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### RESPONSIBILITY AND SELF-RESPONSIBILITY. The Notion of Responsibility as Social-Juridical and Religious-Ethical Category\*

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#### *1. The „Principle of Responsibility“ as Central Category of a Future Ethics*

WALTER SCHULZ recommended in his book „Philosophie in der veränderten Welt“ (1972) the title „Verantwortungsethik“ for the constitution of a modern ethic (1). Along the same line, HANS JONAS made the „Principle of Responsibility“ into a central category of a future ethics (2). This development is new, for the Principle of Responsibility has not played a central role in the history of ethics. Nevertheless, such a development is understandable in the light of current events. Taking responsibility means: understanding oneself as the „author“ of a reality and answering for the consequences of one's own actions. In a situation, in which collective social activity threatens the balance and integrity of the entire socio-ecological systems, and jeopardizes the possibility of all life on earth, no one can overlook the consequences of their actions, and justify themselves by thinking: „I have done my best.“

In particular, with „new objects“ of a „new order of magnitude“ (HANS JONAS, p. 26), modern technology has altered the nature of human activity in such a way, the ethical implications of which have not yet been thought through. That the moral development of human beings is not able to keep pace with technological development, a commonly held view since ROUSSEAU, has proved an elevated actuality in the face of the environmental threat.

#### *2. The Threat to the Environment*

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Not only has the factual scope of human activity increased, but also the associated consciousness of human responsibility. Until recently, one believed that one could overlook the far-reaching consequences of one's actions, concentrating simply on one's local relationships and immediate environment. The far-reaching effects could then be left up to God or nature. Even where the consequences of individual actions were disturbingly clear, they were dismissed as „undesired side-effects“, and attributed to „accident“ or to „blind fate“. Nonetheless human beings have upset the natural and cosmic order; what they lack is an alert conscience for this self-imposed damage. While they could subjugate nature with a clear conscience and dominate it with cunning, both bridle it and pillage it, at the same time this attack appeared harmless, the entire natural order was viewed as impervious. Nature, it was believed, followed iron rules and could care for itself, relying on its own resources. Hence, individuals didn't need to take responsibility for it. No moral principle guided their relationship to nature, in contrast to their relationship to other human beings.

Today, by contrast, we are becoming aware of nature's vulnerability, at least of its endangerment and injury by technical intervention. We recognize that the problem isn't only a matter of increasing, large-scale, technological intervention, but also that of an closely related, accompanying form of consciousness, i.e. the belief that every desired effect can be attained from outside nature through human manipulation and control. What is false in this attitude, are not the human actions as such, but the accompanying working principle of „domination“ by which the possible consequences of affairs are thrust out of consciousness. The *quality of actions* reveals itself in the *quality of its effects*, and these can be bad, even when the actions are precise and technically perfect. Measured against one's own norms, there would be nothing to condemn technological actions, since they operate more perfectly than all other human actions. Nevertheless, by their effects, it is revealed that perfect actions can be destructive actions too. In this respect, it has less to do with the material effects of technical actions, and much more with the limited consciousness that reveals itself in such actions.

### 3. *Is There a Satisfactory Recourse to Old Attitudes and Patterns of Thought?*

In the context of the older religious forms of consciousness, individuals could leave the results of their actions up to God and in one sense, validly so.

In COMENIUS words':

*Omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus*

(Everything occurs as if from itself, there may be no violence in things)

an aspect of reality is touched, worth remembering, that found its highest expression in taoistic thought and praxis. And likewise GOETHE was not wrong, when he recommended [12/13] full attention and moderation in action, allowing nature to govern in the rest:

„Tu nur das Rechte in deinen Sachen,  
das andere wird sich von selber machen.“

(Do only what is right in your own affairs, the rest will take care of itself.)

Hence it is not surprising, when HANS JONAS in his highly proclaimed book „Das Prinzip Verantwortung“ (cf. note 2) in the face of the present dilemma seeks to reconstitute old metaphysical thought-forms and religious attitudes. In an ontological

sense, he begins from the principle of „the priority of Being over Nothingness“, i.e. from the „foundational recognition“ of „the value of all being“ (Seiendes), that deserves to be named „good“, before every determination of good and evil (p. 96 ff.). In the face of the endangered environment, of progress and perfection, he gives a priority to an „ethic of conservation, of preservation, and of protection“ (p. 249). In a request for restraint, frugality and prudence he exercises his critique upon the Utopianism of technical phantasies, which tends towards extremism and seduces us into an excessive use of materials. The global balance and „abundance of responsibility“ (p. 54) requires much more „caution“ (p. 82) and „humility“ (p. 55), „real virtue and wisdom“ (p. 57), the „reestablishment of the category of the sacred“ (p. 57) and in whole a □Ireligious foundation of ethics. □i

Such a religious orientation is also presupposed by other authors, as in the principle of „Reverence for Life“ (ALBERT SCHWEITZER) and „Letting-Nature-Be“ (ROBERT SPAEMANN, cf. note 3). Here the religious attitude can be anchored in the thought, that the individual is a part of nature; hence, those who want to dominate nature must also dominate human beings, so that the battle against nature, precisely in the victory, will be lost. In order to overcome the unfortunate position, that freedom is opposed to nature, SPAEMANN poses the question, i.e. whether one can grasp the concept of reason (*qua* autonomy) in such a way that self-determination includes nature, instead of being opposed to it. Nature itself would then have to be thought under „self-categories“ and human freedom as a „freedom of nature“, instead of one that must escape the bondage of nature. The request is for another type of relationship to nature in the whole.

But while appearing justified in their call for a return to traditional attitudes and ways of thinking, particularly in light of the extreme „endangerments to“ and „imbalance of“ the world situation, something still remains questionable. For from my point of view, the wheel of history can not be turned back, and the past cannot be the measure of the future. If the statement is valid:

„Denn wo Gefahr ist, w“chst das Rettende auch“ (HÖLDERLIN)  
(For where there is danger, [13/14] is also deliverance),

then in the present situation, and only there, can the potential be sought and found for nature's healing.

#### *4. Responsibility for the Present and Future requires a New Frame-Work and Perspective*

Ethical and religious attitudes have their place in a specific spiritual comportment and an accompanying way of thinking. If one begins from the inseparability of human social, psychological, and conceptual structures, then one must speak of a historical-epochal totality, the conditions and aspects of which cannot be randomly separated, i.e., rearranged in time and space. Thus, recourse to older frames of reference and categories can only be *heuristically* meaningful, where they illuminate analogous contexts and tendencies in the present. This demands the overcoming of older, inherited conceptions and attitudes. *The present world will be born out of the future and not out of the past.* Who wants to grasp the new, must therefore let the old fall away. The required emergence of individual self-responsibility demands, in this respect, a new development. This cannot be validly realized in recourse to outmoded ways of thinking, regardless of how deeply they have become engraved in the soul.

I would like to exemplify the necessity of a paradigm shift by considering some actual fields of concrete responsibility like genetechnology, euthanasia, abortion and suicide treatment. Everyone knows, how complex these issues are and how little real knowledge can support the demanded decisions. But also ethical principles, in so far as they can compensate for lack of knowledge, often fall short and fail to apply to the real situation. Both, together, complicate not only public legislation, but also its application, for which there exist grey areas, fluctuating boundaries and unknown cases. The personal decisions called for can no longer receive a satisfactory orientation from an outside point of view, i.e. from political, religious, and ethical norms. Hence, an orientation must be determined through personal insight and self-established norms. This presents an unprecedented difficulty for the individual, but also a new challenge.

The new situation can be clearly illuminated in the counseling relationship. Should a counselor take refuge into legal rights, apply ethical principles, or appeals to reason, then the goal of the counseling relation would be missed, i.e., such standards fail to meet the individual case and individual self-responsibility called for. In the counseling relation, general liability is first suspended, which cannot suggest that the practice is illegal or immoral. In order to find an ethically responsible solution, one must consider the scope of the problem „outside the [14/15] bounds of good and evil“. Even God must be suspended from the picture, if it is to find its proper frame. Legal rights, reason, morality, and belief as orientation-marks are not thereby closed out, but they cannot carry the weight of the decision, which the individual must be responsible for. Counseling has to do with a situation of self-encounter, in which general principles are invalid, and which at first glance appears irrational; but this moment of encounter is what gives the ethical problem its inner transcendence and first discloses its true place. Only in this position can one really speak of self-responsibility.

##### *5. Responsibility in the Older, Heteronomic Frame of Reference (Responsibility A)*

The example of the counseling relation as a place of concrete, interpersonal responsibility shows, that the concept of self-responsibility (responsibility B) belongs to a different frame of reference than its traditional counterpart (responsibility A). Responsibility in the counseling situation is something in quality other than the traditional heteronomic notion of responsibility.

The traditional social and ethical models of thought, at least in Western culture, are based on the idea of law and a corresponding notion of reason, which both follow the *principle of generalization*. This position is layed out most clearly in KANT's ethics and philosophy of law. Even when this principle cannot be effectually applied, it is nevertheless apt to produce general liability, based on a generally expected range of normal behavior. Extreme deviations from that norm were avoided or repressed. Indeed, the tendency towards deviation, and the tendency towards extremes, showed that „generality“ could not suffice, to moderate social and psychological processes and tendencies. Nevertheless, this averaging, at least, in cooperation with force, could maintain a passable balance, to which the threat of death contributed. For irresolvable problems, there were graves for the body and soul, that at least could give the appearance, that things had been taken care of. More incisive are the

curtailments, that this generality was obligated to make in the life of the individual. Neither could it suffice for the individual nor tolerate an unconditional universal or absolute relation. Like the person's self-relation, so too their relation to God was socially controlled, for it was felt, that with 'I' and 'God' a situation could arise, that was independent of the social world and its power structure.

In a traditional sense of responsibility, a client or employer is accountable to a law giver and judge. An individual who takes responsibility in this traditional sense, must speak and answer in such a way, that is required of him, and take [15/16] responsibility for the good or bad results of his fulfillment of duties. The responsible party sees himself placed before a legal court, to whom he must justify himself. He is responsible for the fulfillment of a given task or for the conducting of an office. To be responsible means to be accountable to one's duty and office. Such handed-over, established duties and rights could be legally mandated, their fulfillment being rewarded and their non-fulfillment punished. Where responsibility could be requested and be set down in this way, there is naturally a even greater need for discharge and forgiveness, so that the rendering of accountability will tend to self-defense and serve to individual excuse. It turns to a merely legal category of liability, which requires no moral engagement. In fulfilling its duties and obligations, responsibility becomes understood and defined like business affairs, who need, as it seems, no moral involvement. It doesn't matter, if one feels himself personal responsible or not.

The reverse of the medal is, that in the non-defined, not obligatory matters no consciousness of responsibility can arise. Through this confinement of focus upon the particular, consciousness is pulled further and further away from the larger contexts; which now, like nature, are left to themselves, or in the case of the society, to anonymous institutions (like the free market, money or the State), which are overloaded. The growing consciousness of this „systems-character“ fully neutralizes the consciousness of individual responsibility, so that the enormous responsibility in economics, politics, and society is fully separated from the smaller, individual burden of responsibility. Indeed, shortcomings in highly complex forms of organisation and technological events do not allow individual accountability (consider industrial megafirms and modern bureaucratic systems); hence by publically confessed „human limitation“, the individual can avoid the consequences of his actions and avoid the corresponding punishment. Moreover, responsibility doesn't refer to the distant, unforeseeable consequences of individual and collective behaviour, that express themselves in the quality of life. One believes it unnecessary to take responsibility for the physical, psychological, and spiritual conditions of life.

In its narrow juridical form, the notion of responsibility is not valid for the far-reaching responsibility, called for today, which is neither clearly bounded in its scope nor exactly defineable in the sense of expected action. But not only legal thought has reached the boundaries of its range of application; also the traditional political and moral consciousness has not kept pace with the new situation. As always there is a tendency to illuminate an ever smaller circle. The duty in the State would be subordinated to the duties in family and job. Finally, the idea of moral autonomy put the individual outside of all natural, [16/17] social and psychological contexts and gave it a transcendent place. In all this is revealed a tendency to self-

exoneration, self-excusals, and factual irresponsibility, whose grounds must be sought in the older concept of responsibility and its shortcomings of consciousness.

#### *6. Shortcomings of Consciousness as the Main Source of the Factual Denial of Responsibility*

The theoretically accepted place of the self-guiding and responsible subject remains a barely redeemed postulate. The present trends, set in motion through the Enlightenment, appear to be leading in the reverse direction. Even if now a wider range of events and larger periods of time can be foreseen, practical reason and behavior remain committed to old patterns of behaviour. Until now, the practical relation to products, and also the scientific attitude could satisfy itself with *zones of mediate generality*, for which there were vague, yet practically reliable and statistically valid *approximations*. This approximate relationship existed between a *more or less*, it permitted *undefined boundary lines*, that neither theoretically nor practically needed to be illuminated. Many aspects could remain unconsidered, and also the point at hand didn't have to be *directly* dealt with. When one by such means didn't reach a solution, one could always hope that a solution would come *in time* or that *death* would remove the problem. Those who were bound by laws and regulations, could count on *exceptions*. Hence, undesirable responsibilities were passed off on a *scapegoat*, i.e. on nature, on death, or on God. But the *social hierarchy* also favored a setting aside of responsibility upon leaders, representatives, or elites, from whom individuals gladly made and let themselves be dependent. In any case, everyone had recourse to either smaller or larger excuses, so that no one put themselves in a position to overtake responsibility for the whole. Just as one can *spatially* set things aside, either outside or inside - one can blame circumstances, delegate to higher authorities, or simply repress the situation - in the same manner one can *temporally* shove responsibility forwards or backwards. In paradisiacal thought, responsibility was considered lost in the past, just as in the apocalyptic expectation it was found in the future. Meanwhile, one could say that God's fatherly decree and providence along with nature's motherly care, would guarantee the proper outcome of things. Hence, the individual could restrict his conscience concern to short range periods of activity.

In comparison with this childlike denial of responsibility, things have not changed for the enlightened, mature, so called self-responsible individual. On [17/18] the contrary, through insight into the systems character of structures and processes, it seems that individuals feel themselves relieved from personal accountability, which an older, religiously informed attitude demanded. But also a technological mode of thinking has neutralized the self-responsibility felt by conscious individuals. The large-scale of technological thought has occasioned the overlooking of subtle processes that have followed it at the micro level. For modern thought, the principle requests and long-range solutions tend towards ideals and utopias, whose realization will not succeed. (4) In the consequence, the present situation has led to personal apathy and feelings of helplessness in the wake of an insurmountable crisis. Psychologically speaking, the unconsciously repressed situational and personal aspects have developed to such an extent, that, as Freud says, the individual no longer is the master of his own household; likewise the actor no longer knows who is regulating his behavior. How these obvious shortcomings can be effectively encountered, remains an open question.

## 7. *The Paradoxical State of Affairs*

Modern technological and organizational forms of production both encourage self-exoneration, while demanding self-responsibility, since man is clearly their maker and knows, that he is. Unclear and contradictory relationships reveal themselves especially in the unforeseeable consequences, manifested in the environment, of collective and individual conduct; here cumulative effects develop in the large and small scale to critical potential, and the boundaries of systems-controls are obviously seen. Thus follows the paradoxical state of affairs, that now, in increasing measure, everyone is responsible and simultaneously no one can be made concretely responsible. While on the one hand, the consciousness of responsibility for the entire system grows, on the other hand, a personal feeling of responsibility shrinks. Where all are responsible, yet no one can be made responsible, unclear relationships arise. In the larger horizon of actions and their global effects, everyone is equally affected and each one or no one is accountable. For example: What can it mean today, for instance, to be a „faithful housekeeper“? Or who would be willing to stand up „personally“ against fascist tendencies in the private and public sectors?

The dilemma points to a *structural paradox*. In the same moment in which the long range horizon of human action opens, closes, so it seems, the time and the space for their realization. When, for instance, social reforms collapse financially, after periods of peak prosperity, and periods of recession result, the opportunity for long-range reforms, based on a continuous development, are [18/19] prematurely closed out. Projects with a long-range perspective under these conditions no longer have a chance. The same holds true for the larger responsibilities for the environment and society, their long-range perspectives cannot find their appropriate time. While from the perspective of the individual person, the space of action narrows, also, in consideration of the totality, the perspective is reduced and time accelerated, so that quickly established, destructive cycles take the place of long-range planning and a comprehensive approach. The dilemma is blatant in the political sphere, where the more complex and long-range the planning perspectives are, the more rushed and uncertain are the corresponding political decisions.

This inability cannot be blamed on either the individual or the social, for on neither side is there a lack of good will. How then shall the difficulties be dealt with? The appeal to the individual is unsatisfactory, but also the complementary call for political action can not change things. Neither can be negated and yet both appear likewise insufficient. An entirely new paradigm for thought and action must be found, in which the individual and the social likewise are included.

The difficulty, which reflects itself in the feeling of „lost future“, gives a hint at the possible solution, for such a paradoxical situation has always two possible inlets and outlets. Through the eclipse of time and space, possibilities for action are in one sense closed off, but in another sense first opened. This means in fact, that the real opening cannot be directed outwards, but must lead through a narrow door into the inner realm. The individual must learn, how to move consciously in this direction. In any case, outwardly directed and oriented behavior is trapped in a box, from which, without a change of direction, it remains unable to break free, even with the greatest effort.

### 8. *The Demand for Radical Self-Responsibility (Responsibility B)*

Those who call for global politics, legal rights, and reason, have just grounds. Nevertheless we all know, that political institutions and legal cases on the world scale are highly ineffective, and that they cannot be made more effective by force. The arm of the law is short and the political lever is weak as long as a majority fail to support the political structure and order. With pure power politics and a corresponding „we - they“ mentality, just as with legal measures alone, the political stumbles upon a boundary. Beyond its borders such methods become ineffective, both on a world and local scale of conflict. Where world politics develop increasingly into „one world politics“, no more national battles can [19/20] be fought. At the same time, small-scale quarrels fought within one's own house can no longer be suppressed. Since the environmental problems reach beyond national boundaries, they result in the overlapping of smaller and wider zones of effect and responsibility. This all-in-one form of reality leads to the inescapable consequence, that everything is intertwined and artificial boundaries in their previous function have become meaningless.

This development makes it difficult for individuals to limit themselves to their own sphere and to dispense with the wider reaching effects of human actions. Also, the individual is aware of the interdependence of factors, thus cannot so lightly consider himself as an unimportant factor in a mass process. On the contrary, in today's complex and highly formalized systems the subjective factor of self-participation and concrete involvement will become ever more important. Indeed, collective guilt can not legally be dealt with. Instead of appeasing oneself with the thought, that where there is no one plaintiff there is no accusation, the new appeal is to the moral consciousness, that cannot exempt itself from its own failure. For instance, the younger generation no longer accepts the refusal of the past generation to feel responsible for the violent fascist system. What appears here as a mere moral problem, from which one believes one can always escape, has meanwhile developed into a physical and psychological form of impairment, from which no one can break free. The moral deficit, that until now expressed itself only psycho-somatically in damaged souls, has now taken on material forms in the environment, thus becoming inescapable for all. We can no longer close our eyes in the face of evil. What until now could be held apart as two extremes: the „person of good will“ with a „clean state“, and „the sacrificial lamb of atonement“ (cf. Jesaia 53, 1 - 12), has now collapsed into one. Morally and factually it is now demanded, that individuals take responsibility even for that which they cannot impute to themselves.

*Responsibility for the whole* is not to be refused. In the first glance it seems to be highly contradictory: the one who is in control, has responsibility for that as well, which lies beyond the boundaries of that control. One is responsible for all, not only for that which can be expected from him. Precisely the universal, or objective responsibility reveals itself as no longer objective, for *only the individual can bear universal responsibility*, which lifts any arbitrary moral boundaries, and gives to the individual consciousness a transcendent character.

But what does it mean to be responsible in a situation, in which each one is both in power and not in power, in which each is accountable and can not be held accountable? In other words, how can we „concretely“ expect the individual to be a

„world citizen“, responsible for history and nature. How can one think [20/21] of such categories in reality and not only in an abstract way? Under what name can the requisite association really be produced between objective, generally declared and subjective, individually enacted responsibility? In the present state of affairs, both aspects increasingly tend to fall simultaneously apart and together, i.e. in their kernel they prove to be identical. What appears to be two separate strands, intertwine in an untieable knot, which is the place of the desired solution. This demands or suggests a new direction for both, small and large scale responsibilities. The individual can no more restrict his view to the local horizon and leave the larger picture up to the authority of God or politics. Likewise, neither can politics base itself on its old instruments of power and is being increasingly confronted with the challenge of nature and mankind.

The principle of responsibility, as demanded today, can no longer be based on the limited scope of *generality* and *authority*. Required is both a more individualized and more generalized universal principle. Generality as such can neither bear the burden of a universal accountability nor take the place of individual responsibility. In contrast, since PASCAL and KIERKEGAARD, the *paradox of the individual*, which is also the *paradox of the universal*, has been recognized and thought through, i.e., the individual (der Einzelne), who falls both „before“ and „beyond“ the generalized mean, *realizes an absolute relation in a concrete fashion*. Consequently, a paradoxical form of generality is required, in order to deal with the contradictions that follow upon its logical form. How such a paradoxical, both individual and universal absolute, in one the same attitude respective action can be established, has been in Western thinking until now left open. Hitherto elaborated types of ethics (for example ethos, moral sense and moral reasoning), are unfit for dealing appropriately with the individual and the universal perspective. As formal logic and the paradox can not meet, nevertheless they are intrinsically connected, so too, the older types of ethics and the new ethics of self-responsibility (category B) remain incommensurable. Nevertheless, it is possible to combine them on a practical level.

The prior argument can thus be summarized as follows:

*Generality (social, political), i.e. the general law of morality and legislation, cannot replace the personal responsibility of individuals. In other words, individual responsibility cannot be mediated by means of a medium or abstract general rule. Both a thorough-going individualizing and universalizing of the reference frame for human thought and action is necessary. The thesis is that each can only be realized within the other, i.e. that a universal ethics must be an individual ethics and vice versa. Personal respon- [21/22] sibility is global responsibility, and the latter is centered in the former, even though political means continue to be a necessity.*

The *paradox of the coincidence of individual and universal perspectives*, which now is chosen as a starting point, has hitherto been resolved in a different way. For instance, the implementation of social systems has chosen forms of accountability, which corresponded to the traditional solutions of social problems and conflicts. Indeed, by systemic accountability the role of the individual was overstepped. Nevertheless, an appeal could always be made for increased personal involvement and self-initiative, to the point of self-sacrifice. Even when it was recognized, that larger entities (groups, institutions, nations) as such can not be held accountable, it could still be maintained, that social entities are composed of individuals, and these

can potentially be bearers of responsibility, where their social group can not. And even when social systems demanded too much from their individuals, this didn't imply an overburden, for individuals could always do more than simply fulfill their function - they could struggle and die for the welfare of the social whole.

But more difficult is, becoming wholly accountable for the state and integrity of nature and life on earth . Solutions here were mostly sought by taking recourse to religious attitudes. It was held that religious attitudes can account for situations, where the total context lies beyond the boundaries of individual or social accountability. A humble mind was required for human beings, who can not restructure the whole earth according to their own wishes and aims.

### *9. The Absolute Basis of Self-Accountable Action: KANT and SARTRE*

In the principle of responsibility B, the two poles, i.e. „the individual“ and „the concrete whole“, are related in a qualitatively distinct fashion, as in the case of traditional social forms and rights. Important is, how their relation can be more clearly defined.

Since the 18. Century of Enlightenment, the following considerations were made in respect to the position of the free subject:

- there is no mediation of the individual, even when one can substitute the other;
- every individual position has the same worth, and none is more important than the another, even when they could be considered on different levels and be measured against one another;
- because they are equal in an absolute and not in a relative sense, individuals cannot be compared with one another, even if they continuously make such [22/23] comparisons; their relation to one another is personally and impersonally at the same time.

The principle of responsibility (category B) presupposes these interpretative moments without being exhausted in them:

- accountability will imply involving oneself unconditionally; i.e., one's relative position will be absolutized;
- individual deeds take on, in a personal fashion, an impersonal meaning; i.e., an individual defines good action by making it their own, and at the same time improves the world by performing that action;
- the individual is not more important than that for which it has taken responsibility; i.e., ones absolute position will be relativized.

But what can the measure of accountability be, when it can no longer be based on any given standard? I would like to attempt, once again, in light of a few representative authors, to develop further this existential direction.

KANT's categorical imperative is based on the principle of consistence and generalization of individual action. In reality though, it is valid only in so far as „all“ are willing, to carry it through. But we cannot count on that assumption, and thus, its factual validity remains an ideal of reason. Nevertheless, in its subjective binding

force, it obligates me absolutely, even though no other would be willing to follow. Hence, reference to generality cannot ground its own validity, for it is valid always only for „me“, and separates me from all comparison with others, whose behavior is wholly irrelevant for the individual's decision. But from where then, can generality receive the foundation? And what type of non-rational consciousness provides its absolute validity - for me?

SARTRE's individual oriented notion of absolute freedom defines responsibility anew as radical self-accountability, one that can be neither denied nor shoved off on others. One is in a comprehensive sense responsible for everything, what one is and does, and equally for the unseeable results of one's actions, including the consequences for the whole of humanity. In this way, the project of action undergoes a totalization. To create a totality does not belong to the individual and yet is demanded of them, because it belongs essentially to their own freedom and responsibility. Individual and general responsibility are bound together in a non-rationally resolvable fashion. In the narrow and broad sense the two intersect, and are in fact coextensive. The smallest and the widest sphere contact each other immediately.

Freedom so understood contradicts God, in so far as the concept of God is utilized to keep oneself in a self-chosen bondage and a denial of individual responsibility. For SARTRE the principle of responsibility means *totalization* and not *re-* [23/24] *ligio*, i.e. a regress to an overarching authority. In the context of absolute freedom and responsibility, the question of God represents no challenge; rather, it serves much, in the opposite sense, as a principle of passivity and self-excusals. The individual can in no way be dismissed, not even by God. No one can be obligated to take responsibility, unless they are willing to.

Such a standpoint can be called atheistic, but is in no way irreligious. How should one come to feel personal responsibility without the consciousness of absolute freedom? The circle closes here, for responsibility presupposes only itself and nothing else. But, against SARTRE, the true religious reveals itself first through this step into the unknown of oneself, where the genuine religious dimension is hidden. SARTRE is right in that only where God no longer rules over the world, where the state no longer calls one to duty, and where no outside authority can be blamed, the individual first does awaken, in truth, to himself. God may then be again important, but in another way, just as the other person begins to take on a new significance. Concrete responsibility is only in play, where there are no orders to preserve and no demands of a party to fulfill, i.e., where there is no „charge“ and no „dependence“, and where I alone remain as the one that can take responsibility, when I choose to.

Implicit in KANT's and explicit in SARTRE's position is that the general is no longer a matter of a rule or general law, but is made a concern of individual choice. The challenge is proclaimed to all, but in such a fashion, that it is only valid for me and I experience it so, i.e., as personally directed. This is the foundation for all concrete involvement. The general is here mine in such a way, that it remains incommensurable with the acts and omissions of others. Responsibility as ethical self-involvement is now subjectively constituted, nevertheless unconditionally related to the total context of human life. The individual obligates himself, but does not obligate himself within himself. In so far as the individual chooses and projects

themselves, they choose and project the other and the whole of humanity at the same time. Paradoxically expressed, this means, that the general obligation is not a general obligation, but rather refers to a deeper plane. No fixed structure supports the whole, but individual subjects and their actions.

Such an intersubjective constitution of relation, action, and responsibility is foundationally free from obligation, also from self-obligation. The HOBBSIAN problem of embodied egoism no longer presents a problem. The radical, personally responsible freedom can be understood in an impersonal-personal fashion; hence, from the outset, it extends beyond the egocentric will and/or generality. There is always an underivable „more“, that supports the general order and fulfills the expected duty, or takes departure from it. For me everything [24/25] has life only through the living impulse, that I give to it. The overcoming of egoism exists in the insight, that everything freely intertwines with everything else, and a theft, in this respect, is not possible.

The coincidence of individual and universal responsibility does not exclude a recourse to the general, but is not based on it. Thus, the ethics of responsibility can not be an ethics of ethos, moral sense, or reason, if one understands by it the obligation to the general mean. Responsibility, as here defined, points in another direction from that mediated through KANT by Hegelian Idealism, Marxism, and Pragmatism, and still today declared obligatory by the practitioners of discourse ethics (HABERMAS, APEL). The following sections should serve to clarify this new direction, in so far as it is articulated in Western thinking.

#### *10. Personal Responsibility as Religious-Ethical Category by KIERKEGAARD*

Since KANT, a personally centered ethics of fair-mindedness has been complemented with a legal-political social ethics; both appear to mutually call for and expand on one another. When push comes to shove and the weakness of the ethical reveals itself, one always takes recourse to the call for politics. The individual is thus hypostasized and at the same time subjugated, while in both cases overburdened with the demands of altruism and of egalitarianism.

In contrast, since KIERKEGAARD and NIETZSCHE, there is a split or rupture between individual ethics and social ethics, that begins with the problem of action and doesn't concentrate primarily on duties and rights. The social reference frame, be it in empirical-factual or in normative-idealized form, is here made secondary. The path of the ethical now becomes an „individual law“ („individuelles Gesetz“ by GEORG SIMMEL), that is absolute, but that doesn't absolve the individual from obligation and not reduce them to pure selfishness. Neither is the individual placed beyond the sphere of reality, nor good-naturedly made harmonious with it. In this context, „die Pflicht und ewige Gültigkeit des Allgemeinen“ (the duty and eternal validity of the general) has become an obsolete frame of reference for the individual and for the ethical (5). The individual is infinitely more than could be defined by an extraneous denominator. But on the other hand, it is not absolute in the sense, that there is nothing common and obligatory for it. The simultaneous connection of absolute freedom and being-in-relation requires a new elaboration of the categorial framework, in which the one and the other and their mutual relations can be thought, as centered in the category of self-responsibility. The point is not solely exchange of the

[25/26] focus „social behavior“ through the focus „self“, but the shift of the paradigm on the whole.

In the old religious context one needed „to give up the world“ in order to „save one's soul“. KIERKEGAARD contrasts this wrong alternative with a seemingly paradoxical movement in both directions: „Die wahre konkrete Wahl ist die, durch welche ich im selben Augenblick, da ich mich aus der Welt herauswähle, mich in die Welt zurückwähle.“ (Entweder-Oder, loc. cit., p. 814). (The true concrete choice is the one, where I put myself out of this world and because of this, in the same moment, back into the world.) The choice of one self as a concrete option has two sides, but both may only prove to have an effect, when one chooses himself absolutely: „Erst wenn man in der Wahl sich selbst übernommen hat, sich selbst angezogen, sich selbst durchdrungen hat, dergestalt, daß jede Bewegung von dem Bewußtsein einer Selbstverantwortung begleitet ist, erst dann hat man sich ethisch gewählt, erst dann ist man in seiner totalen Isolation in absoluter Kontinuität mit der Wirklichkeit, der man zugehört“ (p. 812 f.) (Not before one has chosen oneself, attracted and penetrated oneself, so that every movement is accompanied by the consciousness of self-responsibility, one has chosen oneself ethically; then, in total isolation, one is in absolute continuity with the reality one belongs to.)

The choice of „self“ happens while going through despair, in which one loses everything and needs to give up oneself - in order to get everything back, transformed on a deeper level. Here is manifested the paradox, that „the absolute isolation is identical with the deepest continuity“. The gate is narrow one has to pass through, before one is able to connect absolute self-responsibility with the responsibility for the whole world, the history and the descent („Geschlecht“). One is born and educated into the „reality, one belongs to“ („die Wirklichkeit, der man zugehört“, p. 813), but nevertheless one comes into *essential* contact to it *first* through the act of self-choice, when one has chosen one self out of that reality, in total isolation.

Therefore it is impossible to apply the category of self-responsibility to the esthetical man (den „ästhetischen Menschen“), who still is standing before this choice and its experience. It does not belong to the *first ethics* („erste Ethik“), which presupposes, as SOCRATES says, the ability to do the good. SOKRATES thought is, that those, who have really realized the good, will do it. There may be a misunderstanding, but no fundamental incapability. In contrast, the categorical frame for self-responsibility is a *second ethics* („zweite Ethik“), where the starting-point is to be *not* capable of: „Die erste Ethik ignoriert die Sünde, die zweite Ethik hat die Wirklichkeit der Sünde innerhalb ihres Bereichs ...“ (Der Begriff der Angst, p. [26/27] 465) (The sin is ignored in the first ethics, the second ethics has the sin in it's own sphere.)

In the old context of heteronomic responsibility, it means to talk big, if one would speak about global responsibility at all, and it could only lead to misunderstandings, to take the command of GOD: Be the Lord of Earth! literal (cf. Genesis 1, 26-28). Absolute responsibility in the meaning of the „second ethics“ doesn't start with a rise of power, but with a conversion to the inner realm. From this point on, there is despair for the individual, who has sinned against the earth and life. But in the same moment, when the continuity of this „sin of the descent“ is realized deep inside, one stands already above it as an acting person.

Consequently, KIERKEGAARD does not talk about the general, where, from an ethical point of view, there is no doubt about its validity, but about the difficulty of its realization. The term „sin“ thus is *doubly* defined: Not only what has to be possible, but moreover is duty for everyone: the realization of the good, is made impossible in the state of sin, but does not cease to be true. Such a limitation doesn't relieve the individual, but is a burden, even when there is no conscious feeling of guilt connected with it. KIERKEGAARD paraphrases the state of sin not with „guilt“, but paradoxically with „innocence“. But in this innocence, there is an underlying fear, which does not allow men to be happy with their luck.

Before taking the decisive step, i.e. the self-choice, the individual is confronted with the trilemma of the tragic, the comic and finally with despair (cf. Entweder - Oder, p. 168 ff), which at last can only find its solution in the religious dimension. The tragic is, that a man, factually not yet able to be responsible for anything, should nonetheless be responsible for everything. Ridiculous or comical seems the situation, as long as one does not feel this huge contradiction and its pain, but wants to be absolute in his whole relativity. Despair arises in the transit from the esthetical to the ethical form of life. Psychologically, the first state of life reaches its inner boundary and starts showing its reverse side in despair. Desperate in the ethical sense is the situation, when one realizes, that one fails in taking individual responsibility for the general and is frustrated by trying to realize it. Again, there are two movements possible at this point. Either the strength and hardness of the ethical demand breaks at the mildness of the tragic, that lulls in sleep the grieved like motherly love; or the ethical will be softened by the fatherly as the religious, when the discrepancy is made visible in its whole extent.

With this, the direction is shown, in which the consciousness of responsibility may be purified with all embracing love. But first it is necessary to go through: „In gewissem Sinne ist es schon ein sehr richtiger Takt, wenn unsere Zeit das Individuum für alles verantwortlich machen will; das Unglück aber ist, daß sie es nicht tief und innerlich genug tut, und daher ihre Halbheit; sie ist selbst klug genug, die Tränen der Tragödie zu verschmähen, aber sie ist auch selbst klug genug, der Barmherzigkeit entraten zu wollen ... Entweder die Wehmut des Tragischen, oder die tiefe Trauer und tiefe Freude der Religion.“ (S. 174) (In one sense it is correct, when our time tends to make the individual responsible for all; but unfortunately, it takes place not deep enough, hence only by halves. Our time disdains the tears of tragedy, nor does it allow mercy... Either the woefulness of the tragical, or the deep grief and the deep joy of religion.)

This passage shows, that self-choice and self-responsibility are from the outset ethical as well as religious categories. The ethical relies on the challenge, the religious points to the condition of fulfillment. The ethical is centered in action: „Wer daher sich selbst gewählt hat, der ist eo ipso ein Handelnder.“ (p. 793). (Who has chosen himself, is eo ipso someone who acts.) To be acting means, that every movement is accompanied by the consciousness of self-responsibility („daß jede Bewegung von dem Bewußtsein einer Selbstverantwortung begleitet ist“, p. 812). Acting therefore means always only self-responsible acting, i.e. the absolutely free action. The absolute character of acting is well consistent with the relativity of its subjects or contents, for the place of the acting self is simultaneously absolute and

concrete. But always it is its own place, because no other place can be absolute - for me: „Etwas anderes als mich selbst kann ich niemals als das Absolute wählen, denn wähle ich etwas anderes, so wähle ich es als eine Endlichkeit und wähle es also nicht absolut“ (p. 771 f.) (Something other than myself I can never choose as the absolute, because if I choose something else, I choose it as a finite and not absolute - even if it would be God, whom I choose in this way). Therefore, there can be no absolute object, because even the absolute itself, put in the place of the object, would not be absolute anymore.

The general in ethics must be seen differently in the context of self-responsibility than in the context of the social general and of reason. While here the outer frames have insisted on the right for definition, it is always, in the context of self-responsibility, the individual, which realizes the absolute relation: „Das Ethische lehrt ihn, daß das Verhältnis das Absolute ist. Das Verhältnis ist nämlich das Allgemeine.“ (p. 879) (The ethics teaches him, that the relation is the absolute. The relation as such is the general). Relations which are general in this absolute sense, can not be thought of like objective relations in form of definable structures or frames. They point from the very beginning into the other dimension of *actuality*, which is the religious dimension. Thus, the ethical relation to duty is misunderstood, if living ethically means “to fulfill one's duties” [28/29] (p. 819). The ethical can not be based on duties, carried through from the outside and turned into a norm. „Sieht man das Ethische außerhalb der Persönlichkeit und in einem äußeren Verhältnis zu ihr, so hat man alles aufgegeben, so hat man verzweifelt.“ (p. 821) (If the ethical is viewed outside of the person and in an outer relation to it, then one has given up all, and one has despaired). The ethical in its abstract form is demanding and imperative, but even more, prohibiting and destroying in its underlying sense.

The place of the absolute is always the place of one's self. Consequently, everyone is the absolute only for himself. This thought would be completely misunderstood and turned the wrong way, if one would withdraw himself or themselves out of all relations and define his or their freedom arbitrarily.

„Daß dieses Bewußtsein nicht dazu verleiten kann, die Wirklichkeit von sich zu werfen, ist leicht einzusehen, denn will es solchermaßen das Absolute sein, so ist es gar nichts, eine Abstraktion. Nur als der Einzelne ist der Mensch der Absolute, und dieses Bewußtsein wird ihn vor allem revolutionären Radikalismus bewahren.“ (p. 833) (That this consciousness can not be seduced to throw away reality, can easily be seen. But if it wants to be such an absolute like this, it would be nothing, a mere abstraction. Only as a single person is a human being the absolute, and this knowledge will prevent him from all revolutionary radicalism.) So, the coincidence of the individual and the absolute refers from the very beginning to the I-thou-dimension, which is the religious dimension of reality itself. (6)

That in the religious dimension all is absolute means, that all is in relation to all other. Absolute relations can not arbitrarily be moved-in and moved-out, taken on and rejected. Here, to be and to be-in-relation is one and the same thing. But there are no fixed points on both sides, so that the space of actuality can be widened. Those who act self-responsibly, will take an absolute relation to everything and turn every action into an absolute deed. The consequence of this seems rather paradoxical: Only in realizing an absolute relation is it possible to take into account relativity and avoid its quasi-absoluteness as well as its annihilation. Since the

absolute and the relative touch each other immediately (which does not mean, that they coincide), neither the relative is taken quasi-absolute nor is it annihilated. Again, only in this way is it possible, that the most narrow and the widest circle of acting go together and the self and the world can touch each other immediately. „Wenn die Persönlichkeit das Absolute ist, so ist sie selbst der archimedische Punkt, von dem aus man die Welt heben kann.“ (p. 833)  
 (When the personality is the absolute, then it is itself the archimedic point, out of which the world may be lifted up.) It is obvious, that this is not at all meant in a revolutionary sense. [29/30]

KIERKEGAARD expresses the religious aspect of self-responsibility in temporal and not any more in *spatial* categories. The self, by choosing itself, chooses itself „in its eternal validity“ (Entweder-Oder, p. 768). The dark phrase „in its eternal validity“ doesn't refer to the aspect of eternal duration, but attempts to express, that every self-action experiences an eternal sealing or confirmation. Even when the deed is by all means relative, according to its content and range, it carries the seal of God's affirmation. So it is, what it is and in that it finds the Yes of Being, which is given to all that lives out of its primary source. No self-acting can threaten the divine whole, even when it violates its laws. It belongs to this divine whole, to have a reverse side. Therefore, yet every negating action is able to find a place in this whole, where it can be, immediately as well as after all, affirmed.

Self-acting is always actual acting, acting *now*. On one hand, through my acting every moment is defined, that is always relative; but on the other hand, it receives the eternal seal of God's Yes and Amen, which turns the moment of time into an atom of eternity. Here, I don't want to specify the ontological aspects of this time-structure, which, on the whole, is discontinuous, and from which KIERKEGAARD does not separate eternity at all. A person is self-responsible, when he/she is likewise willing to impress this „Yes“ without restraint on every moment of his/her life. In this way, the act of pure self-affirmation becomes, as NISHIDA says, *a creative focal point of the world*. That time doesn't stop moving and the world-present goes on and on, carries with it the bitter consequence, that it is impossible not to choose, not to act and not to communicate. „Man sieht also, daß der Trieb zur Persönlichkeit zu Gedankenexperimenten keine Zeit hat, daß er beständig vorwärts eilt und irgendwie das eine oder das andere setzt, wodurch denn die Wahl im nächsten Augenblick noch schwieriger wird; denn was gesetzt ist, muß zurückgenommen werden.“ (p. 712) (So it is clear, that the drive of personality has no time for experiments-in-thought, that it always goes further and somehow puts this or that, whereby the choice is made more difficult in the next moment; because there is a need to take back, what has been fixed.) Even through non-acting, something is lived and manifested that will influence the future acting and state of life. It may connect life even more strongly with the past, or it may free it for its future.

Thus, the idea of radical self-responsibility invites and encourages to even accept what one denies. It is centered in the insight, that there is absolutely nothing that needs to be denied. Only the acceptance leads to a qualitative change of the old ways, which then cease to be a burden. The balance in one sense is never lost, but this does not mean, that in another sense the outcome of all is [30/31] ever preestablished or pre-finished. Still there is a lot to do, regarding the past of

humanity and that of every individual. Therefore, the way to become self-responsible, at first, leads back.

In this respect, the three stages of existence, i.e. the esthetical, the ethical and the religious, can be differentiated in their *temporal condition*. As to the *esthetical* existence, the past is going on in its own consequence, burdened with guilt and sin. As a consequence, the esthetical existence is made more and more unfree, regarding its present possibility. This means, that its future is lost. The *ethical* character of acting still refers to the same obligatory contexts, determined by the past, which hamper the acting and almost seem to prevent it. Nevertheless, the ethical existence starts from the principle, that man at all time is able to act freely, if he only wants to. Even in the worst form of bondage exists still a moment of freedom, that may be accessed through action. From an ethical perspective, the acting in the present is free, even when the same present is confined by the consequences of the past. In a *religious* sense it is total emphasized, that I have always the opportunity to step out of a binding string of actions, and that, in my very self-nature, I am absolutely free in every moment and was free all the time.. The self has never lost its original place, whatever the destiny of its lifes may have been. Religiously seen, freedom can never be tied, and exactly this is, what is expressed in its absolute character.

Thus, the esthetic life-form has, regarded temporally, the denominator of the *past*; the ethical existence has the denominator of the *present*, and the religious consciousness has the denominator of the *future*. Esthetically, one lives his past; ethically, one struggles for a free space in the present, and religiously seen, the whole works out the future, which is always free and open and never restricted by any consequence of the past. In the first case, freedom is experienced as lost freedom, in the second case, it takes its opportunity, and in the third case, it is experienced as one with the infinite reality. Finally, the expression *eternal* signifies in the esthetic frame of life something inescapable, from which one would like to escape, but is not able to. The ethical existence turns it to a heroic self-project, but fails to resolve the task, which then is given to it. The religious rewrites the term with eternal reiteration, which allows it to continue and to revise history eternally.

Therefore, what is in one sense a binding consequence, is in another sense a liberation. To be self-responsible means, to transform the prior state into the posterior.