

# the question of german guilt

KARL JASPERS

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

Translated by E. B. Ashton

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THE QUESTION OF GERMAN GULLS

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YORDBAM UNIVERSITY PRESS • NEW YORK • 1960

Originally published as *Die Schuldfrage* in 1947. © 1965 Piper Verlag GmbH,  
München, Germany.

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Introduction © 2001 by Fordham University Press

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Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, No. 16  
ISSN 1089-3938

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Jaspers, Karl, 1883-1969.

[Schuldfrage. English]

The question of German guilt / Karl Jaspers ; translated by E.B. Ashton, with  
a new introduction by Joseph W. Koterski.

p. cm.—(Perspectives in continental philosophy ; no. 16)

Originally published: New York: Dial Press, 1947.

ISBN 0-8232-2068-0—ISBN 0-8232-2069-9 (pbk.)

1. National socialism. 2. World War, 1939-1945—Germany. 3. World  
War, 1939-1945—Atrocities. 4. Germany—History—Philosophy.

5. Antisemitism—Germany—History—20th century.

I. Ashton, E. B., 1909— II. Title. III.

Series

DD256 .J8 J3713 2000

943.086—dc22

06-029375

Printed in the United States of America

03 01 02 03 04 5 4 3 2 1

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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 Heidel-

<sup>1</sup>Among the many recent volumes that have been reconsidering the question, see especially interesting one is *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: A Study in the Ethics of*



berg 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 their 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

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*Chavacano* by David H. Jones (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999) and Fernn Sazub, *The Root of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). See also the essay by Anita Kizica, "Kosovo's War Remembered" in *Commonwealth* (February 12, 1999): 12–15.

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

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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 had 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 exonerations 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 unvolving 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. But much practiced at the detachment for which philosophy strives, Jaspers produced a study of guilt and responsibility

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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 still 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

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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

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 existentialists 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 testi-

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<sup>2</sup>Two classic studies of his place among the existentialists are those by James Collins, *The Existentialists: A critical study* (Chicago: Regnery, 1952) and by L. M. Bechler, *Contemporary European Philosophy*, as translated by Donald Nyzell and Karl Aschenbrenner (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

lief in his philosophical autobiography<sup>1</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 tacitly 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 1937 because of displeasure with his acute criticism of racism and rabid nationalism. Gertrude's Jewish heritage was also held against him, but they were

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (The Library of Living Philosophers), edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974) 5-94 (p. 6).



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 a more succinct expression to his ideas: *Reason and Existence* and *Philosophy of Existence*. In these 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 judgement, 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 generally 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 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 of the subject (internally within an individual and externally, for instance, in the trust-relations

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<sup>4</sup> A convenient source for a well-balanced survey of Jaspers's thought is the volume *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited, translated, with introductions by Edith Ehrlich, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1986).

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 sub-

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<sup>5</sup> See my article "Jaspers on Realism and Idealism" in *Jahrbuch der Christlichen Kant-Tagung Göttingen* 11 (1998): 58-69.

<sup>6</sup> On this theme see José Ferrer, *Living the Truth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), which contains a thoroughgoing historical essay on the difference between the classical metaphysical doctrine of the transcendents of being and the corresponding doctrines in Kantian (and generally in Idealist) philosophy.

ject" 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>17</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 yet 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

<sup>17</sup> See volume one of his 1952 *Being and Philosophy*, translated by P. B. Schilpp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

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 indefinable and unprovable,<sup>4</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

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<sup>4</sup>See volume two of *Philosophy*, translated by F. B. Arnold (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), especially 151-54.

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mindful that human beings are conscious of their freedom in various ways, including (1) through their 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

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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 this 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 embedded 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.

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January 23, 2000

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