastly, I characterize ways of remaining silent to which we incline and which constitute our greatest danger (I myself cannot refrain from accusing—at least not from a mental attack on the aggressive mentality).

A proudly silent bearing may for a short time be a justified mask, to catch one's breath and clear one's head behind it. But it becomes self-deception, and a trap for the other, if it permits us to hide defiantly within ourselves, to bar enlightenment, to elude the grasp of reality. We must guard against evasion. From such a bearing there arises a mood which is discharged in private, safe abuse, a mood of heartless frigidity, rabid indignation and facial distortions, leading to barren self-corrosion. A pride that falsely deems itself masculine, while in fact evading the issue, takes even silence as an act of combat, a final one that remains impotent.

Talking with each other is canceled too by speech which no longer speaks in private—speech which means to insult but not to hear an answer, waiting rather for the moment of face-slapping and secret anticipation of what in reality is fist and manslaughter, machine gun and bombing plane. Rage cannot distinguish only friend and foe for a life-and-death struggle, talks frankly with neither and does not see men as men, to get along with by being ready for self-corrections. We cannot be conscientious enough in illuminating this sort of conflict and rupture in our intercourse.

## THE GREAT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN US

Talking with each other is difficult in Germany today, but the more important for that reason. For we differ extraordinarily in what we have experienced, felt, wished, cherished and done. An enforced superficial community hid that which is full of possibilities and is now able to unfold.

We cannot sensibly talk with each other unless we regard the extraordinary differences as starting points rather than finalities. We have to learn to see and feel the difficulties in situations and attitudes entirely divergent from our own. We must see the different origins—in education, special fates and experiences—of any present attitude.

Today we Germans may have only negative basic features in common: membership in a nation utterly beaten and at the victors' mercy; lack of a common ground linking us all; dispersal—each one is essentially on his own, and yet each one is individually helpless. Common is the non-community.

In the silence underneath the leveling public propaganda talk of the twelve years, we struck very different inner attitudes and passed through very different inner developments. We have no uniform constituted souls and desires and sets of values in Germany. Because of the great diversity in what we believed all these years, what we took to be true, what to us was the meaning of life, the way of transformation must also be different now for every individual. We are all being transformed. But we do not all follow the same path to the new ground of common truth, which we seek and which reunites us. In such a disaster everyone may let himself be made over for rebirth, without fear of dishonor. What we must painfully renounce is not alike for all—so little alike that one man's renunciation may impress another as a gain. We are divided along different lines of disappointment.

That the differences come into the open now is due to the fact that no public discussion was possible for twelve years, and that even in private life all opposition was confined to the most intimate conversations and was often furtive among the closest friends. Public and general, and thus suggestive and almost a matter of course for a youth that had grown up in it, was only the National-Socialist way of thinking and talking.

Now that we can talk freely again, we seem to each other as if we had come from different worlds. And yet all of us speak the German language, and we were all born in this country and are at home in it.

We must not let the divergence faze us, the sense of being worlds apart. We want to find the way to each other, to talk with each other, to try to convince each other. Let us visualize a few typical differences.

There were our conceptions of events, differing to the point of irreconcilability: some went through the whole disrupting experience of national indignity as early as 1933, others after June 1934, still others in 1938 during the Jewish pogroms, many in the years since 1942, when defeat became probable, or since 1943 when it became certain, and some not until it actually happened in 1945. For the first group, 1945 was the year of delivery and new chances; for others these days were the hardest since they brought the end of the supposedly national Reich.

Some radically sought the evil's source and took the consequences. They desired intervention and invasion by the Western powers as early as 1933; for they saw that now, with the gates slammed on the German prison, delivery could only come from outside. The future of the German soul depended on this liberation. If its destruction was not to be completed, it had to be freed as soon as possible by the sister nations of Western bent, acting on a common European interest. This delivery did not take place. The way led on to 1945, to the most fearful destruction of all our physical and moral realities.

But this view is by no means general among us. Aside from those who saw or are still seeing the Golden Age in National-Socialism, there were opponents of National-Socialism who were convinced nonetheless that a victory of Hitler's Germany would not result in the destruction of Germanism. Instead, they foresaw a great future based on such a triumph, on the theory that a triumphant Germany—whether immediately or after Hitler's death—would rid itself of the party. They did not believe the old saying that the power of a state can only be maintained by the forces which established it; they did not believe that terrorism would, in the nature of things, be unbreakable precisely after a victory—that after a victory, with the army discharged, Germany would have become a slave nation held in check by the SS for the exercise of a desolate, destructive, freedomless world rule in which all things German would have suffocated.

Another difference lies in the way of the ordeal which, although common to all of us, extraordinarily varied in the kind and degree of its particular appearance. Close relatives and friends are dead or missing. Homes lie in ruins. Property has been destroyed. With everybody experiencing trouble, severe privations and physical suffering, it is still something altogether different whether one retains a home and household goods or has been ruined by bombs; whether he sustained his sufferings and losses in combat at the front, at home, or in a concentration camp; whether he was a hunter, a Gestapo victim or one of those who, even though in fear, profited by the régime. Virtually everybody has lost close relatives and friends, but how he lost them—in front-line combat, in bombings, in concentration camps or in the mass murders of the régime—results in greatly divergent inner attitudes. Millions of disabled are seeking a way of life. Hundreds of thousands have been rescued from the concentration camps. Millions are being evacuated and forced to roam. The greater part of the male population has passed through the prisoner-of-war camps and gathered very dissimilar experiences. Men have come to the limits of humanity and returned home, unable to forget what reality was. Denazification throws countless numbers out of their past course. The suffering differs in kind

and most people have sense only for their kind. Everyone tends to interpret great losses and trials as sacrifice. But the possible interpretations of this sacrifice are so abysmally different that, at first, they divide people.

The loss of a faith makes a tremendous difference. All of us have somehow lost the ground under our feet; only a transcendently founded religious or philosophical faith can maintain itself through such disasters. What used to count in the world has become brittle. The believing National-Socialist's thoughts even more absurd now than they were during the days of his rule, can only snatch at feeble dreams, while the nationalist helplessly stands between the immorality of National-Socialism through which he sees, and the reality of the German situation.

Equally vast is the difference in kind and degree of our guilt. No one is guiltless. We shall take up this question later.

But no one is beyond the pale of human existence, provided he pays for his guilt.

True, it is sensible for the individual, depending on his past, to curb and resign himself—it applies to individuals, not to the many, that they should perhaps be silent now, for the time being.

In Germany we have not only the differences between the peculiar attitudes based on the German fate. We also have here the party divisions which are common to all the West: the socialist and bourgeois-capitalist tendencies, the politicized creeds, the democratic will to freedom and the dictatorial inclination. And not only that; it may yet happen that these contrasts will be affected by the Allied powers, and work on us as on a now politically impotent, pliant, testing material.

All these differences lead to constant disruption among us Germans, to the dispersal and division of individuals and groups—the more so as our existence lacks the common ethical-political base. We only have shadows of a truly common political ground on which we might stand and retain our solidarity through the most violent controversies. We are sorely deficient in talking with each other and listening to each other. We lack mobility, criticism and self-criticism. We incline to doctrinism.

What makes it worse is that so many people do not really want to think. They want only slogans and obedience. They ask no questions and they give no answers, except by repeating drilled-in phrases. They can only assert and obey, neither probe nor apprehend. Thus they cannot be convinced, either. How shall we talk with people who will not go where others probe and think, where men seek independence in insight and conviction?

Often the outstanding difference is simply one of character. Some people always tend to be in opposition, others to run with the pack.

Germany cannot come to unless we Germans find the way to communicate with each other. The general situation seems to link us only negatively. If we really learn to talk with each other it can be only in the consciousness of our great diversity.

Unity by force does not avail; in adversity it fades as an illusion. Unanimity by talking with and understanding each other, by mutual toleration and concession leads to a community that lasts.

What we have mentioned and shall develop in subsequent discussions are typical traits. No one needs to classify himself. Anyone who feels himself referred to does so on his own responsibility.

## **OUTLINE OF SUBSEQUENT DISCUSSIONS**

We want to know where we stand. We seek to answer the question, what has led to our situation, the way to see what we are and should be—what is really German—and finally to ask what we can still want.

It is only now that history has finally become world history—the global history of mankind. So our own situation can be grasped only together with the world-historical one. What has happened today has its causes in general human events and conditions, and only secondarily in special intra-national relations and the decisions of single groups of men.

What is taking place is a crisis of mankind. The contributions, fatal or salutary, of single people and states can only be seen in the framework of the whole, as can the connections which brought about this war, and its phenomena which manifested in new, horrible fashion what man can be. It is only within such a total framework that the guilt question, too, can be discussed justly and unmercifully at the same time. At the beginning, therefore, we place a theme which does not even mention Germany as yet: the generality of the age—how it reveals itself as technical age and in world politics and in the loss or transformation of all faith.

Only by visualizing this generality can we distinguish what is all men's due and what is private to a special group—or, furthermore, what lies in the nature of things, in the course of events, and what is to be ascribed to free human decision.

Against the background of this generality we seek, second, the way to the German question. We visualize our real situation as the source of our spiritual situation, characterize National-Socialism, inquire how it could and did happen, and finally discuss the guilt question.\*

After the visualization of the disaster we inquire, third: what is German? We want to see German history, the German spirit, the changes in our German national consciousness, and great German personalities.

Such a historical self-analysis of our German being is at the same time an ethical self-examination. In the mirror of our history we see our aims and our tasks. We hear them in the call of our great ancestors and apprehend them at the same time by illuminating the historic idols which led us astray.

What we think of as German is never mere cognition but an ethical resolve, a factor in German growth. The character of one's own people is not finally determined until it is historically finished, a past and no future any more (like ancient Hellenism).

The fact that we are still alive, still part of history and not yet at the absolute end, leads, fourth, to the question of our remaining possibilities. Is there any strength left to the German in political collapse, in both political and economic impotence? Or has the end come in fact?

The answer lies in the draft of the ethos which is left to us—and if it were the ethos of a people deemed a pariah people in the world today.

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# Introduction

Almost the entire world indicts Germany and the Germans. Our guilt is discussed in terms of outrage, horror, hatred and scorn. Punishment and retribution are desired, not by the victors alone but also by some of the German emigrés and even by citizens of neutral countries. In Germany there are some who admit guilt, including their own, and many who hold themselves guiltless but pronounce others guilty.

The temptation to evade this question is obvious; we live in distress—large parts of our population are in so great, such acute distress that they seem to have become insensitive to such discussion. Their interest is in anything that would relieve distress, that would give them work and bread, shelter and warmth. The horizon has shrunk. People do not like to hear of guilt, of the past; world history is not their concern. They simply do not want to suffer any more; they want to get out of this misery, to live but not to think. There is a feeling as though after such fearful suffering one had to be rewarded as it were, or at least comforted, but not burdened with guilt on top of it all.

And yet, though aware of our helplessness in the face of extremity, we feel at moments an urge, a longing for the calm truth. The aggravation of distress by the indictment (of the German people) is not irrelevant, or a mere cause of anger. We want to see clearly whether this indictment is just or unjust and in what sense. For it is exactly in distress that the most vital need is most strongly felt: to cleanse one's own soul and to think and do right, so that in the face of nothingness we may grasp life from a new authentic origin.

We Germans are indeed obliged without exception to understand clearly the question of our guilt and to draw the conclusions. What obliges us is our human dignity. First, we cannot be indifferent to what the world thinks of us, for we know we are part of mankind—are human before we are German. More important, however: our own life, in distress and dependence, can have no dignity except by truthfulness toward ourselves. The guilt question is more than a question put to us by others, it is one we put to ourselves. The way we answer it will be decisive for our present approach to the world and to ourselves. It is a vital question for the German soul. No other way can lead to a regeneration that would renew us from the source of our being. That the victors condemn us is a political fact which has the greatest consequences for our life, but it does not help us in the decisive point, in our inner regeneration. Here we deal with ourselves alone. Philosophy and theology are called on to illumine the depths of the question of guilt.

Discussions of the guilt question often suffer from a confusion of concepts and points of view. To arrive at truth, we must differentiate. I shall begin by drafting a scheme of distinctions that will serve to clarify our present German situation. The distinctions are, of course, not absolutely valid. In the end, what we call guilt has one all-embracing source. But this can be clarified only by what is gained by means of the distinctions.

Our darkest feelings do not mind being trusted out of hand. Though immediacy is the true reality, the presence of our soul and our feelings are not simply there like given facts of life. Rather, they are communicated by our inner activities, our thoughts, our knowledge. They are deepened and clarified in the measure that we think. Feeling as such is unreliable. To plead feelings means to evade naïveté, the objectivity of what we can know and think. It is only after we have thought a thing through and visualized it from all sides, constantly surrounded, led and disturbed by feelings, that we arrive at

true feeling that in its time can be trusted to support our life.

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