

# The Politics of Guilt

Ramin Jahanbegloo

University of Toronto

One of the enduring features of human societies has been the relation between the sphere of politics and the question of guilt. Whoever participated in politics has confronted the problem of guilt. The feeling of guilt not only motivates political actors to submit to ethical judgment and accept punishment for their wrongdoings, but also invites the citizens to reflect more profoundly on the idea of vulnerability of a polity to ethical corruption and evil. Strangely enough, the ethical reaction of guilt is asserted by the same moral code that fails to give us guidance in the situation of confronting evil in politics. But if so, we might say that we are free to decide as we please, letting the moral code take the blame for its failure to give advice in the real world, the world in which we must make choices. However, the moral legitimacy of democratic institutions depends primarily on the ethical stubbornness of citizens who refuse to compromise their moral integrity, even for the sake of a practical weighty end. According to the French political philosopher Pierre Manent, “Democracy aims to have its citizens go from a life that one suffers, receives, and inherits to a life that one wills. Democracy makes all relations and all bonds voluntary.”<sup>1</sup> There is an understanding of voluntary engagement here that implies a responsible refusal to destroy political life. Each person’s moral commitment is, in this sense, a commitment to a vision of what a socially cohesive, democratic society should be. This claim is particularly

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Anderson, Brian C. “Two Cheers For Politics”, *National Review*, September 25, 2006

pertinent in dealing with politics of guilt, but also in balancing the ethical bonds that enable citizens to live and share together. As such, our commitment to uphold ethical values reinforces those values within a political community. In other words, a commitment to ethical values requires a commitment to their political expression and public display. What is at issue, then, is that guilt denotes the failure to uphold an ethical bound in the life of a shared moral community. The more an individual is guilty, the more he/she stands apart from the public realm that refers to a shared sense of responsibility. For Hegel it is the loss of such a shared sense of responsibility that gives rise to the “flee from contact with the actual world”. However, though a form of rupture with the community, guilt does reveal and discloses who somebody is. In light of this revelatory character of guilt, each subject is indissolubly bound to the offense that he/she has committed. Through guilt, what was done in the past is repeated differently as a desire to repair the damage suffered by the other. That is, the subject seeks to restore and repair the injured party by bearing the burden of the other’s suffering. Guilt is, therefore, a responsible response to the other which offers the possibility to think a shared community through the eyes of the victims and not the victors. We certainly cannot forget Hegel’s examination of the possibility of guilt as felt by the individual in his reading of Sophocle’s *Antigone*.

As Hegel puts it, in assuming the boundaries between family and polis and by transgressing the political laws of Athens, Antigone “disturbs the peaceful organization and movement of the ethical world.”<sup>2</sup> However, Judith Butler insists in her book, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, that Antigone as a transgressor of the *polis* establishes a “law beyond law.... A law that emerges as the breaking of the law...not a law of the unconscious but some form of demand that the unconscious necessarily makes on the law, that which marks

---

<sup>2</sup> Hegel, G.W.F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans, A.V.Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, paragraph 464

the limit and ambition of the law's generalizability.”<sup>3</sup> So, the ambiguity of guilt remains in Hegel's approach to the tragedy of *Antigone*. There is little doubt that Antigone is guilty because she turns away from one ethical sphere in favor of another. As such, we can say that in this case the guilt is felt because it is an expression of the subject's devoting oneself to one ethical sphere and transgressing it for another. However, it would be fair to say that Creon also suffers from a sense of guilt because he fails to prevent the moving forward of the *polis* to another ethical sphere. Creon's acknowledgement of his guilt is a form of self-destruction: “And the guilt is all mine-can never be fixed on another man/ no escape for me. I killed you, / I, god help me, I admit it all!”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Creon feels the destruction of his very being upon suffering guilt. This brings Hegel to add that Creon “surrenders his own character and the reality of his self, and has been ruined. His being consists in his belonging to his ethical law, as his substance; in acknowledging the opposite law...it has become an unreality.”<sup>5</sup>

By comparing the two cases of Antigone and Creon, we can distinguish between two forms of guilt: on the one hand, a guilt which is negative and brings shame and destruction (that of Creon) and on the other hand, a guilt which is positive and takes the form of a responsible response to the suffering of the other. It is this latter form of guilt which embodies the full meaning of the German word *Schuld* which means at the same time bond, obligation and debt to the other. Antigone's deep sense of guilt corresponds to his indebtedness to the *polis* as an ethical structure. So unlike the negative guilt of Creon, which is a pathway of despair, the

---

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000. P. 33

<sup>4</sup> Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, Trans. Robert Fagles, London: Penguin Classics, 1984, paragraph 1444-4)

<sup>5</sup> Hegel, op.cit., paragraph 471.

positive guilt of Antigone is a recognitive attentiveness to the logic of togetherness of the *polis*. This recognitive attentiveness of intersubjectivity and the ethical value that can arise from it is both an epistemic moment and an ethical moment. In authoring one's actions, one also becomes answerable for the sense of guilt that can result from it. I would suggest that it is with the epistemic humility that one's responsible responsiveness to the irreducible appeal of the Other turns toward the answerability of guilt as an ethical stance. Guilt in this scenario carries with it the fundamental idea that one has the potential to create evil and to repair it by being susceptible to the suffering of the Other. As such, "People are almost always better than their neighbours think they are."<sup>6</sup> as George Eliot writes in *Middlemarch*.

Instead of suggesting a uniform sense of guilt as the source of moral values, we can distinguish between guilt as considered by community ethics and that which is closely related to an ethics of fraternity. It is true that the sense of guilt is a source of values in both forms of ethics, however, it is questionable whether it is the same kind of guilt. Unlike the tragedy of *Oedipus* which represents, as in the case of *Antigone*, the division of the polis against itself and the sense of guilt that follows, the murder of Abel by Cain illustrates the hatred between brothers and a transgression against the kingdom of God. This model of biblical fratricide is completed with the story of Joseph and his brothers and finds its solution in the community ethics. When Joseph finally discloses his identity and is reunited with his brothers, he tries to give his entire story some purpose and relieve his brothers' guilt for selling him into slavery by saying that God had put him in Egypt to preserve his family in the famine. This is to say that the sense of guilt which follows the failure of the ethics of fraternity is corrected by the logic of the highly developed community ethics. In other words, the effects of fratricidal guilt which follow the violent and

---

<sup>6</sup> Eliot, George, *Middlemarch*, ed. by W.J. Harvey, Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1965, p.789

harmful tendencies towards one's brother or neighbour are compensated and disguised by the imperatives of community ethics. The sense of guilt, however, remains in the chamber of community memory as an open door which leads the community into no place beyond the law, but into the heart of the law. The guilt, therefore, with its ethical and communitarian consequences, is recalled as a transformed relationship to the world. This explains why Paul Ricoeur affirms in his famous work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, that the experience of guilt brings about a veritable revolution of consciousness because with it "what is primary is no longer the reality of defilement, the objective violation of the interdict, or the vengeance let loose by that violation, but the evil use of liberty [*liberte, Freiheit, freedom*] felt as an internal diminution of the value of the self."<sup>7</sup> Guilt, then, announces the existence of a new dimension of consciousness, namely, the radical development of a personal moral responsibility or what Ricoeur calls the "it is I" who am responsible for this evil. As such, the sense of guilt (*Schuldgefühl*) brings about a phenomenological transformation of the subject. This phenomenological disclosure of the structure of guilt could be closely paralleled with Karl Jaspers' account of guilt in the moral and not the ontological sphere of analysis.

In his well-known book *Die Schuldfrage*, Jaspers develops a schema distinguishing between four kinds of types of guilt: Criminal Guilt, Political Guilt, Moral Guilt, and Metaphysical Guilt. Criminal Guilt has to do with the transgression of law within a given legally constituted jurisdiction. As for Political Guilt, it deals with the culpability of political actors for crimes committed by the state. Jaspers distinguishes carefully political guilt and collective guilt which is the co-responsibility of a nation for the acts committed by its regime. Unlike Political Guilt, Moral Guilt has to do with an individual's personal sense of culpability. "The morally

---

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 102

guilty”, writes Jaspers, “are those who are capable of penance, the ones who knew, or could know, and yet walked in ways which self-analysis reveals them as culpable error- whether conveniently closing their eyes to events, or permitting themselves to be intoxicated, seduced or bought with personal advantages, or obeying from fear.”<sup>8</sup> Last, but not least, what Jaspers calls Metaphysical Guilt is the failure of having solidarity with the idea of a universal humanity when humanity is threatened. It is the humiliation of “being alive” in the case of the surviving citizens of post-Nazi Germany, whether they happened to be Jewish or not. As such, Jaspers' notion of metaphysical guilt ultimately requires the subject’s relationship with the idea of humanity. Thus the notion of metaphysical guilt, understood within the parameters of Jaspers' philosophy, requires that “we further feel that we not only share in what is done at present-thus being co-responsible for the deeds of our contemporaries-but in the links of tradition.”<sup>9</sup> As mentioned previously, Ricoeur’s response to Jasper’s *Schuldfrage* is that “guilt demands that chastisement itself be converted from vengeful expiation to educative expiation and amendment.”<sup>10</sup> For Ricoeur, human conscience needs to “understand its past condemnation as a sort of pedagogy”<sup>11</sup> This capacity of changing and self-education is what Martin Buber calls “self-illumination”. In his essay on “*Guilt and Guilt Feelings*”, Buber describes existential guilt as a necessary stage in human relationships because it could help people to restore the human order of justice and to undo the harmful effects of failed responsibilities. “Existential guilt occurs when someone injures an order of the human world whose foundations he knows and recognizes as those of his

---

<sup>8</sup> Jaspers, Karl, *The Question of German Guilt*, translated by E.B. Ashton, New York, Capricorn Books, 1961, pp.63-64

<sup>9</sup> Jaspers, Karl, Op.cit., p. 79

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, Paul, op.cit., p. 102

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p.150

own existence and of all common human existence,”<sup>12</sup> writes Buber. In clearly distinguishing existential guilt from neurotic guilt, Buber insists on the illuminating task of conscience as a call for reconciliation. According to him, reconciliation helps the injured individual to overcome the consequences of guilt and to restore trust and justice. Martin Buber writes: “Each man stands in an objective relationship to others; the totality of this relationship constitutes his life as one that factually participates in the being of the world. It is this relationship, in fact, that first makes it at all possible for him to expand his environment into a world. It is his share in the human order of being, the share for which he bears responsibility. An objective relationship in which two men stand to one another can rise, by means of the existential participation of the two, to a personal relation; it can be merely tolerated; it can be neglected; it can be injured.”<sup>13</sup> In a sense, the experience of guilt is a process that occurs when someone injures the order of the human world, but it also takes on the responsibility to repair the perceived injury. In other words, without a sense of guilt, that is a desire for reparation of injury caused to another, there would be no work of dialogue. The guilty man is he who re-enters a dialogue with the world and by the same token is seized by the higher power of conscience. As a result, one learns from his /her sense of guilt to know the limits of one's knowledge, the extent of one's power and the fact that he/she has no control over the world. That is to say, the dialogical dimension of guilt adopts a posture of epistemic humility in order to be able to draw upon the wider spectrum of human experience rather than a singular self-establishing discourse which asserts superiority and hegemony. Guilt is therefore distinct from shame (*Scham*).

---

<sup>12</sup> Buber, Martin, *The knowledge of man*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965, p.127

<sup>13</sup> Buber, Martin, "Guilt and Guilt Feelings," *Psychiatry* 20 (1957): 114-29

Both feelings of guilt and feelings of shame are involved in conscience, but as Rawls asserts “In general, guilt, resentment, and indignation invoke the concept of right, whereas shame, contempt, and derision appeal to the concept of goodness.”<sup>14</sup> As in contradistinction with guilt, shame helps us to recognize the human potentiality for barbarism. According to Arendt “this elemental shame, which many people of the most various nationalities share with one another today, is what finally is left of our sense of international solidarity.”<sup>15</sup> Arendt thus shows us that we cannot pretend that we are guilty about the suffering of others while ignoring the political reality that we live in a shared world. The politics of guilt, therefore, is not to be confused with an abstract and individualistic conception of responsibility. On the contrary, it expresses the idea that we share a common world that includes both those implicated in the wrongdoing and those wronged. As such, the burden of guilt – namely, the irreversible consequence of our actions and the socio-historical context in which it happens – is not only a *moral idea* but also a *political* one. It would not be wrong to argue that guilt assumes a shared ground of values and a feeling that we are dependent on the presence of others, be they real or imagined. It is a moral sentiment which *addresses* an essential component in our political life. But it also refers to the civic responsibility we have to assume as citizens of a human world. It is true that this might not turn us into better human beings, but in any case, it implies the human ability and willingness to transcend self-interest and to be able to set aside oneself for the sake of others while striving for one's own self-realization. As Gandhi used to say, “All humanity is one undivided and indivisible family, and each one of us is responsible for the misdeeds of all the others.”

---

<sup>14</sup> Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971, p.484

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, H., ‘Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility’, in J. Kohn (ed.) (1994) *Essays in Understanding*, pp. 121–32, p.131