

## ARTICLE

### WHAT IS RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE PAST? ETHICAL, EXISTENTIAL, AND TRANSGENERATIONAL DIMENSIONS

NATAN ELGABSI<sup>1</sup> 

#### ABSTRACT

Today, there is a growing interest in the ethics of the human and social sciences, and in the discussions surrounding these topics, notions such as responsibility toward the past are often invoked. But those engaged in these discussions seldom acknowledge that there are at least two distinct logics of responsibility underlying many debates. These logics permeate a Western scholarly tradition but are seldom explicitly discussed. The two logics follow the Latin and Hebrew concepts of responsibility: *spondeo* and *acharayut*. The purpose of this article is to make an ethical argument: to explain, based on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and others, what kind of ethical-existential logic of responsibility *acharayut* is and how it differs from and challenges other concepts of responsibility in moral philosophy and the human sciences. I am especially concerned with what this logic implies with regard to reading and writing about the past. Responsibility is not necessarily congruent with performing a scientific (historical) task or defending the (political, juridical) interests of a group of people. Instead, a “guiltless responsibility” to people of other generations points to something that I refer to as a transgenerational responsibility. I contrast this transgenerational responsibility to inherited guilt and related ideas of generational interconnectedness, which follow the logic of *spondeo*. Inherited guilt suggests that a responsible relation the past is to either identify with or blame a group of people in the past. Contrary to inherited guilt, a commitment to *acharayut* means constantly probing one’s responsibility to people of the past (for their posterity) and people of the future (as their predecessors) precisely because people of the present are not people of the past or people of the future.

*Keywords:* ethical responsibility, moral philosophy, history and ethics, transgenerational justice, *spondeo*, *acharayut*, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida

#### INTRODUCTION

Today, there is a growing interest in the ethics of the human and social sciences, and in the discussions surrounding these topics, notions such as responsibility toward the past are often invoked. Scholars and other social agents speak about responsibility when we historicize, historical or political responsibility, transgenerational justice, the responsibilities of an academic profession, and so on. But those engaged in these discussions seldom acknowledge that there are at least two distinct logics of responsibility underlying many debates. These logics permeate

1. Thank you to all of the colleagues who have helped me with this article.

a Western scholarly tradition but are seldom explicitly discussed. The two logics follow the Latin and Hebrew concepts of responsibility: *spondeo* and *acharayut*.

In this article, I will begin by explaining the *logical* distinction between these two concepts and their ethical implications. I will then scrutinize the logic of *acharayut* as a personal commitment when reading and writing about people of other generations. According to Giorgio Agamben, the Latin/Roman *spondeo* is a purely juridical and nonethical concept, which is why I characterize the logic of *spondeo* as juridical. Although it is clear that moral matters are often conceived on the logic of *spondeo*, the very logic is, in Agamben's view, still juridical.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew/Judaic concept of responsibility, *acharayut*, has another logic. David Patterson, who has explicated the meaning of *acharayut* based partly on Emmanuel Levinas's readings, has shown that *acharayut* is an ethical and existential concept (one with clear theological undertones).<sup>3</sup> It is *ethical* in the sense of responding to the preciousness of the neighbor's face; it is *existential* not in the sense of defining properties in the world but in the sense of defining who I am. This is why, for the sake of clarifying the logical distinction, I characterize *acharayut* as bearing an ethical-existential logic, although it includes the imperative command of the face that cannot be completely separated from religious law.<sup>4</sup>

To my knowledge, Levinas did not explicitly use the concept of *acharayut*, but he exemplified this logic throughout his writings. For instance, in *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, he wrote:

To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him. The Other is not only known, he is *greeted* [*salué*]. He is not only named, but also invoked. To put it in grammatical terms, the Other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative. I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I *am* for him.<sup>5</sup>

One could say that the concept of *acharayut* revolves around “a responsibility for my neighbour, for the other man, for the stranger or sojourner.”<sup>6</sup> The core idea is that “the relationship with the exterior”—with *someone* else—“is only possible as an ethical relationship”—that is, a relationship with an individual to whom I must *answer*.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, I explain what kind of ethical-existential logic of responsibility *acharayut* is and how it differs from and challenges other concepts of responsibility in moral philosophy and the human sciences. I am especially concerned

2. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

3. David Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005).

4. I am grateful to Ethan Kleinberg for pointing out this important feature of the Hebrew/Judaic concept. In this respect, see also Kleinberg's important book *Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Turn: Philosophy and Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), especially his discussion on the theological meaning of this command and its relation to *Zachor* (the command to remember).

5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism*, transl. Séan Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 7.

6. Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 84.

7. Emmanuel Levinas, “Freedom and Command,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 21.

with what this logic implies with regard to reading and writing about people in the past, and I will show precisely what is involved in a personal commitment to this logic of *acharayut*—that is, this ethical, existential, or theological idea of responsibility. The penetrating force and commitment of this logic as a way of personally responding to absent others and creating a future is, to my mind, the way in which I must conceive of my answering to and for others of other generations. This “guiltless responsibility” for absent others challenges the idea that a responsibility toward the past is confined to performing a scientific (historical) task or defending the (political, juridical) interests of a group of people.<sup>8</sup> Instead, a “guiltless responsibility” to people of other generations points to something that I refer to as a transgenerational responsibility. I contrast this transgenerational responsibility to inherited guilt and related ideas of generational interconnectedness, which follow the logic of *spondeo*. Inherited guilt suggests that a responsible relation to the past is to either identify with or blame a group of people in the past. Contrary to inherited guilt, a commitment to *acharayut* means constantly probing one’s responsibility to people of the past (for their posterity) and people of the future (as their predecessors) precisely because people of the present are not people of the past or people of the future.

WHAT IS RESPONSIBILITY? THE LOGICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *SPONDEO* AND  
*ACHARAYUT*

What are the two logics of responsibility informing our discussions, and how are our common ideas about responsibility in moral philosophy situated in relation to these logics?

According to Agamben, as mentioned above, the word “responsibility” has its roots in the Latin word *spondeo* and is a genuinely juridical term:

The Latin verb *spondeo*, which is the origin of our term “responsibility,” means “to become the guarantor of something for someone (or for oneself) with respect to someone.” Thus, in the promise of marriage, the father would utter the formula *spondeo* to express his commitment to giving his daughter as wife to a suitor (after which she was then called a *sponsa*) or to guarantee compensation if this did not take place. In archaic Roman law, in fact, the custom was that a free man could consign himself as a hostage—that is, in a state of imprisonment, from which the term *obligatio* derives—to guarantee the compensation of a wrong or the fulfillment of an obligation. (The term *sponsor* indicated the person who substituted himself for the *reus*, promising, in the case of a breach of contract, to furnish the required service.)<sup>9</sup>

Agamben’s purpose in taking up the etymology of *spondeo* is to claim that we should recognize that the concept of responsibility in fact originates in this Latin/Roman word and its contextual meaning. Any present-day ethical interpretations of this word have diverged from its original meaning, having turned the concept into something it never was. From *spondeo*, the word “responsibility” implies that the person responsible stands as a guarantor for a specific task

8. Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 83.

9. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 21–22.

for which one is judicially obliged and culpable. In this vein, Agamben continued: “The gesture of assuming responsibility is therefore genuinely juridical and not ethical. It expresses nothing noble or luminous, but rather simply obligation, the act by which one consigned oneself as a prisoner to guarantee a debt in a context in which the legal bond was considered to inhere in the body of the person responsible.”<sup>10</sup> The juridical emphasis is, according to Agamben, still present even if one speaks of taking responsibility, assuming responsibility, or being responsible. The meaning is consequently that responsibility obliges the individual to a task to which the individual is juridically bound. This juridical concept indeed informs the customary belief that responsibility is a question of for what and to whom someone can reasonably be held responsible, which, on the one hand, makes responsibility a matter of culpability or blame and, on the other hand, invites the idea that individuals are free from responsibility as soon as they are not the ones culpable, or as soon as a debt is paid and an obligation is fulfilled.<sup>11</sup>

In Agamben’s explication, however, even if the context of *spondeo* is not necessarily juridical, its original logic is. The logic is juridical because it brings along ideas of obligation, culpability, and blameworthiness when the concept of responsibility is used, ideas that, according to Agamben, belong exclusively to a juridical domain and not to an ethical one.<sup>12</sup>

But besides this juridical logic, one can still often sense that there is an ethical-existential meaning at stake when the concept of responsibility is used. Even at court (to take the most paradigmatic example of the juridical logic), the meaning of responsibility is often ambiguous. When a question of responsibility is consigned and discussed at a trial, the discussion does not always stop when the verdict is given, nor is the jarring question of responsibility after the verdict a simple longing for a revision of the juridical verdict. Instead, in such cases, responsibility refers to something different from obligation or culpability. Being juridically free of charge with regard to an accident, for example, and thus no longer responsible in the juridical sense, I can still feel that I should do something for the accident’s victim. This can take the form of feeling guilty, simply wishing to repair any damage caused, or desiring to apologize, but the core is that I recognize not so much culpability (and, with it, a wish to be free from obligation) but also, and above all, a relationship with another person about whom I care. This relationship reflects, in hindsight, the recklessness of my own actions and thus the recklessness of myself with regard to another person.

Responsibility, in this sense, is sometimes termed “*ethical* responsibility” (which is distinct from, say, social, political, or scientific responsibility) precisely

10. Ibid., 22.

11. This is by far the most common idea when it comes to so-called specialized or applied concepts of responsibility in both science and society. The idea is that there is a principle (or possibly someone’s interest) that I account for and that, as long as I do that, I am free of duty. Many texts could be mentioned in this regard, but I think that this logic is explained (and criticized) clearly in Elizabeth Wolgast’s *Ethics of an Artificial Person: Lost Responsibility in Professions and Organizations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 19–39.

12. Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 22.

in order to separate its meaning from the juridical logic we are accustomed to thinking of whenever we use the concept of responsibility.

Ethical responsibility (if one insists on using this term), as explicated by much moral philosophy after Immanuel Kant, is distinct from the juridical logic of *spondeo* because it stresses that human freedom is logically bound to responsibility. Being able to conceive our freedom is to acknowledge responsibility for what will belong to one's thoughts and actions.<sup>13</sup> Being unable to acknowledge this freedom is to be in bad faith, as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested in his existentialist modification of Kant's metaphysics of morality. Thus, there is no sense of being free from responsibility by supposedly fulfilling a task. I am free to act contrary to what binds me, but in this freedom, I will still acknowledge my responsibility with regard to what I ought to have thought or done (as Kant would have it)<sup>14</sup> or with regard to the fact that no one else but I have made this choice (as Sartre would have it).<sup>15</sup>

Whereas Sartre anchored responsibility not in an ethical order but in the subject as the bearer of the world as such, Kant defined responsibility as referring to a respect for the ethical imperative that demands our subjectivity. Despite these differences, their logics are in many ways similar. Following Sartre, one could say that the ethical idea of responsibility means the "consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object,"<sup>16</sup> which is purely about understanding one's own existential situation in the sense of acknowledging that one is responsible for everything one thinks and does in the world. According to Sartre, it is as if

I am abandoned in the world, not in the sense that I might remain abandoned and passive in a hostile universe like a board floating on the water, but rather in the sense that I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant.<sup>17</sup>

The course of the world, according to Sartre, is my responsibility because the world changes through my active decisions. I must be guided by a mode of existence in which I acknowledge that I am always and endlessly responsible in and for this world. This concept of responsibility, in turn, does not denote that one can be free from responsibility by fulfilling an obligation, as *spondeo* suggests. Instead, it stresses that one is always responsible for recognizing the course of one's actions and doings, both prospectively and retrospectively—that is, to recognize that the decisive choice of an "I" is always present.

13. What exactly belongs to my thoughts and actions in various situations, however, is yet another discussion that would require other kinds of examples. I could, for instance, inquire into how many possible unprecedented consequences I should consider as belonging to my action.

14. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [1785], in *Practical Philosophy*, transl. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86–88.

15. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, transl. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kulka (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 25.

16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, transl. Hazel E. Barnes (Colorado: University of Colorado, 1956), 553.

17. *Ibid.*, 555–56.

Does this idea of ethical responsibility escape the logic of jurisprudence that is affiliated with *spondeo*? In Kant's moral philosophy, even if the mode of freedom is a logical necessity for any ethical agency and responsibility, one could still say that I am obligated to a high principle that I respect (a principle that I am the legislator of) even though I think and act to the contrary, which indeed makes me culpable, as if this trial were to take place in my head. This is probably one reason why deontology is sometimes experienced as dogmatic. Also, in Sartre's existentialism (which is in part a break with the dogmatism of deontology in the sense that it stresses the *legislative* power of the volitional subject differently than Kant's deontology does), the juridical logic is sometimes present. I am, according to Sartre, only responsible for my thoughts and doings—that is, for my activity of having to *decide* in life—even if this choice means that I must always take the whole world upon my shoulders. *Only* in this decisive activity (which is prospective and retrospective) is my responsibility entangled. And as soon as I lose sight of the fact that I am obliged by my choice, I am in bad faith. In solitude, the trial is in my head. Again, this idea leads us back to the Latin context of *spondeo*—namely, responsibility for a particular task or, perhaps most importantly, to a particular person (that is, myself).

What one senses in Kant's and Sartre's moral philosophies is that *responsibility* is approached with a logic that does not truly disclose its ethical-existential meaning. The reason (or, at least, one reason) for this problem is that the root of the idea of responsibility that Kant and Sartre pursued—that is, the ethics of taking an external world upon one's shoulders through the responsiveness of thought bound to an activation of initiative—comes from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition and refers not primarily to legislative features but to the love of one's neighbor.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, it is important to describe the Hebrew/Judaic idea of responsibility that lingers on in our tradition—namely, *acharayut*.

The Hebrew word *acharayut* incorporates *acher* (the other) in its constellation.<sup>19</sup> It can be taken to mean “to-be-for-the-other” or “to-think-about-others,” with the other (*acher*) taking central stage. In a related discussion, Patterson explicated the meaning of *acharayut*: “entering into a relation to another human being, we do not *become* responsible—we are *already* responsible, responsible before we respond. The infinite scope of that responsibility cannot be thought in a moment of contemplation; it lies outside of the Cartesian *cogito* and the Kantian categorical imperative.”<sup>20</sup> Responsibility means that I am bound. As with *spondeo*, the point of reference of *acharayut* is anchored in the world external to the self, but it does not designate a responsibility for a particular task or person. The other of myself is my responsibility because I am primarily summoned to answer not first and foremost for what I do when I think or act but rather for the other as such, in the face of whom my thoughts or doings will mean something. It is

18. See Anne-Marie Søndergaard Christensen, “Løgstrup, Levinas and the Mother: Ethics, Love, and the Relationship to the Other,” *The Monist* 103, no. 1 (2020), 1–15, and Camilla Kronqvist, “A Personal Love of the Good,” *Philosophia* 47, no. 4 (2019), 989–93 (on love and responsibility).

19. David Patterson, “Emmanuel Levinas: A Jewish Thinker,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62, no. 2 (2006), 607.

20. Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, 63.

important that the ethical subject alone finds himself in this relational mode of responsibility before the other. I am called to respond inside this relationship. I am not an accomplisher of a task, nor does the other before whom I stand demand a task to be accomplished. Responsibility instead means that I am entangled in another. *Acharayut* (or *acharay*) shares a form with *acharey*, which literally means “behind” or “after”—in this case, being behind another, readily standing by. Continuing in a vein that largely resembles that of Levinas, Patterson wrote:

And because only *I* can meet *this* responsibility, my responsibility is what defines who I am: responsibility is subjectivity. Which means: I am the “not-I”—the “other” or [*acher*]—of [*acharayut*]. When I fail in my [*acharayut*], I become [*acher*] to myself, “other” than who I am, hence absent from my fellow human being. Absent from my fellow human being, I have no time, a point underscored by the verb [*achar*], meaning to “be late,” to “tarry,” or to “lag behind,” and by the noun [*acharit*], which means “end” or “future.” The other human being *is* my end, *is* my future: *is* my meaning. Hence only through the responsibility that defines me do I generate a presence before the other, where I have time because I am on time.<sup>21</sup>

The Hebrew concept of responsibility originally had a religious root. It responds to seeing or preparing a future to come. In responsibility for the other, a future is prepared—that is, a future is opened and given. What I do should strive toward the future, as a healing or reparation of the world. (Think of the notion of *tikkun olam*.) What is most important in this context, however, is that the ethical-existential meaning of *acharayut* as such should anchor our thoughts not in the same place as the juridical concept of *spondeo* or the deontological/existentialist concept of ethical responsibility. Instead, *acharayut* resembles Levinas’s concept of responsibility: “The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signalled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized.”<sup>22</sup> Responsibility should direct my thoughts toward acting upon this relationship with the other.

What meaning does *acharayut* have for a moral philosophy, for our thought of what responsibility should mean not only in philosophical discourse but in life? One implication is that it means to understand ethics through my interpersonal entanglements, as I answer to my fellow beings within these relationships. This relationality and the logical prioritization of the other before myself as the ground for *thought* is not at all self-evident in a context of moral philosophy or even in the idea of a human science subsequently inquiring into the lives of other people. It is not even self-evident in my own life, which means that *acharayut* awakens me to how I was already bound by the other. Thus, the other, who is unknown (often another person or the thought of another), will potentially destabilize and change me. As a call heard, *acharayut* is a deeply personal mode. I welcome a life where I am addressed by others, a life that is often blocked in my mind and

21. Ibid., 83. Patterson used both Hebrew and Latin letters to show the etymology of the Hebrew words, but I have consistently used Latin letters for the sake of readability.

22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, transl. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Springer, 1991), 87.



imagination through my self-centeredness. *Acharayut* should wake me from that dream, as with Cain—I was and still am my brother's keeper. Indeed, this freedom is difficult, as Levinas noted.<sup>23</sup>

Taken as an ethics, this concept might feel overwhelming. Similar to what Sartre argued, the call says that I must take it or linger on in bad faith. Still, it says that *I* must take it, not that someone else or everyone ought to. It begins with a change of self-being. Can this be translated into anything but religious experience? If anything, *acharayut* can show the existential poverty of the legislative language of *spondeo*, but then it should not be taken as a moralism.

“Entrenched in the ‘autonomy’ of his ‘self-legislation,’” Patterson argued,

the ontological thinker is locked into a radical isolation from the other human being; thus isolated, he is morally and spiritually bankrupt. The one thing that can penetrate this ontological isolation is the commandment that comes to us through the other human being, from beyond being. The other human being, therefore, is more than an instance of “being”—the other human being is a *breach* in being.<sup>24</sup>

This point does not depend on a moralizing dogma or a religious experience in order to show us that a life and thought with no others—that is, others with whom we are entangled in a variety of ways (including in life and in thought) and others beyond those whom we meet and live with each day—is meager. In a commentary on Levinas's philosophy, Jacques Derrida wrote:

In the last analysis it never bases its authority on Hebraic theses or texts. It seeks to be understood from within a *recourse to experience itself*. Experience itself and that which is most irreducible within experience: the passage and departure toward the other; the other itself as what is most irreducibly other within it: Others.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, what is a moral philosophy that is unresponsive to being addressed by another, and what is a human science that does not recognize this responsibility? It is this ethical-existential dimension shown by the concept of *acharayut* that is at the core of Levinas's philosophy, but it is also a very meaningful way of conceiving the logical contours of what my responsibility toward the past—that is, to past persons—is and should be. In the following, I will discuss a variety of consequences of a personal commitment to the logic of *acharayut*.

#### RESPONSIBILITY IN THINKING, READING, AND WRITING ABOUT THE PAST

Ideas of responsibility that move between (or, put differently, that draw from both) the logic of *spondeo* and the logic of *acharayut* are integrated in our culture and within the discourses of the human sciences. Specialized or applied discussions about responsibility, however, seldom recognize the distinctly different implications of these concepts and their respective logics. This is yet another reason to

23. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 20.

24. Patterson, *Hebrew Language and Jewish Thought*, 72.

25. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, transl. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 83.



flesh them out more fully. But what is characteristic of discussions of responsibility in the human sciences and, in particular, in historiography?

Derrida's critique of Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* is in many ways a good example of some of the ideas of responsibility that circulate in the philosophy of historiography.<sup>26</sup> Strictly speaking, of course, Derrida and Foucault were not historians, although the structural depth of the past, which is concreated in and through the activity of writing, was important for both. Yet, this debate, and especially Derrida's critique, is, to my mind, important to consider in the context of what responsibility in writing and reading about the past involves.

In this debate, at least two ideas about responsibility in historical writing clash. Foucault's narrative is a political critique of the project of historiography (or of the discourse of history/reason in general). This and similar works by Foucault also contribute to legitimizing a politically charged way of writing about the past that often equates the ethical with the political. Derrida's commentary, in turn, is an ethical critique, yet, to my mind, not a politics of the past. If Derrida's critique is read through the spirit of *acharayut*, it becomes an ethical-existential critique of Foucault's politically charged project of an archaeology of silence.<sup>27</sup> The debate between Foucault and Derrida is deeply affected by ideas about what responsibility toward the past is and what it should involve—that is, responsibility for the suffering other in this tradition of reason.

In the edition of *History of Madness* on which Derrida commented, Foucault stated that he wanted to write an “archaeology of that silence” that the “monologue by reason about madness” presupposes.<sup>28</sup> This void in the discourse of reason contains a continuous murmur of suffering. Foucault emphasized that the void, “both empty and peopled at the same time,” consists of “the obstinate murmur of a language talking *to itself*—without any speaking subject and without an interlocutor, wrapped up in itself, with a lump in its throat, collapsing before it ever reaches any formulation and returning without a fuss to the silence that it never shook off.”<sup>29</sup> It contains the repressed life of the other that is the possibility of history and is “the charred root of meaning.”<sup>30</sup> “Historical time,” Foucault argued,

imposes silence on a thing that we can no longer apprehend, other than by addressing it as void, vanity, nothingness. History is only possible against the backdrop of the absence of history, in the midst of a great space of murmurings, that silence watches like its vocation

26. Jacques Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” in Bass, *Writing and Difference*, 31–63.

27. The most common reading of Derrida's critique is that he “maintained that the Archimidean point from which Foucault embarked on his research neither can nor does exist” (Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, transl. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992], xviii). A similar interpretation is given in Slavoj Žižek, “Cogito, Madness, and Religion: Derrida, Foucault, and Then Lacan,” in *Theology after Lacan: The Passion for the Real*, ed. Creston Davis, Marcus Pound, and Clayton Crockett (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 25–29. This interpretation is possible, but I think that Derrida's deconstruction involves a deeper ethical critique than merely saying that Foucault's discourse is impossible.

28. Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, transl. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London: Routledge, 2006), xxviii.

29. *Ibid.*, xxxi–xxxii.

30. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

and its truth: “I will call desert this castle that you were, night this voice, absence your face.”<sup>31</sup>

By sacrificing this lump of foolish voices that murmur in the background—the life of all those persons who, unnoticed or solely in negativity, belong to our world—historical discourse arises as the high castle of reason. Foucault asked, “Is there any place in the universe of our discourses for the thousands of pages where Thorin, an almost illiterate lackey and ‘frenzied madman,’ transcribed, at the close of the seventeenth century, his fugitive visions and the roaring of his terror?”<sup>32</sup> If there is a place for Thorin at all, it is not one characterized by the warmth of human understanding but is rather one ascribed to him in the psychiatric discourse, spoken not by him but for him, reassuring therein what he is—a frenzied madman, an exemplification of insanity and non-reason.

Thus, according to Foucault, writing a history of the persons in the void—exiled in concrete life but also in our thought—means seeing the “structure of the experience of madness” through what is testified to in the history of the language of reason:

We need to strain our ears, and bend down towards this murmuring of the world, and try to perceive so many images that have never been poetry, so many fantasies that have never attained the colours of day. But it is, no doubt, a doubly impossible task, as it would require us to reconstitute the dust of this concrete pain, and those insane words that nothing anchors in time; and above all because that pain and those words only exist, and are only apparent to themselves and to others in the act of division that already denounces and masters them.<sup>33</sup>

There is an obvious ambiguity in the extent to which, in his work, Foucault truly wanted to speak about past persons at all, especially as he claimed to excavate an unpopulated experience of a language that speaks to itself “without an interlocutor.”<sup>34</sup> Yet, as Michel de Certeau argued in *The Writing of History*, to write a history already presupposes the dead other who will be entombed within the discourse. Dead persons are the conditions for historiography, which means that the dead are objectified as absences.<sup>35</sup> Thus, in his *History of Madness*, Foucault also claimed to speak about absent other persons. But since the persons in the void will speak fragmentarily and only in the language of reason (if they speak at all), giving them a voice can be only an indirect concern. “To write the history of madness,” Foucault argued, “will therefore mean making a structural study of the historical ensemble—notions, institutions, judicial and police measures, scientific concepts—which hold captive a madness whose wild state can never be reconstituted.”<sup>36</sup> Listening to the mass of voices through the cracks in our world of knowledge and reason is to describe the “rudimentary movements of an

31. Ibid., xxxi.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., xxxii.

34. Ibid., xxxi.

35. See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 46; Ewa Domańska, “Toward the Archaeontology of the Dead Body,” *Rethinking History* 9, no. 4 (2005), 398.

36. Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxxiii.

experience.”<sup>37</sup> It is thus “a history not of psychiatry, but of madness itself, in all its vivacity, before it is captured by knowledge.”<sup>38</sup>

Derrida’s two fundamental critical remarks on *History of Madness* concern, on the one hand, the structural unity of madness that Foucault conceived and tried to excavate and, on the other hand, the representativity of some of the examples that Foucault used. (The most important is René Descartes’s use of madness as an example of deception in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.<sup>39</sup>) For Derrida, these concerns in scholarly discourse need to be scrutinized in order to be able to speak of justice or responsibility toward the past. Derrida asked, “What is the historical responsibility of this logic of archaeology?”<sup>40</sup> If, as Derrida argued, the purpose of a history from the margins—an archaeology of silence—is to disentangle the language of reason, to hear the voices of those in the void, and to speak on their behalf, I must continuously ask what it would mean to “follow the madman down the road of his exile.”<sup>41</sup> I must understand what *following* another person means. Following the madman is not being mad, as if I could step into that other person’s shoes, nor is it to speak of a general experience of marginalization or suffering. It is to recognize a relationship with another person who was considered mad. I perform the deconstruction from within the language of reason through being addressed by another, thus breaking up the language of reason through the other that both breaches and disjoins my being. I will not speak as if I were a madman; instead, I will speak of what has happened to the other person, who is now dead. In ethics, I am precisely not the other; I speak about the other and I thereby let the other speak in me. Responsibility and justice circulate around how I should respond to another, as a difficulty inside this interpersonal relationship. Being addressed by someone else means that I am called upon to break up the unity of the historical ensemble of madness-reason that has fettered the other in the past. The ethics of deconstruction begins by that breach of the other who displaces my selfhood. Thus, the concern becomes an ethical understanding of seeing where I stand in relation to the other person by writing a history about that other person and, furthermore, determining whether a structural description of the experience of madness truly will be a just response to the other person, who is no longer there.<sup>42</sup>

Derrida’s ethical criticism, however, can seem exaggerated if one does not consider Foucault’s own purpose of writing history. In an interview, Foucault argued

37. *Ibid.*, xxxii.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Madness is used as an example primarily in the first meditation of René Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. and transl. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17–23. See Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” 47–56. Foucault further discussed this criticism raised by Derrida in a subsequent essay titled “My Body, This Paper, This Fire,” which has been republished in *History of Madness*, 550–74.

40. Derrida, “Cogito and the History of Madness,” 35.

41. *Ibid.*, 36.

42. See Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) for an important account on how ethics in deconstruction meaningfully can be understood.

that the *History of Madness* and *The History of Sexuality* are based on a historical imagination that is connected to contemporary political circumstances, to which his historiography in turn seeks to respond. Foucault stated:

I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to say, however, that truth is therefore absent. It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or “manufactures” something that does not as yet exist, that is, “fictions” it. One “fictions” history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one “fictions” a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.<sup>43</sup>

The idea of “fictioning” history is, in this context, congruent with the activities of imagining, creating, or configuring the past, which are arguably part of much historiographical work. Yet, the concern that is important to consider when following an ethical-existential idea of responsibility is what Foucault considered a responsible response to the past—that is, where he thought the referent of his “fictioning” activity is located. In this context, he clearly argued that the *History of Madness*—or, indeed, any history he ever wrote—responds to “a political reality that makes it true” for the sake of producing “effects of truth” in order to change present social circumstances.

What idea of responsibility toward the past is exemplified in this context? If the *responsibility* to historicize by imagining a past of structural marginalization and injustice is just a *means* in order to change my present political circumstances, then this invites the question of whether the persons in the void, their lives, and their suffering are at all important and whether an archaeology of silence truly aims to give them a voice. It is notable that Foucault has been ethically charged with bending the limits of the possible for the sake of catalyzing political effects, especially as some of the examples he used in *History of Madness* (most importantly, the so-called *Ships of Fools*, which he claimed existed all over Europe during the Middle Ages<sup>44</sup>) seem to have never concretely existed beyond being literary allegories.<sup>45</sup> Disturbingly enough—as Derrida also expressed in his critique—if it is unimportant to consider to what extent another person has actually existed or suffered in the past (because my purpose in writing history is to “fiction” the past in order to reach political effects in the present), this also simultaneously shows that the persons in the past who have suffered are not the ones who grip me in life and summon my responsibility for them when I think and write. What instead supposedly grips me is contemporary political circumstances that I partake in by writing history, circumstances where I assume things about the past as justifications for the kind of politically charged discourse I am undertaking. In this politically charged project, even if I give an impression of speaking justly with respect to marginalized people in the past, the suffering other persons will have no meaning beyond being a springboard for a politically charged

43. Michel Foucault, “The History of Sexuality,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, transl. Colin Gordon et al. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), 193.

44. Foucault, *History of Madness*, 13–20.

45. Winifred Barbara Maher and Brendan Maher, “The Ship of Fools: *Stultifera Navis* or *Ignis Fatuus?*,” *American Psychologist* 37, no. 7 (1982), 756–61.

counternarrative. Thus, when writing history, identifying exactly where the ethical referent is located is paramount to acquiring an ethical understanding of what a particular idea of responsibility toward the past implies. As Kalle Pihlainen has argued, I must understand that “historical narratives represent *particular real people*,”<sup>46</sup> who are the ethical referents to which the “fictioning” activity of historical configuration in every respect responds.

#### RESPONSIBILITY TO WHOM OR WHAT? BEYOND IDEOLOGY AND EPISTEMICS

What are the further consequences of this politicized idea of conceiving responsibility toward the past? In her important *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe*, for example, Siobhan Kattago showed one way in which a responsibility toward past is taken over by political choices and interests:

The question of how citizens in democratic nations *should* come to terms with difficult pasts puts a new twist on one of the oldest questions of social justice: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain’s question of whether we, as individuals[,] bear any responsibility for others is still a fundamental question of the human condition.<sup>47</sup>

Taken together with Levinas’s thought, the story about Cain and Abel (as discussed in theology and existential ethics) is a story about the awakening to human solidarity, to responsibility for one’s neighbor. In that sense, the “brother” is anyone, just as the “neighbor,” in other stories from the Bible, can be both someone I already know or someone I do not know. Through the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” then, I simply wake up to the fact that I already was so and that my ignorance, as Levinas stated, was “not . . . a case of simple insolence.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, from the perspective of the ethical-existential logic of *acharayut*, the decision of whether to stand in ethical relationality to others, whomever they might be, is not a choice I can make.

But the idea that ethical relationality can be a choice is easily instilled, as Kattago has shown. “The democratic response to a difficult past,” she argued, “is yes; we should be our brother’s keeper.”<sup>49</sup> “But,” she continued, “who is defined as a brother, and how individuals decide to link together as a community balanced between the past and the future[,] is a politically charged and delicate answer.”<sup>50</sup> Although it is unclear to what extent Kattago herself subscribed to this political idea, her account shows an important tendency with regard to what responsibility toward the past is often taken to be.<sup>51</sup> The inclination is that I can

46. Kalle Pihlainen, “The Moral of the Historical Story: Textual Differences in Fact and Fiction,” *New Literary History* 33, no. 1 (2002), 56.

47. Siobhan Kattago, *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past* (London: Routledge, 2016), 25.

48. Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 20.

49. Kattago, *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe*, 25.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Many accounts could be mentioned in this regard. A legal or political idea of responsibility toward the past is often transparent in political science and memory studies. See Jeffrey K. Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Klaus Neumann and Janna Thompson, eds., *Historical Justice and Memory* (Madison:

only care about others if I define them as my brothers—that is, if they belong to my sphere of interest, as if I could choose who concerns me and who does not and how they concern me. In this sense, I am deeply entrenched in the jurisprudence of *spondeo*, as I need to choose who I will defend.

In truth, this politicized idea that a responsibility toward the past is to defend someone's interests is quite contrary to the traditional idea of responsibility within the historical sciences. As Saul Friedländer has argued, "the historian cannot be and should not be the guardian of memory."<sup>52</sup> No particular parties or interests can be defended via historical science. Instead, Friedländer argued, "the historian's duty is to reintroduce the complexity of discrete historical events, the ambiguity of human behavior, and the indetermination of wider social processes."<sup>53</sup> In a similar vein, Richard Evans has claimed that historians should avoid making ethical judgments because they are not trained to do so; they are obliged solely to the epistemic search for truth concerning how the past was.<sup>54</sup> In a commentary on Evans's "History, Memory, and the Law," Jonathan Gorman argued that "Evans is right: we must not allow our appropriation and representation of the sources to be framed by political or legal consequences, for that would offend against the duty to give historical truth."<sup>55</sup> Responsibility, in this respect, is tied to an obligation to truthfulness with regard to the evidence at hand, which does not forward any political or legal interests. Yet, this solely epistemic obligation is still closely related to the logic of *spondeo* insofar as responsibility is envisioned as my being accountable for a particular *task* that I should answer to. Another related idea of responsibility with regard to the past implies that the one who inquires into the past (usually the historian) is obliged to uphold certain epistemic virtues such as objectivity or honesty. Even if politics can be important, the scholar should not allow politics to compromise these epistemic virtues, as Allan Megill has argued.<sup>56</sup>

One senses that specialized discussions within the human sciences are not able to escape this trap of trying to determine how to think of responsibility toward the past—that is, as either the epistemic obligation to tell truths about the past or as the political or juridical obligation to defend particular contemporary interests. Echoing the language of obligation articulated in *spondeo*, historian David Harlan, for

---

University of Wisconsin Press, 2015). For a critique, see Berber Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

52. Saul Friedländer, "History, Memory, and the Historian: Dilemmas and Responsibilities," *New German Critique* 80 (Spring–Summer 2000), 13.

53. *Ibid.*, 14.

54. Richard J. Evans, "History, Memory, and the Law: The Historian as Expert Witness," *History and Theory* 41, no. 3 (2002), 330; Jonathan Gorman, "Historians and Their Duties," *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004), 104.

55. Gorman, "Historians and Their Duties," 114. See also François Bédarida, ed., *The Social Responsibility of the Historian* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1994), especially Bédarida's essay titled "Historical Practice and Responsibility," 1–6.

56. See, for example, Jeroen van Dongen and Herman Paul, eds., *Epistemic Virtues in the Sciences and the Humanities* (Cham: Springer, 2017), especially the editors' introduction titled "Epistemic Virtues in the Sciences and the Humanities," 1–10. See also Allan Megill, "Some Aspects of the Ethics of History-Writing: Reflections on Edith Wyschogrod's *An Ethics of Remembering*," in *The Ethics of History*, ed. David Carr, Thomas R. Flynn, and Rudolf A. Makkreel (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 61–62.



example, asked: “To whom or what are historians responsible?”<sup>57</sup> This originally rhetorical question—which, later in Harlan’s essay, potentially dissolves responsibility’s anchoring in something particular—demands an answer. According to Harlan, although historians have traditionally been understood as being responsible toward the past, this is no longer the case. Present-day historians—that is, historians after Foucault, Hayden White, and others—are responsible to their contemporary social circumstances.<sup>58</sup> In a similar context, Keith Jenkins questioned “to whom or to what might that responsibility—*ought* that responsibility—be directed,” but he pressed toward a purer question of ethical responsibility (as raised by existentialism).<sup>59</sup> In contrast to the customary claim that historians have particular obligations and duties that arise in their professional discipline—and, furthermore, that they have a duty to tell the truth, a duty to be objective, and so forth—Jenkins has argued that historians *qua* historians have no special duties or obligations *beyond* what can be expected of an intellectual in general. In contemporary applied discussions, Jenkins’s reflection is the closest to a dissolution of the logic of *spondeo*, as he argued that, beyond questions of professional obligations, historians “would not diminish, but rather enlarge, their calling by answering a call that comes not from the past at all but directly from ethics.”<sup>60</sup> The person inquiring into the past—the person who historicizes—should draw fully on the reflexivity of ethical responsibility as articulated in, for instance, existentialist ethics.

Jenkins’s take on ethical responsibility would not necessarily sacrifice the integrity of past persons for the sake of present political interests and projects. However, at issue still is the question of how one should envision the meaning of *ethical responsibility*.<sup>61</sup> This remains, to my mind, among the most unclear concerns in applied discussions on responsibility toward the past, and, as I have shown, it suffers from overly reductive reflections on what different conceptions of responsibility ethically entail.

#### ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY AS MY EXISTENTIAL RELATION TO OTHER PERSONS

In several of the above discussions, one general problem is apparent: other persons who are not right before my eyes—those who do not belong to my sphere of juridical, political, or epistemic interest or obligation—do not seem to be in my world at all, and it is as if I could speak about a responsibility (for example, to the evidence, to present political interests, and so on) without already being called on to have to respond to those different others.

57. David Harlan, “‘The Burden of History’ Forty Years Later,” in *Re-figuring Hayden White*, ed. Frank Ankersmit, Ewa Domańska, and Hans Kellner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 169.

58. *Ibid.*, 182–83.

59. Keith Jenkins, “Ethical Responsibility and the Historian: On the Possible End of a History ‘of a Certain Kind,’” *History and Theory* 43, no. 4 (2004), 44. See also *ibid.*, 59.

60. *Ibid.*, 60.

61. Anton Froeyman’s *History, Ethics, and the Recognition of the Other: A Levinasian View on the Writing of History* (New York: Routledge, 2015) is an exception in this regard. For a good discussion of the ethical considerations of the philosophy of history, see João Ohara’s *The Theory and Philosophy of History: Global Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 19.



In my reading, however, Derrida's ethical critique of *History of Madness* concerns exactly this hazard of leaving people outside. Derrida's deconstructive inclusiveness becomes a turning point in defining what it would mean to understand responsibility toward the past as ethical work that a person must do. If I speak of a responsibility toward the past, what does it mean that the alterity of past persons in the void grips me and beckons me to find a way to respond responsibly to them? What does it mean to *hear* this call, this murmur of misery, through the cracks in the language of reason? This is not a juridical, political, or even epistemic question. Instead, it resembles a hermeneutics of testimony in which the ethical difficulty consists in doing justice to those absent others who cannot speak directly. As Anton Froeyman has suggested, I must simply conceive of these absent others as belonging to "a reciprocal, moral community."<sup>62</sup> Indeed, if an ethical responsibility in historiography is to be meaningful, I think I must be prepared to give the other a voice and let the other speak in my heart.<sup>63</sup>

In *The Voice of Misery*, Gert-Jan van der Heiden argued that it is a "figure of the witness as the third" that is the very root of testimony.<sup>64</sup> The voice of "the third" is steadily around us, but it remains indirect or broken. He argued that we are confronted with this absent or broken voice of "the third" particularly

in [Primo] Levi's quote in which he describes his own testimony as "a discourse 'on behalf of third parties.'" The third parties here are the *Muselmänner* who are, for Levi, the true witnesses who, however, are not capable of bearing witness to their experiences. They are the third party with respect to the dialogical situation of the narrator-witness and the hearer. The third party here is nothing less than the reserve/object of testimony itself. To this reserve, the narrator-witness, in addition to all that they tell of the object, can only bear witness by directing the hearer's attention to the absence of an attestation.<sup>65</sup>

This quote reveals an important aspect of the meaning of a responsibility that follows *acharayut* in the craft or writing and reading as a personal, ethical-existential concern. My attention—"the hearer's attention"—is turned toward how written and spoken words involve speaking about absent other persons who are not immediately before me. In reading and writing, I am the hearer of the voice of the absent. I bear witness—here, at this very moment—to "the absence of an attestation." In this mode, I continue to speak about others in life.

What, then, does it mean to write and to read about those who are absent? What does it mean that the absent others breach my thoughts? What is ethical responsibility toward the past as an existential concern? When doing human science, I

62. *Ibid.*, 8. For a slightly different account about reciprocity and the dead, see Antoon De Baets, "The Posthumous Dignity of Dead Persons," in *Anthropology of Violent Death: Theoretical Foundations for Forensic Humanitarian Action*, ed. Roberto C. Parra and Douglas H. Ubelaker (Hoboken: Wiley, 2023), 15, 27, which draws on his imperative *Responsible History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 112–43.

63. To my mind, some postcolonial critique is utterly close to this ethical point. See AB (Benda) Hofmeyr, "Levinas Meets the Postcolonial: Rethinking the Ethics of the Other," in *The Ethics of Subjectivity: Perspectives since the Dawn of Modernity*, ed. Elvis Imafidon (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 280–95.

64. Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *The Voice of Misery: A Continental Philosophy of Testimony* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019), 254.

65. *Ibid.*

respond to this call of the absent other. As Edith Wyschogrod has argued, I will speak about “the dead others who cannot speak for themselves.”<sup>66</sup> This idea of discursively speaking about absent others, however, must be an activity in which I take my relationship with other persons as the mode whereby responsibility toward the past, as with any interpersonal relationship, will be meaningful. When reading and writing in the human sciences, I thereby recognize that “the ethical referent goes all the way down.”<sup>67</sup> That is, it precedes empirical inference and narration and binds me to someone other than myself—in this case, someone who is no longer alive. The ethical referent is an absent other, but the other’s absence does not determine my responsibility in our relationship. In every respect, my research and writing involve the indirect murmur of “the third” whom I continue to respond to and speak about.

#### POSTERITY AND TRANSGENERATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Historicity as an involvement with absent, dead others, however, does not generally signify the continued relationship that I have with a person I have known in life but who has died. Rather, it signifies a relationship that I have with people who lived before I was born, many of whom died long before I was born.<sup>68</sup> While historicity thus involves the recognition of existing in a transgenerational lifeworld in which people have lived long before I was born, it also means that I am connected to future generations who are absent in yet another way than being absent dead, because they are the anticipated future to come. This recognition of my entwinement with people of other generations, many of whom are not contemporary with myself, invokes something one could call a transgenerational responsibility. That is, as Matthias Fritsch has argued, a perspective on life in which

it is critical to overcome a presentist, nongenerational conception of the self and its time, one that views the present as cut off from the absent past and the absent future. This view of time, we’ve seen, makes responsibility to future [and past] people seem anomalous and problematic from the beginning, for such responsibility would have to cross the abyss between presence and absence.<sup>69</sup>

The unimportance of presence and absence for ethical relationality is, as it were, the condition of transgenerational responsibility. It discloses, according to Fritsch, a selfhood in which “we as human beings are constituted in time, in a world that we inherit and that we therefore have to leave for others.”<sup>70</sup> But to go even further, this also means that the other person being dead or unborn is not necessarily

66. Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 38. See also Froeyman, *History, Ethics, and the Recognition of the Other*, 35, and, on what it can mean to bear witness for someone else, Lovisa Andén, “Literary Testimonies and Fictional Experiences: Gulag Literature between Fact and Fiction,” *Studia Phaenomenologica* 21 (2021), 202–4.

67. Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering*, 22.

68. Compare this with De Baets, “The Posthumous Dignity of Dead Persons,” 15–19.

69. Matthias Fritsch, *Taking Turns with the Earth: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Intergenerational Justice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 80.

70. *Ibid.*, 38.

decisive in our ethical relationship. A life of “natal mortality” is a transgenerational existence in which “social relations among the living are structured by an anticipatory mourning, by the sense that one will die before the other, having to interiorize or bury her or him.”<sup>71</sup> Human life, seen from a transgenerational vantage point, already means that we bury and mourn past others and rejoice with the newborn or not-yet-born in a chain of life that is not determined by contemporaneity. On the one hand, proximity with absent others and asymmetrical reciprocity between generations, as Fritsch has argued, would consist in my preparing and “giving” myself to a future to come, one gift being the bodily return to earth. However, there is also, I think, another sense of this futurity of responsibility. This is because, on the other hand, I (as posterity) am also entangled in this transgenerational responsibility with people in the past, who have given themselves for me (in the sense of having prepared part of my life and having given me a future). Transgenerational responsibility thus involves that my relationship with people in the past, although backward-looking, opens up the possibility for a nonenclosed future and thereby prepares a future to come.

What, then, is transgenerational responsibility, particularly with regard to past generations? I will critique two common ideas of what transgenerational responsibility should supposedly look like. On the one hand, there is the idea that transgenerational responsibility is some kind of inherited or collective guilt with respect to what people have done in the past. On the other hand, there is the idea that transgenerational responsibility consists in a mere recognition, in hindsight, of the fact that what was done in the past must be left in the past and “is no longer.”<sup>72</sup> In the second idea especially, it is questionable if it is sufficient to speak about *responsibility* at all, because no ethical relation to past persons is recognized; there is only a mere factual statement that the past event is past. However, in contrast to these ideas, there is a sense that my relation to the past is not to a past event or to dead people who are “no longer.” Instead, I am continuously standing in an ethical relationship of responsibility to them, and in this relationship, their pastness is only secondary. This is also, according to Fritsch, what the concept of transgenerational responsibility shows by suggesting that this kind of responsibility belongs to my ethical life because I am involved with those who are not contemporary with myself.<sup>73</sup> I will show not only why neither collective guilt nor the factual statement that the past is past (and thus “is no longer”) is a responsible response to persons of other generations but also how the concept of *acharayut* puts a different emphasis on my being rooted in a generational world.

Why is transgenerational responsibility not inherited or collective guilt? This point can be highlighted by turning to one of Karl Jasper’s reflections. In *The Question of German Guilt*, which was published a few years after the end of World War II, Jaspers wrote:

71. *Ibid.*, 52.

72. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 432.

73. See, for example, Fritsch, *Taking Turns with the Earth*, 52.

We feel something like a co-responsibility for the acts of members of our families. This co-responsibility cannot be objectivized. We should reject any manner of tribal liability. And yet, because of our consanguinity we are inclined to feel concerned whenever wrong is done by someone in the family—and also inclined, therefore, depending on the type and circumstances of the wrong and its victims, to make it up to them even if we are not morally and legally accountable.

Thus the German—that is, the German-speaking individual—feels concerned by everything growing from German roots. It is not the liability of a national but the concern of one who shares the life of the German spirit and soul—who is of one tongue, one stock, one fate with all the others—which here comes to cause, not as tangible guilt, but somehow analogous to co-responsibility.

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. We have to bear the guilt of our fathers.<sup>74</sup>

Although Jaspers's reflection in itself risks inviting the kind of tribalism that he criticized, he emphasized an important difference between inherited guilt and posterity's responsibility. The important point is what it means for posterity "to bear the guilt of our fathers." The reflection arises from Jaspers's own predicament of being German in the aftermath of the horrors of the war. He argued that we are "inclined to feel concerned whenever wrong is done by someone in the family" because of "consanguinity." This feeling of concern with what another in our family has done is easily taken as a sense of *shared guilt* that is invoked because of familial connections. The experience that Jaspers referred to is one in which individuals can be affected by the deeds of their family members and that, for many generations, individuals and their children can be identified with the family members' character traits or deeds. For example, in a village, a person could be identified as the granddaughter of the good fisherman, the son of the man who was handy, or the brother of the person who committed suicide. Shame and pride typically belong to this kind of familial or tribal togetherness. The same experiences are evoked when it comes to ethno-national identities that, through such ideas as consanguinity, origin, faith, linguistic unity, and so on, can be seen as extended families. The inclination is to think that everyone who is considered German shares the guilt of what has been done.

But Jaspers argued that "we should reject any manner of tribal liability," such as the idea of inherited or shared guilt. Instead, being guilty or *taking on* guilt (emotionally or legally) for what has been done by our forefathers is *not* the same thing as *bearing* the guilt of what our forefathers have done. If "we have to bear the guilt of our fathers," we have to do so in the manner of responsibility (that is, in our roles as their posterity). This does not mean that I am considered (or consider myself) blameworthy or guilty as if I were my ancestors. Responsibility, in Jaspers's terms, is not tribal identification and liability, as if I were them or the crime that they committed was done today by me; rather, it means responsibly *bearing* what has actually happened to or been done by those who lived before me. This is a responsibility that, in my role as posterity, goes beyond whether or not

74. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 73.

people are to be considered my kin. Jaspers has thus invited an important critique of the logic of *spondeo*—of the idea, for instance, that the *sponsor* of the crime (as Agamben would have it) would be anyone who is considered the perpetrators' kin.<sup>75</sup> Whereas guilt (along with ideas of inherited culpability) follows the logic of *spondeo*, responsibility does not follow such a logic.

What, then, is transgenerational responsibility that is not inherited or shared guilt? I would say that it is the responsibility to ethically *understand* what has happened between people in the past, a responsibility that is shared by subsequent generations in their roles as posterity. This ethical understanding can be a preparation for action, but responsibility toward the past thus is not a matter of blaming others or oneself but instead concerns having an ethically clear-sighted relationship to people in the past—that is, an understanding of where I exist in relation to them and what this relationship ethically demands of me as their after-life.

The existential point of such a statement is deeper than inherited guilt or tribal solidarity. With respect to slavery or genocide, for example, it means recognizing that, whether or not I like it, the I who lives now is the *afterlife* of both the enslaver and the enslaved person and thus that I have a relationship with both of them. I speak about what has happened between them, and only in that sense will my responsibility *for* them have a place. (As I have shown elsewhere, responsibility for the perpetrator is to see what the perpetrator has done to the victim.<sup>76</sup>) Even if I were related to a person who was an enslaver in the past, or to a perpetrator of genocide, or to a victim, my relationship with the past is not restricted to kinship connections. This is not to say that being kin with a perpetrator, or with a victim, cannot be emotionally confusing for me. But the afterlife's responsibility—indeed, *my* responsibility—to the past is not restricted to caring for those with whom I feel familial togetherness. When, for example, Tzvetan Todorov claimed that “we are all the direct descendants of Columbus,” he was not arguing that all of us who are presently living are *related* to Columbus and should be blamed for a crime that he and his contemporaries committed because of our supposed consanguinity.<sup>77</sup> Instead, the afterlife as such bears what has been done, which means that every subsequent generation must ethically relate to, understand, and condemn this conquest, realizing that they, as posterity, have often profited from colonial enterprises. In my role as the afterlife of these earlier individuals and events, I will also see how traces of colonialism are integrated in our contemporary lifeworld. When I, say, speak of the horrors that have happened, or when I repatriate cultural artifacts, I do so as the posterity that has a relationship with what has happened between people in the past. But I also recognize that I have not done these deeds; instead, I do something that Columbus and many of his contemporaries never did—that is, I speak about the horrors and I participate in

75. See Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 22.

76. See my “Understanding Evil Deeds in Human Terms: Empathy for the Perpetrators, the Dead Victims, and the Ethics of Being the Afterlife,” *Zeitschrift für Ethik und Moralphilosophie* 6, no. 2 (2023), 176–77.

77. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, transl. Richard Howard (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 5.

cultural repatriation. This does not erase or repair the wrongs of the past, and it does not turn back time, but it is an act that I, as posterity, am capable of doing in the spirit of condemning the atrocities that some people committed. In this way, I try to have a responsible relationship to persons who have lived through misery. As posterity, I can be guilty of upholding colonial institutions and activities that arose as a consequence of conquest,<sup>78</sup> but that is not the same thing as being guilty of the conquest of America. To be a descendant is to acknowledge a relationship with people in the past, but it also means that we must distance ourselves from and sometimes condemn what our predecessors have done, whereby referring to inherited or shared guilt is far from responsibly reproaching our forefathers. To share guilt is instead a kind of tribal identification that *possibly* marks an irresponsible relationship with people in the past. According to Hannah Arendt, “the cry ‘We are all guilty’ is actually a declaration of solidarity with the wrongdoers.”<sup>79</sup> It is so in the sense that people in the past are deprived of their integrity through tribal identification, where the past and present of the tribe merge and I no longer understand who I am. I share their guilt instead of clearly seeing what they have done and how I stand in relation to these deeds as having been done by someone other than myself. “Where all are guilty, nobody is,” Arendt argued.<sup>80</sup> But the same thing could be said about being a victim.<sup>81</sup>

However, realizing that transgenerational responsibility is not inherited or shared guilt can easily give rise to indifference and ideas of historical destiny. When guilt or blame is not at stake, one might wonder, what transgenerational responsibility is meaningfully left to talk about? Isn’t responsibility a mere recognition of living in a temporal world, where I understand that the past is past?<sup>82</sup> This idea of accepting a historical trajectory, however, is as misplaced as sharing the guilt for something I have never done.

Living a life after suffering and misery, as G. W. F. Hegel argued, may result in turning away from responsibly engaging with the past. This is done in order to avoid being consumed by the fact that all destruction and misery of the world is “not the work of mere nature but of the will of man.”<sup>83</sup> Turning away from what has been (for example, by saying that the past is *past and “no longer”*) is

78. Compare this with Chiel van den Akker, “Heroism, Self-Determination, and Magnanimity: Hegel and Brandom on Self-Conscious Agency,” in *Ethics and Time in the Philosophy of History: A Cross-Cultural Approach*, ed. Natan Elgabsi and Bennett Gilbert (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 115–17. See also Matthias Fritsch’s discussion of inheritance in “History, Violence, Responsibility,” *Rethinking History* 5, no. 2 (2001), 285–304.

79. Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” in *Responsibility and Judgement*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 148.

80. *Ibid.*, 147.

81. *Ibid.* I have discussed these issues more in depth in my “Understanding Evil Deeds in Human Terms,” 173–77.

82. On historical destiny, see Hans Ruin, “Historicity and the Hermeneutic Predicament: From Yorck to Derrida,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Phenomenology*, ed. Dan Zahavi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 723–25.

83. G. W. F. Hegel, “The Philosophical History of the World,” in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, transl. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 68.



not uncommon, because we often wish to escape the melancholic consciousness brought about by misery.<sup>84</sup> According to Hegel,

We can only harden ourselves against it or escape from it by telling ourselves that it was ordained by fate and could not have been otherwise. There is nothing we can do about it now, and we react against the lassitude into which such sorrowful reflections can plunge us and return to our customary attitudes, to the aims and interests of the present, which [call for] activity rather than laments over the past.<sup>85</sup>

When guilt and blame are not at stake as transgenerational responses, this idea of historical destiny is indeed tempting. The temptation involves two aspects. On the one hand, with regard to past misery, I might be tempted to think that “there is nothing we can do about it now” and that what has happened has happened in the course of a ruthless arrow of destined historical time. On the other hand, in addition to such destiny, I might also search for some ultimate meaning in the historical trajectory. According to Hegel, “even as we look upon history as an altar on which the happiness of nations, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals are slaughtered, our thoughts inevitably impel us to ask: to whom, or to what ultimate end have these monstrous sacrifices been made?”<sup>86</sup>

These two aspects of historical destiny are, however, unresponsive to what my transgenerational responsibility is. If, in hindsight, I regard everything that is past as inevitable, as a past that I cannot do anything about because it has manifestly happened, I escape one central aspect of my responsibility. What I would then discard is the notion that I can actually do something with respect to what has manifestly happened, and I can do so through my ability to *think* in an ethically clear-sighted way about it. I would, for example, have to see that another person’s suffering, which was brought about not by natural catastrophe but by other people, was not *inevitable* when it happened.<sup>87</sup> I would also have to recognize that its having happened was not a *necessity*.<sup>88</sup> This is a responsibility for absent others that I acknowledge in thinking about them. It is only in hindsight (that is, after time has passed) that I might think that the misery of people in the past was inevitable—that is, destined by time—and thus that their having suffered had a meaning *for me* as part of a historical trajectory. But I cannot let an idea of historical destiny mutilate my personal responsibility to think of the other in an ethically clear-sighted way. This thought of the other is how the other breaches

84. See also Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, “Engaged History,” in *The Ethos of History: Time and Responsibility*, ed. Stefan Helgesson and Jayne Svenungsson (New York: Berghahn Books, 2018), 166.

85. Hegel, “The Philosophical History of the World,” 69.

86. *Ibid.*

87. In this context, see Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253–67.

88. See Jean Améry’s reflection on why historical necessity is not moral necessity in *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, transl. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 72. See also Victoria Fareld, “(In) Between the Living and the Dead: New Perspectives on Time in History,” *History Compass* 14, no. 9 (2016), 432–37.



my being. It is essential to my responsibility, to how I am bound in a relationship of responsibility to another person.

The capacity to think of the other is inevitable when it comes to recognizing that I actually have relationships with persons of other generations whom I have never met. By thinking of others in a transgenerational lifeworld, my proximity to them is often disclosed. I read texts that involve them, and I hear stories about them. This proximity to absent others is a dimension of life that is especially manifest in scholarship. It also means that my thought is subject to ethical scrutiny with regard to how it is a response to other people in the past.

“Proximity,” wrote Levinas in his massive critique of historical time and consciousness, “is a disturbance of the rememberable time.”<sup>89</sup> It marks another mode of my existence than historical time, a “suppression of the distance that consciousness of . . . involves.”<sup>90</sup> It means that the temporal distance between us is secondary to ethical proximity. It means that the difference between us as persons standing in proximity to one another is the only thing that matters for what I should think of and do in relation to others. Before fraternal togetherness or tribal community engage me, this is how I must exist. My responsibility is not restricted to anyone particular, and it does not end. I live a life with many others whom I do not necessarily know. The other, according to Levinas, breaches my temporal existence:

One can call that [breach or disturbance] apocalyptically the break-up of time. But it is a matter of an effaced but untameable diachrony of non-historical, non-said time, which cannot be synchronized in a present by memory and historiography, where the present is but the trace of an immemorial past. The obligation aroused by the proximity of the neighbor is not to the measure of the images he gives me; it concerns me before or otherwise. Such is the sense of the non-phenomenality of the face.<sup>91</sup>

Can responsibility in a transgenerational lifeworld in which I read and write about the past demand anything less of me? If I take to heart the ethical-existential call of *acharayut*, I will also see that historical time, death, mediation, and so on are of secondary importance to how proximity to another person binds me. In every respect, my responsibility is connected to another person who sets the ethical frames of my life.

#### CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that responsibility toward the past in a transgenerational lifeworld is not restricted to prescriptions, interests, or duties. Unlike guilt, responsibility is not a matter of culpability or blame and will not end. I cannot free myself from this relationship of responsibility toward other persons in this transgenerational lifeworld. That is, I cannot ever be free from searching for what

89. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 89. Compare this with Bennett Gilbert, “On Breaking Up Time, or, Perennialism as Philosophy of History,” *Journal of the Philosophy of History* 12, no. 1 (2018), 5–26.

90. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 89. The ellipses in this quote also appears in Levinas’s text.

91. *Ibid.*

responsibility means or what my responsibility is in relation to how I should think about and be with others. What exactly is brought on me in a relationship of responsibility is to some extent an open question. It is an open question in the sense that I must relentlessly try to understand what a life with others is, a question that is directly connected to the becoming of myself. According to Levinas, “the absent has a meaning in a face.”<sup>92</sup> This is one way of elucidating what a life with absent others involves as an existential call. The answers to the ethical, existential, and transgenerational questions of responsibility in writing, reading, and thinking about the past that I have addressed in this article can be found by figuring out what this call means, especially when historicizing and responding to absent others. Responsibility to the past means finding a way to answer a call that comes from others in the past—and to answer in an ethically responsible way when I, as part of their afterlife, continue to speak about them.

*Åbo Akademi University*

92. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Trace of the Other,” in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 355.