

1977

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Recommended Citation

Samson, Steven Alan, "Karl Jaspers: The Question of German Guilt Study Guide" (1977). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 224. http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs/224

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KARL JASPERS: THE QUESTION OF GERMAN GUILT

STUDY GUIDE, 1977

Steven Alan Samson

After the Second World War, the murderous events of the first half of the twentieth century lent renewed energy to international efforts to define and protect human rights. One contribution to this literature, which addressed the question of the collective responsibility for the German people for the criminal actions of their government, was a brief book simply entitled *Die Schuldfrage* [The Guilt Question] by the German physician, psychiatrist, and existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers. Jaspers, whose wife was Jewish and who hid Jews from the authorities, distinguished between four types of guilt:

Criminal guilt comes of violating unequivocal laws and is capable of objective proof. Jurisdiction rests with the court.

Political guilt involves the deeds of statesmen and implicates the citizens of a state for “having to bear the consequences of the deeds of the state whose power governs [them] and under whose order [they] live.” Jurisdiction rests with the power and will of the victor if the state should be defeated militarily. The exercise of political prudence serves to mitigate arbitrary power.

Then there is **moral guilt**: “I, who cannot act otherwise than as an individual, am morally responsible for all my deeds, including the execution of political and military orders. It is never simply true that ‘orders are orders.’” “Jurisdiction rests with my conscience, and in communication with my friends and intimates who lovingly concerned about my soul.” This is why it is always important to have wise counsel at hand.

Jaspers’ last category, **metaphysical guilt**, is a little more troubling if taken to an extreme. It owes more to the Hindu concept of karma than to Christianity to the extent it neglects to consider the irreducible reality of sin and the crucial importance of divine forgiveness. But still it makes a sound point: “There exists a solidarity among men as humans that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world [this confuses man the creature with God], especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail whatever I can do to prevent them, I too am guilty.”

This last point merits further consideration. It can easily lead to a sanctimonious political moralism that has often been used to justify acts of terrorism, such as the bombing of the federal office building in Oklahoma City or the murder of an abortionist in Pensacola. It may also lead to a conception of war as a crusade that requires unconditional surrender by the enemy. Among its tools are the arts of guilt-manipulation, which are addressed at length by R. J. Rushdoony (*The Politics of Guilt and Pity*), who squarely confronts the temptations of self-atonement and scapegoating.

Often this kind of moralism substitutes a false idealism for the prudence or compassion that would spare even an enemy from unnecessary harm. John Brown’s use of terrorism against Southern settlers in the Pottawatomie Massacre is just one of many examples. It has a psychological aspect – a sense of guilt by

association – that may cause us to abhor the consciousness of injustice in our midst and seek to purge it by correcting it or, sometimes, by wreaking vengeance. The American movie industry seems to specialize in fantasies of retribution for guilty consciences.

Self-justification takes a variety of forms. Sometimes we are in a position to act and regret that we did not do so sooner, like the high school student in West Paducah, Kentucky who talked a school mate into surrendering his gun after he had already killed three students. Such circumstances may cause us to wrestle with our consciences and even lead us to unrealistically magnify our own role or responsibility. We must remember that we are not all-seeing. Sometimes we simply react to a crisis on the basis of instinct or prior experience. For Jaspers metaphysical guilt results from confining our solidarity to the closest human ties -- family, friends, neighbors – rather than extending it to all mankind. It suffers from a lack of proportion. Here the parable of the Good Samaritan is helpful because it teaches compassion for the real people we encounter rather than the kind of abstract philanthropy which costs nothing and accomplishes little more. The concept of metaphysical guilt can too easily be used as a political tool by people to extort benefits from others or avoid accepting personal responsibility.

In the end Jaspers himself acknowledges that jurisdiction over metaphysical guilt lies with God alone. It is a disturbing and easily abused concept but it reminds us of the subtle ways in which our lives are entangled – and how we may unknowingly (and sometimes knowingly) profit from the sufferings of others.