

Asserting One's Presence:
Exploring Moral Responsibility

Truth is what joins us together; and, truth has its origins in communication. The only reality with which man can reliably and in self-understanding ally himself in the world, is his fellow man.

Karl Jaspers¹

The Allied forces firebombed Magdeburg, Germany on January 16, 1945. The city's flak battery defenses, operated by the *Luftwaffe*, were on the outskirts of town and spared destruction. The firebombing turned ninety-percent of the city to rubble and ash. Peter Lutz Lehmann, a nineteen year old German soldier, watched the carnage while rushing shells to the flak guns firing through the night. Every time Peter looked towards the pelted and burning city, his thoughts turned to his mother and grandmother. Were they still alive?

The next day, Peter was free to search the city for his family. The piles of rubble still smoldered and scorched bodies littered the streets – a total of 16,000 dead. A bomb had torn down the front wall of his house leaving the inside open to plain view like a dollhouse. Both his mother and grandmother had survived, which was a point of hope as he served his dreary duty.

During my year of study at Heidelberg Universität (2007-2008), I sat at Peter's bedside once a week in Haus Phillipus home for the elderly. As a retired professor of philosophy, he enjoyed it when I fished out the book I had brought with me to read to him aloud. Normally, it was a *Reklam* book of Stefan George poetry but occasionally it was a densely-packed philosophical treatise by Karl Jaspers, the Heidelberg existentialist. Peter would interrupt me to ask, if I could understand the verses or follow the arguments. Then, a short discussion followed. When I was ready to leave, I would shake his frail hand. Despite his immobility and crooked

¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1950), 48.

spine, he had a firm grip. He asked me when I would return and I named a day in the upcoming week which I thought to be relatively free.

I then rode my bicycle back home to where I lived in the *Altstadt*. The trip lasted fifteen minutes and I passed over the bridge under which the Neckar River flowed. Often, I stopped and dismounted my bicycle. The river caught the sunset's orange light. I enjoyed turning to see how the same light made the ramparts of Heidelberg's castle catch fire. Then, I thought about my research of Heidelberg philosophers during Hitler's *Machtergreifung*; about how Jewish professors' houses were ransacked; and about how after the forced "retirement" of Karl Jaspers in 1937 no philosophers remained at the university. At this point, my mind strained under the weight of this historical Gordian knot and the burning ramparts turned into the Nazi book burning on Heidelberg's *Universitätsplatz* on May 17, 1933. These flames were only an overture to the concentration camps' flames and columns of black smoke: "Where men burn books, / They will burn people also in the end."²

But, on what sort of moral ground do I stand? Why not assert, "Where they read apathetically about genocides, so too will they overlook the evils of their own governments"? Or is the media sensation that grips the internet-powered world an allusion, a cruel trick allowing me endless information without any sort of direct empowerment? Hunger and AIDS plague areas of Africa. The planet is being destroyed through global warming. The United States uses torture at Guantanamo Bay (the prison that Barack Obama has pledged to close down). Wars all across the world are killing innocents. And super-sized nations like India and China will soon want the same share of natural resources that the United States enjoys unfairly. I am not a Nazi,

² Heinrich Heine, *Alamansor*, in *The Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine*, trans. Hal Draper (Boston: Publishers Boston, Inc., 1982), 187.

but am I any less responsible? The question of responsibility (some might argue guilt) is that with which I grapple here.

In Heidelberg, my visits with Peter allowed me to reflect on responsibility. Peter greeted me jovially after I knocked: „Hallo mein Liebling! Schön, dass du da bist!“ The man I spoke with was the same person who had been a young boy in the “Hitler Youth.” During the last years of the war, he was forced to serve in the *Luftwaffenhilferdienst*. Therefore, Peter was a Nazi, but is he guilty and/or responsible?

Will I one day curse about the Bush administration as Peter often cursed Hitler for having put Germany in such a predicament? The young generations ask, “*Why* did you let that happen?” The older generation asks, “*How* did that happen?” And the aloof stream of history laughs somewhere overhead like one of Plato’s forms. But the individual has the ability to assert a *presence* of which history is never capable. The individual’s presence is fluid in the moment and crystallized in history. History is always static; the presence is the free will of the individual and is as eternal as the moment. Responsibility’s wellspring is the ability of the individual to choose – to act – and, thereby, be a presence. What I grapple with is how this responsibility – this presence – establishes itself in Peter’s and my own world.

At Heidelberg Universität, I discovered that the presence of an individual is malleable and subject to fear. Why did the philosophers and the educated not raise their voices during the book burning in May of 1933? Where were the politically savvy’s polemic articles after the Nazi slaughter called “The Night of Long Knives” in June 1934? Karl Jaspers reports his reaction to the openness he felt initially in post-war Germany in a 1945 letter to Hannah Arendt. By imagining the opposite of this free feeling, we can glimpse the state of fear and personal

suffocation that existed under Hitler's rule: "I felt as if I were breathing the air I so yearn for: openness and justice and a hidden love that scarcely allows itself expression in language...as if the world was opening up in which people can talk with each other and discuss things."³ It seems undeniable that engendering fear hinders action and is a tool to reaching power – but does that excuse one from responsibility?

Jaspers would say, "NO!" as shown through his lecture series later published as *Die Schuldfrage*. While other Germans reacted with silence, he tried to spark an ethical debate over the most gruesome time in recent history while standing in a lecture hall. Already in 1945, Jaspers said to an audience of German students and scholars in Heidelberg:

If I did not set down my life against the murdering of others, rather just stood by, then I feel guilty in a way that cannot be legally, politically, or morally measured. That I still live when such things have happened lays on me an irredeemable guilt.⁴

This collective guilt sweeps beyond the politically and criminally guilty within the Regime. It stretches over the whole of humanity. According to this notion of collective guilt, Peter was (is) guilty. His mother and grandmother were also guilty. "When such things have happened lays on me an irredeemable guilt," is non-temporal. All are guilty of all the crimes of humanity just by living through them! As such, history can be imagined as a black ink that sticks to everything it touches. But are there no boundaries? Must I set down my own life "against the murdering of others" even if they live in Darfur? Or is Jaspers speaking about action in the closer community of which I am a part? No matter the setting, however, the presence to act – the ability to exercise a free will as an individual – is that which I have to decide ultimately for myself.

³ Karl Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, December 10, 1945. *Correspondence: Karl Jaspers/Hannah Arendt: 1926-1969*, eds. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, Publishers, 1992), 27.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, trans. Alexander Englert (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946), 32.

Presence and history, however, are both subject to time. When and where a person is born falls to luck. Therefore, my presence is fenced in by the times in which I live, but I choose how to act in this enclosed space. Such a “fencing” time is what occurred in Germany starting in 1933; it is a time under which we still suffer. I am reminded of Theodor W. Adorno’s response to struggling against the past:

One wants to break free of the past: rightly, because nothing at all can live in its shadow, and because there will be no end to the terror as long as guilt and violence are repaid with guilt and violence; wrongly, because the past that one would like to evade is still very much alive.⁵

In the same way that Peter told me stories of the atrocities he witnessed, I feel that I must associate myself with a time in which wars are waged based on economic interests abroad. The images of the hooded prisoner at Abu Grhaib is one example of an instance in time of which I am (and was) a part. Am I guilty for it? I do not believe so. But now that I know, I am somehow responsible. No matter the weight of responsibility, asserting one’s presence is always possible. Our decisions become crystallized in history, yet presence and time are eternally free: “To commit a crime is an act that happens once in the chronicle, but the fact of having committed it will always last...Culpability has indeed begun, although it does not have to finish.”⁶ The product of time is a static history. It is only through asserting one’s presence that the individual can influence the static net of history. Yet, the times can play the role of nemesis when the moment comes in which the individual must act.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Can One Live after Auschwitz?: A Philosophical Reader*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Chicago: Stanford University Press, 2003), 3.

⁶ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, trans. Andrew Kelley (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 45.

But *my* time is marked by widespread knowledge. Does it follow that as I sat by Peter's bedside and read to him; as he ate pudding with a plastic spoon during lunch and reminisced about Jaspers' lectures, that we were responsible? And as the world turned and horrendous acts took place in parts of Sudan and Iraq, were we simultaneously guilty? "Guilt" seems extreme, yet "responsible" seems watery, considering the distance that we have from what occurs on the other side of the world.

The rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who escaped the Nazi Regime, wrote: "In regard to cruelties committed in the name of a free society, some are guilty, while all are responsible."⁷ The distinction here between guilt and responsibility is well-put. But what is a "free society" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? The whole world is beginning to act like a conglomerated society. Evidence is seen in the forming of international organizations like the United Nations, as well as the respective crumbling of the world economy after the fall of one nation's economy. Reading the newspaper or watching CNN gives one the impression that the genocides in Darfur and the battles in the Middle East are next door. Colleges and universities brim over with student interest groups trying to raise awareness and send aid through groups like Amnesty International. Yet, at the end of the day, should that count as an assertion of presence for everyone? Or, is it necessary to refine the "free-society" to the community of which we are directly a part?

My point is not to encourage apathy or diminish the role of wonderful activist groups like those trying to stop the genocide in Darfur. In complete contrast to apathy, I argue for full responsibility of the individual over their own assertions of presence. It will vary, however, *how*

⁷ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1997), 224-6.

each individual asserts a presence. Not all will find value in aid organizations. Each man and woman must decide for themselves.

Time will continue its march; history will perennially form; and the individual through assertion of presence will remain an element in humanity's growth. I do not believe in a Utopia. I *do* believe that humans, through their ability to act freely – i.e., assert their presence – may be able to find some sort of harmony through an open society's solidarity. Yet, what does history have to say on the matter of solidarity when one of its many forms is the mob?

Walking through the streets of Heidelberg, I thought about the torch-lit parade marching down the *Hauptstraße* towards *Universitätsplatz*, where a mob of people lit a bonfire and started hurling books onto the blaze. The head of the Nazi-student union delivered a speech and thrust out the Hitler "Grüß," which the crowd reciprocated. The next day, May 18, 1933, a local newsletter, *Heidelberger Tageblatt*, gave a glowing report of the book burning, "The observers pushed themselves around the roped-off square in a massive crowd that overflowed with enthusiasm, joy, and boisterousness typical of the Pfälzisch people."⁸ The masses that rallied at book burnings represent a *presence of their own* during the times precluding the Holocaust. This "presence" of the masses is a collective presence in which guilt and responsibility vanish in the heat of the moment. Rabbi Heschel's famous quote could then be rewritten, "In a group, some become a ONE, and, therefore, none hold themselves personally responsible."

The Milgram experiment and the Stanford prison experiment illustrate the powerful influence that authority and groups have over the individual. The evidence seems conclusive: in a group or when commanded by an authority figure (especially one that plays upon the individual's fear) the individual can assert his presence in the most horrendous of ways.

⁸ Eckart, Sellin, Wolgast, 62.

Whether it is through the application of shocks or through the using of force in the role of a “prison guard,” the individual seems suddenly less like a free-willed agent and more like a tool in the hands of the powerful. But is this just another excuse for the individual to get away from responsibility? Is it not reasonable to say, “You all should have known better!”? Are we willing to sacrifice our scruples in the face of mob solidarity? Through an examination of the calculation behind the Nazi genocide of the Jews – i.e., the role of the mob-presence behind it – we see the willing self-mutation of the individual in allowing and perpetrating evil acts.

While I visited Buchenwald, just outside of Weimar, the sky began to spatter rain. The weather was appropriate in that it mirrored the sultry mood. In hindsight, two of the camps remaining areas stick out in my mind as important in the discussion of responsibility.

First, just outside of the camps’ barbed wire fence was the cement pen of the Buchenwald Zoo that remained open throughout the war. Inside the pen had been two black bears. The zoo had been a hot spot attraction for both soldiers and Weimar residents alike. When the guards were off duty, they took their dates to look at the animals. Thus, it is painfully clear that the community was aware of the camp and only the most naïve of people could have dismissed it as harmless.

Second, the “horse stall” was an examination room with an adjoining hallway. At one point the Nazi guards used the space to process a group of Russian prisoners of war. The guards took the prisoners one by one into the “examination room” where the prisoner’s height was to be measured. As the prisoners had their backs to the wall with the measuring stick on it, a Nazi guard stuck his pistol through a secret hole and shot each prisoner in the back of the head. I looked in the secret compartment where the Nazi executor stood with his pistol waiting for each

prisoner's shaved scalp to come into view. Every moment in which he pulled the trigger was a moment in which he asserted his presence. But the mob told him to feel proud of doing his duty for the *Vaterland*. They were not men, he was executing, they were sub-human – they were vermin that were better off dead than alive for the sake of the *Volk!*

It was easy for me to condemn every guard as a moral monster as I looked into the dark space of the secret compartment. Surely these men were irredeemable! But I thought about Peter assisting in the shooting down of Allied planes. Then, the haunting images from Abu Grhaib and the tortured at Guantanamo Bay flashed in my head. Just as the visitors of the Buchenwald Zoo, we, the public, are aware of atrocities taking place both domestically and abroad. And just as torture and genocide defied imagination during my visit to Buchenwald, the world is full of horrors committed under the banner of national interests – asserted by a presence of a mob and allowed by the invisibility of the individual's presence. The dark ink of the Holocaust flows into the dark ink of our present history. Looking at Peter and looking at myself in the mirror, shows the protean presence of the individual. In many ways, we are the times in which we live, and still we are so much more.

Back in Heidelberg, Peter was happy to see me. “And how was your trip?” he asked me. I told him about what I had seen and learned. Shaking his head, he grumbled, “How awful, how unbelievably awful.” I nodded in agreement and pulled out the *Reklam* of Stefan George poetry. Afterwards on my way back to the *Altstadt*, I passed over the bridge wondering how the next generation would judge me.

In the poem *To Those Born Later* by Bertolt Brecht, a voice caught during the chaos of mid-twentieth century Europe calls to the coming generation. The poem embodies a moral striving towards some sort of peace in an angry world searching for the guilty:

And yet we know: / Hatred, even of meanness / Contorts the features. /
Anger, even against injustice / Makes the voice hoarse. Oh, we / Who
wanted to prepare the ground for friendship / Could not ourselves be
friendly. / But you, when the time comes at last / And man is helper
to man / Think of us / With forbearance.⁹

Perhaps forbearance is the most that one can expect for past misdeeds when being judged by the next generation. There are so many people who played a role in the systematic genocide of the Jews and who are not easy to blame. Even the individual guards at the concentration camps can hide behind excuses of brainwashing and fear for safety of their families. Then, there are the sleepy residents of Weimar, the children indoctrinated with the toxic ideologies of Nazism, and my friend, Peter, performing his duty to shoot down Allied planes. They all formed the mob-presence and turned their own individual assertions of presence into tools for the authoritarian Nazi Regime. The black stains from the ink of history will never fade away and no amount of forgiveness will erase an action from its place in time. Thus, I feel that Brecht offered a humane way of judging those stained by evil times.

The issue here, though, is personal responsibility and everyone possesses it. The time in which the guards were born was one dictated over by a tyrant and ruled through fear. The history being forged was one of conquest and *völkisch* pride. But the choice – the possibility to assert one’s presence against the tendency of history and against the mob’s presence – remained

⁹ Bertolt Brecht, *To Those Born Later*, trans. John Willett, in *The Faber Book of 20th-Century German Poems*, ed. Michael Hofmann (New York and London: Faber and Faber Inc., 2005), 73.

(and still remains) eternally free. The mob can be swayed by the individual; and the individual is always free to choose within the space and the time allotted him. It is only through such a ubiquitously flowing freedom towards asserting one's presence that German resistance groups like the White Rose and individuals like Karl Jaspers could choose *not* to conform at their own peril. Examples overflow of individual Germans who chose to resist and help Jewish friends and neighbors, while risking the safety of themselves and their loved ones. As Sartre so eloquently said, "We say that man chooses his own self...but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men."¹⁰

Perhaps with the existential "anguish"¹¹ that Sartre discusses, we reach the furthest possible point of understanding the question of responsibility. No matter how large the mob; no matter how heavy history seems to oppose any action; and no matter how fearful a milieu is brought by time, the asserted presence of the individual is the choice made. As a result, to expect everyone to stretch their presence to the other side of the world through chains of e-mails or angry letters should not be held as a requirement nor conveyed as a waste of time. The assertion of presence remains up to each person. The weight, then, on my shoulders is to assert my presence thoughtfully under the weight of compunction. If an evil act is being committed, I cannot be forced to cry out or act against it. There may be a Kantian "Categorical Imperative," but there is certainly no "Categorical Forcing." But I will still feel anguish with the knowledge that the dark ink of history is permanent and that future generations do not have to show me any forbearance.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1957), 17.

¹¹ "[Anguish is:] the man who involves himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a lawmaker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, [thus he] can not help escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility."
Ibid, 18.

On a spring evening in Heidelberg, I sat at Peter's bedside. When I got up to leave, he stopped me and said in English, "I love you." I did not have any idea how to respond. I was in a foreign culture with its own customs. He put out his hand and I took it, saying, "You mean a lot to me too, Peter." This moment of interpersonal connection compliments the notion of individual assertion of presence. It represents the ultimate reaches of human solidarity with which we may be able to rope the scattered nations into some sort of unified world – marked by coexistence, rather than conquering; forged through love and respect, rather than hate and discrimination. Peter and I were linking like a chain into a presence that stood outside of political agendas and venomous ideologies.

Peter said something else, which I wrote down feeling that he had touched on an elemental truth. Tucking his knit-cap down on his bald head, which he wore as a proxy for the hairpieces he had worn while teaching philosophy, he said, "By living through a historical period, the events of the world occur *within* the individual, as well." No matter how I choose to assert my presence as an individual, the residue of time in the form of history will always play into the formation of my identity. In this way, it is the ultimate irony that my freedom of presence is trapped in a time, which I did not choose.

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