

GUILT: FACING THE PROBLEM OF ETHICAL SOLIPSISM

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the constitutive role played by the emotion of guilt, or the capacity of experiencing such emotions, in our moral life. The deeply personal nature of moral guilt (or remorse) leads to the problem of ethical solipsism: it seems that guilt can in the end concern only me, not anyone else, in a morally profound sense. Echoing Dostoevsky, the truly ethical thinker ought to acknowledge that everyone is guilty in front of the entire mankind, “and I more than anyone else”. This problematic feature of our moral perspectives on the world is examined through comments on a number of authors, including Kant, Wittgenstein, Levinas, Gaita, and Todorov. While we do need to avoid solipsism, there is a “truth” hidden in it: morality is something that we are individually and personally deeply responsible for.

I

Immanuel Kant remarks, in a famous footnote to the First Critique, that

[t]he real morality of actions (their merit and guilt), even that of our own conduct [...] remains entirely hidden from us. Our imputations can be referred only to the empirical character. How much of it is to be ascribed to mere nature [...] no one can discover, and hence no one can judge it with complete justice.¹

Although commentators have drawn attention to this important passage,² its full significance still deserves substantial consideration. So does the significance of another famous Kantian remark, according to which, for each one of us, “the depths of his own heart (the subjective first grounds of his maxims) are to him inscrutable”.³

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A551/B579n (original: 1st ed. 1781, 2nd ed. 1787). I have also used the German original, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 3rd ed., 1990).

² See, e.g., A.W. Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant's Moral and Religious Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003; paperback ed. 2005), p. 111.

³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason*, Akademie-Ausgabe (AA), 6:51. For illuminating discussions of this inscrutability – in particular, the inscrutability of evil – see Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); and Robert B. Loudon, “Evil

In this article, I will suggest that these remarks by Kant should lead us to take seriously the problem of *ethical solipsism* in relation to the morally central concept of *guilt*. Through a discussion drawing from Kant among others, I want to raise a systematic issue regarding the attributability – and the apparently resulting inscrutability – of moral guilt: is only my own guilt ultimately truly morally relevant, even though guilt would seem to be a social ethical notion (and/or emotion) *par excellence*? By examining this question in the context of the problem of solipsism, I will try to enhance our understanding of the role played by guilt as a concept and human emotional capacity constitutive of what we may call the moral point of view, and thereby constitutive of our being human beings. My approach is distinguished from mainstream moral psychological theories of guilt⁴ by being more metaphysically oriented; however, this undertaking could also be described as belonging to “philosophical anthropology”, insofar as it reflects on some of the basic features characterizing our morally oriented form(s) of life, that is, human life as we know it. Indeed, some of the literature I will cite, including Emmanuel Levinas’s, Raimond Gaita’s, and Tzvetan Todorov’s ethical reflections, might quite appropriately be categorized as philosophical anthropology in this sense.

As every first year student of philosophy learns, one of the main points of Kantian moral philosophy is that morality belongs to the realm of pure practical reason. There is, thus, a sense in which it is something that takes place solely “within” the moral agent. The external circumstances or the actual results or outcomes of our actions are morally irrelevant. The only morally relevant issue is whether or not an action is motivated by the agent’s pure respect for the moral law (the categorical imperative). We may see Kant’s deontological ethics as the culmination of a long development that started out in antiquity, the process of moving the moral value of our actions from external matters to internal ones. Our moral self is something deeply, absolutely, “internal” to us. It is, eventually, for Kant the person conceived as a legislating citizen of the Kingdom of Ends, understood as a noumenal self rather than an empirical, psychological, flesh-and-blood person in nature. The same holds for moral guilt. We are guilty not simply – or perhaps, in a philosophically important sense, not at all – because of having performed (or having failed to perform) some particular actions. Rather, guilt is something that concerns the inner state of one’s soul (lacking any better term), which may be manifested, instead of specific actions or omissions, in the

Everywhere”, *Sats* 9 (2008), 7-27. (The German original for the term “inscrutable” is “unerforschlich”.) As Loudon summarizes Kant’s position, ultimately “free actions – whether for good or for evil – are fundamentally inexplicable” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

⁴ Thus, my discussion differs significantly from, say, P.S. Greenspan’s; see Greenspan, *Practical Guilt: Moral Dilemmas, Emotions, and Social Norms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

character of one's life in general. Moreover, according to Kant, we "radically" have a propensity for evil – and are thus potentially guilty.⁵

Insofar as we can know nothing about noumena, as Kant maintains, it seems that we can know nothing about our own moral selves and our true moral guilt – or about anyone else's. As moral agents, we are things in themselves, not appearances; famously, we can only act "under the idea of freedom", and no natural entities tied to the deterministic causal laws governing the empirical world can be free in that sense.⁶ That is, as beings committed to the moral law, or as beings who, by reason's demands, are required to be thus committed (whether or not we are actually capable of acting morally at all), and who are, hence, morally accountable for their actions, we are something quite different from mere causality-bound natural creatures. We belong to the "higher", transcendent sphere of noumena – and so does our moral guilt.

Even if we could, by means of some kind of transcendental introspection, take a look at our own "soul" in order to determine whether a given action of ours is motivated from genuinely moral grounds or not, or (conversely) whether we are guilty in a morally deep sense, we can hardly do this in the case of another human being. The "inner life" of others is closed from us. Therefore, a kind of ethical solipsism seems to follow from relatively basic Kantian premises. Note, however, that by "ethical solipsism" I do not mean any extreme subjectivist position privileging certain non-cognitive ethical states of mind or some subjective characteristics of individual moral agents. Such non-cognitivism or subjectivism, e.g., emotivism, would be far from any Kantian ethics, and it is unclear whether any profound notion of guilt could be accommodated by such a view at all.⁷ Rather, the ethical solipsist in my Kantian-

⁵ Kant's famous theory of "radical evil", formulated in the first chapter of the *Religionsschrift* (AA, vol. 6), falls outside the scope of this article. See Bernstein, *Radical Evil*, and Loudon, "Evil Everywhere", for up-to-date discussions.

⁶ Obviously, this paper is not the right place to discuss in any detail Kant's complicated theory of freedom, let alone his moral philosophy as a whole. (Moore's book, cited above, is one of the best recent readings, in my view.) I tend to read Kant as a *compatibilist*, which is well in line with a "one world" interpretation of Kant's famous transcendental distinction between things in themselves and appearances: freedom and determinism are compatible with each other in the sense that all empirical events in the natural world are (causally) determined, while some of those very same events – namely, human actions – can be seen from an entirely different perspective, or conceptualized from another standpoint, that of morality (which requires freedom as a "postulate of practical reason"). Whether such compatibilism is acceptable depends on whether Kant's doctrine of the "two standpoints" can be accepted. See, e.g., Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁷ A critic might ask here whether I am concerned with the *notion* of guilt or with *guilt itself*, the phenomenon or emotion that notion designates or refers to. A short answer is that I am concerned with

like sense insists that *my will* is the only ethically relevant one; the moral world, the normative sphere in which ethical orientation is required, is “my world”, and I can only assess my own moral thought and conduct, never really that of any others. Therefore, any guilt that can be spoken about in a truly moral sense is *mine*.

Dostoevsky’s novels emphasize this idea perhaps more strongly than any philosophical texts. In *The Brothers Karamazov* (which I use as a source for inspiration but do not even try to comment upon in any scholarly detail), Dostoevsky returns over and over again to the significance of guilt, especially to its uncompromising first-person character. *Each of us* is said to be guilty “in front of all the others,” guilty of all human sins, of the sins of the entire world and of all human beings. Phrases like these are repeated throughout the volume by various characters; their overall effect can be compared to a theme or a motive in a symphony or an opera. Moreover, our guilt is not symmetrical or democratic. While everyone is guilty and deserves punishment, *I* am more guilty than the others, “the worst human being in the world.”⁸

There is a Christian analogue to this view. Recall Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount: “Judge not, that ye be not judged. [...] And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?”⁹ The relevance of ethical solipsism from the standpoint of Christianity may be considerable, as the Christian believer should, whenever deliberating ethically, be primarily worried about the state or quality of *her/his own soul*, about her/his own guilt that is, to echo Dostoevsky, greater than anyone else’s (though of course always presupposing a relation to God and other human beings, hence without any *ontologically* solipsistic assumptions).¹⁰ Moreover, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the concept of *original sin* may be seen as a close relative of the kind of deeply personal guilt invoked here. Even though I have not done anything in particular, I may still be guilty in the “original” sense.

both. I am inquiring into the status the notion of guilt plays, or ought to play, in our moral thought, but this is simultaneously an inquiry into the ways in which our moral lives themselves are structured by this phenomenon. As a human-made practice and conceptual system, morality is an area of life in which “real” phenomena and the concepts by means of which those phenomena are understood and categorized cannot be neatly separated. Our moral life largely consists of the ways in which we conceptually categorize our being in the world with others.

⁸ At this point, guilt might be compared to a closely related, though distinguishable, notion or phenomenon, *shame*. An experience of shame may be part of one’s experience of being guilty; indeed, one’s being guilty and one’s recognition of one’s guilt may cause shame.

⁹ Matthew 7: 1, 3.

¹⁰ A distinction must, therefore, be drawn between ethical solipsism and the more standard metaphysical (ontological) and epistemological (skeptical) versions of solipsism maintaining that (for all we know) the world is “my world” and/or that my experiences and thoughts exhaust reality. See Sami Pihlström, *Solipsism: History, Critique, and Relevance* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2004).

Similarly, there is an analogue to Stoicism, another classical ethical framework, which is perhaps a better candidate as a precursor of ethical solipsism than any standard form of subjectivism. Unlike the Sophists, who clearly were subjectivists or relativists of their own kind, the Stoics held that the inner state of the soul is ultimately all that matters, ethically speaking, and that the “sage” is first and foremost concerned with maintaining the inner harmony of her/his soul with the *logos* of the universe. Neither Jesus’s teachings nor the Stoic ideal of the sage can be reduced to what I am here calling ethical solipsism, but certainly there are deep similarities in their accounts of what it means to be ethically committed.

According to ethical solipsism, all evaluative judgments are in the end *about me* (that is, about my will or character), not about any allegedly morally valuable objects in the world existing independently of me. Any value – or guilt – there may be depends on my valuational acts or attitudes, the way I relate to the world around me. The ethical solipsist, then, need not be a solipsist in an ontological or an epistemological sense, but a form of *transcendental solipsism*, a view pertaining to the basic meaning or significance of the world for us, is a natural background of the kind of ethical solipsism I am here trying to understand.¹¹

2

In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein noted that reward and punishment are irrelevant to ethics, except insofar as they “reside in the action itself”.¹² He thereby made a profoundly Kantian point.¹³ It is only the inner motivation one has for performing an action that counts, morally speaking. The moral point of view does not focus on the consequences of our actions, nor on the external rewards or punishments those actions may bring about, but “internally” just on the action itself and its performer’s inner state of soul. Whatever reward and punishment there may be, they must lie in the action itself.¹⁴ As Wittgenstein elsewhere put it, anything that can be done out of ethically noble motives can also be done out of selfishness and

¹¹ In addition to the transcendental solipsism we might ascribe to Wittgenstein, to be commented on in the next section, the solipsism issue in the phenomenological tradition, especially Husserl, may be described as transcendental.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), trans. David F. Pears and Brian F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), § 6.422.

¹³ For Kant, the “reward” one may get for acting morally – or better, what one may hope for insofar as one acts on the basis of the moral law – is the eternal life of the immortal soul, guaranteed by God. Immortality, like God’s existence, is a postulate of practical reason. For Wittgenstein, eternity amounts to “living in the present” (*Tractatus*, § 6.4311); there is, accordingly, even a hint toward *solipsism of the present moment* in Wittgenstein, though I cannot deal with that aspect of the *Tractatus* here.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 6.422.

cowardice.¹⁵ The action itself, externally viewed, does not wear its moral qualities on its sleeve. What is ethically relevant, again, is just the motivation deep within the moral agent, and there is no way of empirically determining whether the agent, *qua* moral subject, is worthy of moral reward or punishment. This can only be “known”, if at all, by the agent her-/himself from within the moral life s/he leads. And it is a special kind of “knowledge” indeed, because, according to Wittgenstein, our moral selves do not merely lie outside the cognitive sphere, as Kantian-like incognizable noumena, but remain outside the sphere of meaningful language-use. What cannot be spoken about must be passed over into silence.¹⁶ In its deepest sense, therefore, moral guilt is also beyond (ordinary) knowledge and linguistic description.

Consider a simple example: I may give a small amount of money to help the starving people of the third world. No one will ever know whether I did this for genuinely moral reasons or not. I may have done it out of vanity, out of wanting to look like a person who is “good” and thoughtful. I may have done it without telling about the action to anyone, to be sure, but even so I may have done it because I want, in general, to be “looked at” as a good person, or because I want to avoid being looked at as a selfish person who does not care about others.¹⁷ I may not even know myself what my ultimate motive for the action was. If Kant is right, I *cannot* know this. My true motive is deeply hidden in the depth of my soul, visible not even to my own empirical self but only to my transcendental, intelligible, noumenal self. Insofar as there is a way for me to conceive of myself as such a self, I can to some extent examine my motives, my ways of being a moral agent, but this possibility is, solipsistically, absolutely closed to all others. Again, the same holds for guilt: only my own moral guilt, and not the guilt of other people, can be determined – and only by me, by me alone, transcendently speaking.

From a Wittgensteinian point of view, the moral subject’s relation to the world conceived as a totality is the only thing that matters – and, astonishingly, there *is* only one such subject, *me*. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein seems to have sympathized with a transcendental form of solipsism, according to which “the world is my world”, and “world and life are one”.¹⁸ Famously, the world of the “happy man” is different from

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, eds. G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 48.

¹⁶ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 7.

¹⁷ Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous discussion of the Look, developed in *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1966).

¹⁸ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, §§ 5.62-5.63.

the world of the “unhappy man”.¹⁹ This is not the right place to deal with the various interpretations of these solipsistic-sounding remarks by Wittgenstein.²⁰ Nor shall I discuss later neo-Wittgensteinian moral philosophers’ views, according to which moral problems are highly personal problems and cannot be settled with reference to any general moral theory – even though there is a hint of the seriousness of the solipsism issue in this conception (shared by a number of Wittgensteinians) of morality as something deeply personal, truly available only from the “first person point of view”.²¹ I am, rather, interested in the question of whether the Kantian-Wittgensteinian line of thought – the proposal to identify the genuinely moral

¹⁹ Ibid., § 6.43. The happy life and the “happy world” of a happy person are discussed somewhat more comprehensively by Wittgenstein in his pre-Tractarian *Notebooks 1914-1916* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961); see the entries on July 8, 29, and 30, in 1916. For a fresh discussion of these issues, see Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty*.

²⁰ There is plenty of commentary literature available. See, e.g., P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986; 1st ed. 1972); Heikki Kannisto, *Thoughts and Their Subject: A Study of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus*, Acta Philosophica Fennica 40 (Helsinki: The Philosophical Society of Finland, 1986); David Pears, *The False Prison: A Study of the Development of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy I – II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987-88); Richard J. Brockhaus, *Pulling Up the Ladder: The Metaphysical Roots of Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1991); Sebastian Lalla, *Solipsismus bei Ludwig Wittgenstein: Eine Studie zum Früh- und Spätwerk* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002); Pihlström, *Solipsism*, especially ch. 3; as well as the special solipsism issue of *European Journal of Philosophy* 4 (1996). In particular, I will here set aside the debate between the “New Wittgensteinians” and the more traditional (e.g., Kantian) interpreters on the question of whether it is correct to ascribe any philosophical theses, such as solipsism or its alternatives, to Wittgenstein. Cf. Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Whatever the status of Wittgenstein’s “solipsism” is, it is clearly no “ordinary” solipsism; in particular, it cannot be put to words but its (unspeakable) “truth” can only “show itself” in our life with language (cf. *Tractatus*, §§ 5.62, 5.64). Indeed, a key idea of the present contribution is that its “truth” may be manifested in the way we think, or ought to think, about the notion of moral guilt.

²¹ For contributions to this discussion, see, e.g., Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); D.Z. Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992); Paul Johnston, *The Contradictions of Modern Moral Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Rush Rhees, *Moral Questions*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (London: Macmillan, 1999); Raimond Gaita, *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004; 1st ed. 1991); Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005); and Pihlström, “Transcendental Guilt: On an Emotional Condition of Moral Experience”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35 (2007), 87-111. The idea of moral problems and actions as profoundly personal is certainly not restricted to the Wittgensteinian tradition. For example, Tzvetan Todorov argues that “an action is moral not in itself but only in relation to its author, a specific time, and a particular place”. See Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996; French original 1991), p. 118. Todorov also concludes, on the basis of his comprehensive discussion of moral life in the concentration camps, that moral action is *subjective* in the sense of being “one that the individual takes on himself” and *personal* in the sense of being “directed toward one or more individuals”; accordingly, the moral action *par excellence* is what he calls *caring* (ibid., pp. 287-288). (I will have a chance to return to Todorov’s views below.)

perspective, including any serious perspective on guilt, with the inner life of the subject, the life of the soul, so to say – inevitably entails something like ethical solipsism. I cannot see how such a conclusion, however unwelcome both intellectually and morally, could be avoided, if only the moral will, motivation, or law within the subject can be taken seriously as the ground for determining whether a given action is ethical or not, or whether a person (i.e., me) is morally guilty or not.

Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, seems to have been not only a transcendental solipsist about the objects of linguistic description (i.e., the world given to the subject, which is its “limit”), but also an ethical solipsist roughly in the sense indicated above. The metaphysical subject as the “limit of the world”²² is the ultimate ground for any ethical evaluation there may be; in this sense of ethical “ultimacy”, guilt is also something that concerns, and can concern, only such a metaphysical or transcendental subject. Only the self is good or evil, not the world, or anything in it.²³ Wittgenstein points out that good or evil acts of the will cannot alter the facts of the world (that is, what can be expressed in language) but only the limits of the world, so that the world may become “an altogether different world”.²⁴ The world itself – its contingent facts – contains nothing ethical, nothing that is valuable in the absolute sense.²⁵ However, value and the valuing subject are nothing *transcendent*, either, even though Wittgenstein says in some places that ethics is “supernatural”.²⁶ Wittgenstein’s statement (in the *Tractatus*) about ethics being, like logic, *transcendental* (instead of “transcendent”) should be taken seriously; a thinker of Wittgenstein’s caliber could hardly have made a simple terminological mistake here. Despite his mysticist tendencies – indeed, the *Tractatus* is a magnificent piece of mystical literature – he did not claim that ethics lies “outside” the world (and life)²⁷ in any literal sense. It lies,

²² See again, in addition to *Tractatus*, § 5.641, Wittgenstein’s somewhat more elaborate remarks on the metaphysical subject in the *Notebooks* (entries on August 2, 5, and 7, in 1916; and on September 2, 1916).

²³ See Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, entry on August 5, 1916.

²⁴ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 6.43.

²⁵ On Wittgenstein’s distinction between the absolute ethical value and trivial everyday value, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Lecture on Ethics” (1929), *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965), 3-16 (reprinted in Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, eds. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann, Hackett: Indianapolis, 1993).

²⁶ See especially the “Lecture on Ethics”, cited above. Wittgenstein’s ethical subject is in my view misleadingly characterized as transcendent (instead of transcendental) in, e.g., Dale Jacquette, “Wittgenstein on the Transcendence of Ethics”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1997), 304-324. For a more promising approach recognizing the significance of the notion of the “transcendental” (though curiously distancing this from the notion of the transcendental subject), see Cora Diamond, “Ethics, Imagination and the Method of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*” (1991), in Alice Crary and Rupert Read (eds.), *The New Wittgenstein* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 149-173.

²⁷ Famously, Wittgenstein claims that the world and life “are one” (*Tractatus*, § 5.621; see also *Notebooks*, entry on July 24, 1916).

rather, at the *limit* of the world, because ethics, like religion and aesthetics, provides a view onto the world as a limited whole, perhaps valuable in some “higher” sense, but nevertheless limited by the subject who values it. This is a view *sub specie aeternitatis*, but neither the valuing and willing subject nor the value s/he (or it)²⁸ imposes on the world are transcendent entities mysteriously located outside the empirical world. Ethics is essentially about the subject’s perspective or attitude to the world and life, a perspective constituting a condition for the possibility of the world, as perspectively structured by the subject. The subject, itself at the limit of the world, views her/his/its world as a whole under the aspect of ethical (or aesthetic) value.

The crucial insight here is that this viewing may also take place under the aspect of guilt. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we may say that the world of a guilty person is different from the world of an innocent one. It is a *guilty world*, a world deeply structured by the phenomenon of guilt. The notion of guilt is so fundamental for our ways of taking seriously our ethically challenging task of being in the world with other human beings that it may guide and “color” our experience of “having” a world at all.

No transcendence is involved here, but only transcendentalism, in a sense resembling Kant’s: the subject’s perspective, together with her/his attitude toward the world as a totality arising from that perspective, constitutes a necessary condition for the world being a possible object of experience and linguistic representation. The moral subject, then, is not external to the world within which we (it) are required to act morally. Instead, Wittgenstein’s view of ethics as transcendental construes “the ethical” as an “inner” feature of the world. Wittgensteinian ethical solipsism may even be compatible with (internal) moral realism, insofar as the former is construed at a transcendental level and the latter at an empirical one, just as transcendental idealism and empirical realism are compatible – and even mutually required – according to Kant.²⁹

Ultimately, then, our question concerns the very possibility of ethics as a human way of facing and engaging the world, of being in the world, as a perspective on the

²⁸ It is a problem whether the transcendental subject can even be referred to by a personal pronoun. But then how can guilt be fundamentally “first-personal” (mine), if the transcendental subject it concerns is impersonal, not a human being at all? In some not easily articulable way, the subject Wittgenstein is talking about, in order to be relevant to our discussion of guilt and solipsism, must be human. We should, presumably, construe it as a perspective on *ourselves*, rather than any distinct entity in its own right.

²⁹ The analogue between Wittgenstein’s transcendental solipsism (“the world is my world”; cf. *Tractatus*, § 5.62) and Kant’s transcendental idealism, as well as the compatibility of both with empirical realism – with the view that, famously, the solipsistic subject “shrinks” to a point without extension, leaving us just the world (cf. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 5.64) – is emphasized in Kannisto’s above-cited work, *Thoughts and Their Subject*.

world we live in. Obviously, insofar as adopting a truly ethical point of view leads to solipsism, it is not clear that we should, or even could, adopt that point of view. It seems that a radically anti-solipsistic move must first be made in order to make ethics possible. Even more strongly, if guilt is a feature fundamentally constituting the (transcendental) subject's way of facing her/his/its world, it is unclear whether the ethical solipsism that seems to be required by this first-personal approach makes sense at all: guilt seems to presuppose the full reality of others whom one can harm. But then, again, as soon as we admit that our actual deeds and omissions in the world ought to be seen as morally relevant, after all, we are back with the situation in which we can never be sure whether a given action is genuinely ethically motivated or not. Any human action, even the most "saintly" one, may be motivated by selfish desires; conversely, any action, even the most "bestly" one, may be motivated by high moral principles (though it may be difficult for us to see how). We can never escape the need to reflect on the depths of our souls, the innermost motivations we have for performing any actions we perform. Nor can we, therefore, escape our fundamentally guilty condition. Guilt, just as the world, is mine – and by taking seriously this thought I am already deeply puzzled by the tension between the primacy of the first person (solipsism) and the presupposition that there must be others for me to be able to be guilty (anti-solipsism).

3

Let us, however, attempt to make sense of the "transcendental" role guilt may play in our moral vocabulary without making any solipsistic assumptions.³⁰ Raimond Gaita, a well-known Wittgensteinian ethical thinker, may lead our inquiry here. He prefers to focus on the concept of *remorse* rather than on the one of guilt. These are not the same concept but they are intimately related; indeed, if "guilt-feeling" is a "pained acknowledgment of the wrong one has done," then there is, between such a feeling and remorse, no significant difference.³¹ Gaita simply characterizes remorse as "the pained acknowledgment of one's guilt".³² He also says that in remorse people "suffer in guilty recognition of what they have become"; remorse is "the suffering recognition and acknowledgment of one's guilt".³³ A more detailed definition says that remorse is "the pained recognition of the significance of our guilt, guilt being the *condition* of one

³⁰ This section makes use of some of the material in my above-cited paper, "Transcendental Guilt".

³¹ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 34.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

³³ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, pp. 48-49.

who is a wrongdoer”.³⁴ These characterizations suggest that one cannot suffer remorse without being guilty – without being in the relevant kind of condition – and without (painfully, sufferingly) acknowledging one’s guilt, that is, experiencing a certain self-reflective feeling, emotion, or attitude.³⁵ Objectively speaking, there is, undoubtedly, a sense in which one can be guilty (that is, be in the relevant condition) without experiencing remorse; this, however, is not the ethically fundamental sense of guilt we are interested in here. When emphasizing the ethical significance of the emotion of guilt (or the dispositional property of being able to experience such an emotion in appropriate circumstances), we perhaps ought to primarily focus on remorse, as Gaita does.

In the preface to the second edition of his penetrating *Good and Evil*, Gaita further describes the experience of remorse “not as a psychological response to wrongdoing” but as a “pained, bewildered realisation of what it means (in a sense interdependent with *what it is*) to wrong someone”; when lucid, remorse is “an astonished encounter with the reality of the ethical”.³⁶ In other words, remorse often comes with a “horrified discovery of the significance of what we did.” This experience is trivialized, if one claims, following traditional moral theories, such as Kant’s, that committing immoral or evil actions is, say, the same as being a “traitor to Reason.” A “horrified” realization or discovery along the lines of, “My God, what have I done? I have been a traitor to reason. I have violated rational nature in another!”, yields a parody of moral seriousness.³⁷ Gaita argues, then, that remorse is more fundamental an experience than any principles one might adopt from typical academic ethical theories. This conclusion is close to the one we may draw from Dostoevsky: the experience (emotion) of guilt, or remorse, is primary to the more sophisticated, but less fundamental, intellectual (philosophical or theological) responses to the questions of right and wrong, or good and evil, that we may develop.

Another possible corruption of the concepts of guilt and remorse is the failure to notice their *personal* character – that is, the failure to notice the relevance of the problem of solipsism in relation to guilt we started out from. In “common guilt,” all are guilty and no one is. “Someone who is true to her remorse will always reject, as inappropriate, consolation that is based on her recognition of the guilt of others,” Gaita tells us, adding that the knowledge that others are guilty, too, will provide only

³⁴ Ibid., p. 51.

³⁵ Analogously, one is in the need of, and is able to receive, *mercy* only if one has sinned and acknowledges this. In a juridical context, only if a criminal confesses her/his crime, pleading guilty, is an authority (say, the President) able to mercifully liberate her/him from her/his punishment.

³⁶ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. xiv.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 33; see also Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, p. 32.

a “corrupt consolation”.³⁸ Putting together Gaita’s and Dostoevsky’s insights, we may argue that this kind of corrupt thinking fails to acknowledge the sense in which *I* am, from the perspective of *my* ethical reflection, always more guilty than any other person – I am the one whose guilt is ethically prior to any other’s. True guilt or remorse is not self-centered, but recognizes, often with a shock, the “reality of the other” (as Gaita puts it); yet, it is, in a way, ethically solipsistic: *my* being guilty is what ultimately matters in moral evaluation.

This personal status of guilt leads to the idea that guilt (or remorse) is, as Gaita seeks to show, a condition for the possibility of finding something a “moral matter”: “we cannot say that something is morally wrong unless it is an intelligible object of remorse”.³⁹ Now, this has the structure of a *transcendental argument*, in a (broadly speaking) Kantian sense: something can be done, that is, in this case, something can be said to be morally wrong, *only* if something else is done or acknowledged, namely, that this “something” is an intelligible object of remorse. It is implicitly suggested that we do judge, and cannot avoid judging, certain things as morally wrong. Finding something an intelligible object of remorse is thus not optional; this is a presuppositional necessity built into the very possibility of the ethical. As Gaita notes, his argument “depends upon a certain understanding of remorse as expressive of the seriousness that is inseparable from a certain sense of morality”.⁴⁰ While avoiding the transcendental terminology I am employing, he says that “remorse is a central and inextinguishable determinant of what it is for something to be a moral matter”.⁴¹ This can be read as a statement about remorse being transcendently constitutive of something’s being a moral issue or problem.⁴²

Insofar as one trusts the resources of Kantian-like transcendental reflection in moral philosophy – though *not* necessarily in the service of foundationalist attempts to demonstrate apodictically certain “first principles” – it is not, I hope, too speculative to read Gaita’s theory as a transcendental account of *a* condition for the possibility of

³⁸ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, pp. 47-48; see also Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, p. 98.

³⁹ Gaita, *Good and Evil*, p. 60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴² Note also that this is not to say that avoiding guilty feelings would have to be – or even could be – the main motivation for moral actions. Such a prudential or even egoistic reason for, say, saving someone who is in danger could hardly be described as moral at all. It is one thing to claim that something (for example, guilt, or the capability of experiencing guilt) is a necessary condition for morality, and another thing to claim that this something would have to be present as the main (or even as a morally relevant) motivation of moral actions.

regarding something as a moral matter.⁴³ But it is important to avoid misdescribing the transcendental guilt I am considering in foundationalist terms. The kind of moral philosophy Gaita seeks to develop through his discussions of remorse, love, truth, and other “big” notions, discussions abundant in empirical and literary examples, is very far from a universal ethical theory with systematic principles and rules. Insofar as we find his account of remorse and guilt compelling, we should not attempt to construct such a theory. Moral philosophy ought to be sensitive to the personal character of ethical problems, including the sentiments of guilt and remorse. At the same time, it can engage in something like a transcendental setting of normative “limits” for genuine (uncorrupt) moral agency and moral concepts, as in Gaita’s demarcations between genuine and corrupt forms of guilt.

A natural (re-)interpretation of the position Gaita develops is, then, the one according to which the concepts of guilt and remorse, whatever their exact relation to each other eventually is, play a transcendental role in being constitutive of what is (or can be), for us, a “moral matter,” or a possible object of ethical thinking, evaluation, and motivation. We could not engage in moral deliberation at all, or find anything a moral problem requiring such deliberation, were we incapable of the kind of emotions, attitudes, and reactions these concepts (purport to) describe; but we can and do so engage; hence, we have no choice but to maintain that these concepts do really play the role I have attributed to them in our moral thought, or in any thinking and language-use we – within our present (historically changing) language-game or form of life – can claim to be genuinely ethical. Guilt, we learn from Gaita’s discussion, is the “condition” of the wrongdoer, a condition acknowledged in remorse; this, we learn from Dostoevsky, is our general human condition, something that characterizes our existence as such, and mine more profoundly than anyone else’s.

⁴³ Another misunderstanding, a variant of the “foundationalist” one, would be to imagine that guilt is *the* transcendental ground of morality. Transcendental arguments locate necessary conditions, not sufficient ones, and there can be more than one necessary condition of a given phenomenon. For comparison, consider the necessary transcendental conditions of experience, as articulated by Kant: space and time as forms of pure intuition (*Anschauungsformen*) are necessary for (human) experience to be possible, but these are not even jointly sufficient, because the categories (for example, causality) are required as well. Similarly, the capacity for experiencing guilt is a necessary condition for the possibility of morality, but genuine moral agency requires other conditions, too – arguably, for example, a language rich enough for making systematic normative distinctions, etc. Yet another misunderstanding would be the claim that morality or ethical standards of evaluation can be reduced to the concepts of guilt and/or remorse. In maintaining that morality presupposes (the possibility of) guilt and remorse, I am *not at all* implying that these moral emotions would not in turn presuppose that the one who is capable of experiencing them *already* lives in a community or form of life constituted by moral relations. Thus, the position I am sketching is in no way a reductionist one.

Now, if guilt (or remorse) is, as I suggest on the basis of these ideas drawn from *The Brothers Karamazov* and from *Good and Evil*, seen as a transcendental requirement of the possibility of morality, or of ethical seriousness, it cannot be a “merely practical” notion, tied to the factual situations of life we encounter. Guilt, or the capacity of experiencing guilty emotions and feelings, is not just contingently present in moral life. In an everyday, somewhat trivial or shallow sense, one is of course always guilty of something specific, if guilty at all; one’s moral guilt necessarily relates to what one has done or has failed to do, that is, which facts one has, by means of one’s actions, caused or failed to cause (overlooking here all the difficult problems with agent causation). In contrast, transcendental guilt is more metaphysical,⁴⁴ even mystical. This, however, does not mean that it is completely different from moral guilt; instead, the kind of guilt I am trying to describe and whose place in the context of the solipsism issue troubles us, is precisely moral guilt. It is moral guilt itself that turns metaphysical when we look at it in the transcendental way I have suggested, finding our sources in Kant and Wittgenstein, among others.⁴⁵

Gaita’s discussion may here be interestingly compared to Tzvetan Todorov’s distinction between *heroic* and *ordinary* virtues, which he analyzes in the context of moral life in concentration camps.⁴⁶ The transcendental notion of moral guilt I have discussed concerns primarily our failure – and the constantly possible failure – to act in accordance with the quite ordinary virtues that make human life with others possible in the first place, such as dignity and (especially) caring, *in relation to individual fellow human beings*. No guilt needs to follow from the failure to be heroic, although it may. (Few of us are capable of heroic virtues even in exceptional circumstances.) Arguably, we may be said to be morally required to act virtuously in the “ordinary” sense, even though no such requirement extends to heroic action. The duty to care for

⁴⁴ Perhaps, we could here talk about the grounding (or “groundwork”) of the metaphysics of morality in the sense of Kant’s famous work, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (available in AA, vol. 4).

⁴⁵ In this sense, my treatment of the metaphysics of (moral) guilt crucially differs from Karl Jaspers’s (see his *Die Schuldfrage*, Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1946). Jaspers distinguishes between juridical, political, moral, and metaphysical guilt. The last is based on our simply being human, on our sharing humanity with others, including in particular the victims of atrocities we may have witnessed but have been unable to prevent (such as, paradigmatically, the Holocaust). It is the guilt of the bystanders. In the metaphysical sense, we are guilty just by being there, by existing. Having attempted to describe our basic problem with the attributability of serious moral guilt as the problem of ethical solipsism, I have so to say attempted to soften the dichotomy between the moral and the metaphysical. The kind of moral guilt I have tried to characterize is itself metaphysical. For a more comprehensive discussion of Jaspers along these lines, see Pihlström, “Transcendental Guilt”. See also Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, pp. 231 ff.; on the passive spectators’ (onlookers’) moral responsibility, see pp. 238 ff.

⁴⁶ Todorov, *Facing the Extreme* (cited above).

other individuals is set to us as a very simple human demand, whose simplicity makes our transcendental guilt all the more deep-seated.⁴⁷

4

The obviously unwelcome solipsistic conclusions arrived at above in sections 1 and 2 above may be avoided, if – perhaps *only* if – the (solipsistic) ethical subject makes something resembling a Kierkegaardian “leap” toward the other human being, into the dark. By making such a leap, one just gives up one’s (instinctive) solipsism and simply acknowledges, as an ethically motivated action, the reality of others, particularly the reality of other experiential and willing perspectives on the world. Giving up solipsism is, then, itself an ethically motivated act. It may be an act of adopting toward others an “attitude towards a soul”, understood as not requiring a metaphysical theory of the existence of souls, or an epistemological one about their cognitive accessibility, but as a fundamentally ethical attitude prior to both epistemology and ontology.⁴⁸ However, even here solipsistic difficulties remain.

One problem is that guilt loses its above-described ethically deep meaning if it is shareable with others. If we acknowledge the full ethically pregnant reality of other subjects, we must also acknowledge *their* being (or at least being capable of being) guilty. Then my guilt is no longer the moral center of human guilt. My being guilty no more provides the world (which is no longer “mine”) with its guilty “form”, its disharmony with the requirements of morality. It is not obvious that this situation would not require a considerable sacrifice in the significance we attribute to our experiences of moral guilt, the kind of experiences that Dostoevsky seems to have in mind when declaring that I am more guilty than any others.

Another problem is that even if ethics is claimed to be primarily about the subject’s relation to a transcendent Other, as Emmanuel Levinas puts it, the problem of solipsism can hardly be completely avoided. Levinas says in so many words that *I* am the chosen one, the one bearing all the world upon my shoulders. It is, then,

⁴⁷ Todorov’s book (*ibid.*) is an extraordinarily interesting examination of the possibility of moral life in the camps. It is important to note that he discusses not just different virtues but also vices, such as fragmentation, depersonalization (of others and of oneself), and the enjoyment of power – all of which are relevant both in ordinary and in extraordinary circumstances. Moreover, he perceptively notes that the kind of ordinary virtues he distinguishes (dignity, caring, “the life of the mind”) may conflict with each other (see pp. 103-107); thus, again, they may produce guilt simply by being extremely ordinary virtues demanded of us in daily life. Neither his list of ordinary virtues nor the corresponding list of vices is, Todorov reminds us, exhaustive; both are just intuitively collected traits encountered in readings on “life in the camps” (*ibid.*, p. 185).

⁴⁸ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958; 1st ed. 1953), Part II, Section iv.

ultimately *me* who is constantly set into the infinite responsibility to and for the Other, the responsibility from which ethics originates. Again, my guilt for failing to carry my responsibilities toward the Other is ethically fundamental, constituting the reality of the ethical. This is a kind of ethical solipsism all over again.⁴⁹

Let us briefly take a look at how Levinas becomes entangled with the problem framework of solipsism, despite his admirable effort to emphasize the ethical primacy of the Other and our infinite responsibility for the Other. The key issue here is the *unshareability* of my responsibility: it is me, and me only, who enters a morally problematic position through sheer existence, through my inevitably occupying someone else's potential "place" in the world with "the *Da* of my *Dasein*".⁵⁰ I am "non-interchangeable", because "I am inescapably responsible", "the unique and chosen one", in the face of the Other, as a "hostage" for the Other.⁵¹ The word "I", for Levinas, "means *here I am*"; I am a "*sub-jectum*", responsible for everything, uniquely substituting myself for the Other.⁵² The ethical relation to the Other is asymmetric: the Other is not responsible for me in the sense in which I am responsible for her/him, and no one can substitute her-/himself for me, although I (must) substitute myself for everyone.⁵³ Thus, again, I am guilty, and if the Other is guilty as well, then I have always "one guilt more" on my shoulders. This is because I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility:

To be oneself, otherwise than being, to be disinterested, is to bear the wretchedness and bankruptcy of the other, and even the responsibility that the other can have for me. To be oneself, the state of being a hostage, is always to have one degree of responsibility more, the responsibility for the responsibility of the other.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ A similar problem arises in William James's insistence on avoiding the "instinctive blindness" toward the inner perspectives of others, their ways of viewing the world. James's 1899 essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings", can be seen as setting this requirement first and foremost to me – to each and every individual, to be sure, but to each one of them strictly from their own subjective perspective. On James's struggle with the solipsism issue, see Sami Pihlström, "*The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything*": *Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America [Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group], 2008), ch. 5.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 82. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 28, 164.

⁵¹ Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, p. 84; see also pp. 116, 181.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 104-106.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 243.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107. See also p. 226: "I always have, myself, one responsibility more than anyone else, since I am responsible, in addition, for [the Other's] responsibility. And if he is responsible for my responsibility, I remain responsible for the responsibility he has for my responsibility." Cf. further *ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

Levinasian ethics can, then, be understood as the subject's – my – continuous struggle with justifying my right to be, in the fundamentally ethical situation in which my own being is called into question by the vulnerable and mortal Other. I am constantly guilty in relation to the Other. It seems to me that even Levinas comes close to being an ethical solipsist in the sense that he singles out me, the ethical subject, as the unique and chosen locus of all moral responsibility. Perhaps *all* deep moral thinkers taking the notion of guilt seriously at least have a temptation to solipsism. The (pre-)original responsibility he locates in me, and me only, is also transcendental in the sense that it is prior to any empirical, factual encounter between me and other human beings. It is a fundamental precondition of ethics, and therefore Levinas's writings intriguingly resonate with Kant's ethics. My simply being there (being here) makes me morally suspect, and this guilty condition of the moral subject – the inescapably suspect subject – is prior to any ethical theory about what makes our empirically describable actions right or wrong, or to anything that makes one guilty in a factual sense. My relation to the other, according to Levinas, is not just a matter of my thinking that s/he is, but of my speaking to her/him – of the “impossibility of approaching the other without speaking”,⁵⁵ which is readily comparable to the “attitude towards a soul” Wittgenstein invokes in the *Investigations*. It is, first and foremost, my responsibility for her/his mortality and my ethical impossibility of abandoning her/him to die alone.⁵⁶

In this non-shareability of ethical responsibility Levinas comes close to Kant's account of the noumenal moral subject and Wittgenstein's somewhat mysticist transcendental ethical thought. This triumvirate, then, offers us a picture of what ethical solipsism might look like, when applied to the concept of moral guilt. There is, however, also something almost inhuman in the idea that *I* am alone responsible for all evil taking place in the world. Todorov offers a voice of common sense against *such* ethical solipsism: “Must we each [...] take upon ourselves all the suffering in the world, ceasing to sleep peacefully so long as there remains somewhere in the world even the slightest trace of injustice? [...] Of course not. Such a task is beyond human strength [...]. We can, however, set ourselves a more modest and accessible goal: in peacetime, to care about those close to us, but in times of trouble, to find ourselves the strength to expand this intimate circle beyond its usual limits and recognize as our

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London and New York: Continuum, 2006; French original 1991), p. 6.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 124-125, 160-161.

own even those whose faces we do not know.”⁵⁷ Yet, even this more modest goal is set first and foremost to *me*, in the context of my life with other human beings.

5

According to Wittgenstein, the human body is the best picture of the human soul.⁵⁸ This might be read as a statement about the soul being always already inevitably turned toward others, toward the world in which it lives, out of its apparently solipsistic predicament. However, here we must recall the Kantian remark from which we started. Whenever we try to critically examine our innermost motives, including the motives we have for avoiding solipsism and for turning toward others and ethically acknowledging them, we should be cautious in making any strong statements about our *true* motives. It is not clear that even our anti-solipsism⁵⁹ is really a result of ethically laudable motives. We may just want to *seem* a bit more ethical, to look like being morally committed – to ourselves and to others around us – even if we “really” aren’t. As we remember Wittgenstein pointing out, anything that can be done out of morally laudable motives can also be done out of selfishness. It is never obvious that our ethical deliberations are genuinely ethical, nor that our investigations of our own soul reveal what we truly are, morally speaking. There is a deep truth (even for atheists) embedded in the Christian idea that only God sees into the bottom of our hearts (or souls). This is a *further* reason why guilt is constitutive of our moral lives. We *may* always be guilty, even if we “factually” are innocent.

This “may” calls for some further remarks, though. Recalling Todorov’s discussion of ordinary virtues, there is no reason to doubt, skeptically, the virtuousness of someone who, for example, joins another individual to her/his death because of her/his care for that person. This care and the act based on it *could* be, at bottom, selfish, but then again the external world *could*, for all we know, be just an illusion, or a figment of our imagination. Skepticism has its limits here, and these limits are marked by the “truth” of ethical solipsism. We cannot, and should not, seriously entertain skeptical doubts about people’s ethical motives when they are willing to sacrifice their lives. Or better: we just don’t.

⁵⁷ Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, p. 253.

⁵⁸ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, p. 178. For a philosophically very interesting literary treatment of this idea, see Oscar Wilde’s famous novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as well as Colin McGinn’s reading of it in his book, *Ethics, Evil and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ I am assuming that we are all anti-solipsists, that is, that despite the compelling picture of the first-personal character of guilt, and of moral problems and concerns generally, we inevitably do assume that there are other human beings around us. Still, the tension between solipsism and anti-solipsism the notion of guilt invites one to deal with is uniquely one’s own.

By way of conclusion, I want to emphasize once more that our problem concerns the very possibility of ethics; it is a transcendental problem pertaining to the conceptual foundations of one of the most central – arguably *the* most central – human institutions. The challenge of ethical solipsism cannot be escaped by philosophical, argumentative means by providing a theoretical demonstration about certain “objective” criteria determining the moral worth of our actions. There is no *such* objectivity to ethics (which is not to say that ethics is simply subjective). Above all, we should perceive that there is no intellectual – or any other – foundation to ethics, no other foundation than ethics itself. Morality can never be grounded in anything more fundamental than morality itself.⁶⁰ Guilt is one of the fundamental ethical notions that may be invoked in order to make this point more explicit. The permanent possibility of guilt, revealed by transcendental examination, makes it impossible for us to escape the requirements of morality – unless we are prepared to see the kind of depersonalization Todorov discusses as an escape from morality in the sense of being an escape from the kind of unified personality or selfhood that any morality (or, a fortiori, guilt) requires.⁶¹

Moreover, we need to be able to experience guilt even in order to be capable of being morally good (which I am *not* denying we sometimes are). Todorov quotes approvingly Hannah Arendt’s remark that “[g]oodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author”.⁶² Moral goodness, or virtuous life – however we want to call it – requires that the virtuous person does not present her- or himself as an example to others. Somewhat paradoxically, we may return to Kant and argue that even though the moral subject knows a priori that her/his maxims are bound by the categorical imperative, s/he can never know whether her/his own actions are actually motivated by her/his respect for this moral law or by something else. Therefore, an acute sense of the possibility of one’s own guilt – the continuous possibility of one’s *not* subjecting oneself to the moral law but to empirical, perhaps ultimately selfish motives – is required for a person’s being able to understand her-/himself as a moral subject in the first place. This, as I see it, is a profound link between guilt and goodness; yet, it must not be misunderstood as the absurd suggestion that anyone who feels guilty is actually good. One may feel guilty also because one *is* (factually, empirically) guilty. The key idea here is that one ought to be

⁶⁰ This view is developed at some length in Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism* (cited above).

⁶¹ See Todorov’s chapter on “Depersonalization” in his *Facing the Extreme*, pp. 158-178.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 115. The quote is from Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 74. Todorov points out, furthermore, that “in fact, as a rule, the legally guilty feel they are innocent while those who are truly innocent live in guilt” (*Facing the Extreme*, p. 263; see also p. 270). These comments, I think, strikingly resonate with the Kantian approach of the present discussion.

able to experience guilt in the more fundamental transcendental sense even if one isn't. While we, as Todorov notes, must not forget the crucial difference between the guilty and the innocent, we must also understand that the horrible evils that, say, concentration camp commandants were capable of are "not as foreign to us as we might wish".⁶³ The mere fact that Arendtian "banal evil" *could* be our own makes us transcendently guilty. This mere fact, like the mere fact that the Holocaust took place, may make us ashamed of being human beings.⁶⁴

Our morality and its requirements may, of course, be disturbed and fragmented. Again, we can never *know* that our actions (or our guilt) are based on an undisturbed moral perspective. My argument amounts, then, to a recognition that we are, in this sense, in an inescapably tragic situation. There is, indeed, a sense in which no one of us ever does, and no one ever can do, what is the morally right thing to do – and recognizing this is, again, crucial to understanding what morality truly means for us. This is, moreover, not an epistemic point about our not knowing, or not being able to know, what is right in a given situation; nor is it a semantic point about the meanings of such words. It is a metaphysical point about the human condition. Given this condition, there is no easy way of being ethical. If one carries moral responsibility at all – if one is, or can be regarded as, a morally serious person – one will have no chance but to experience guilt at the transcendental level. One might also say that this reflection on what I just called the human condition is on the one hand historically, empirically informed by the facts of human history, and on the other hand "cosmic", existential, metaphysical.

This recognition of the metaphysically tragic nature of morality might perhaps be illuminated by means of a simple argument drawing attention to the inevitably conflicting moral demands our lives set us: as our moral duties often conflict, we can never be sure that we have done what we are ethically required to do.⁶⁵ To be sure,

⁶³ Todorov, *Facing the Extreme*, p. 137. Nor am I recommending the unrealistic and even somewhat inhuman turning away from the concrete fight against evil and focusing on one's "inner perfection" that Todorov criticizes in Etty Hillesum's writings (*ibid.*, pp. 198 ff.). On the contrary, we might also be guilty because it may be too easy for us to *accept* various forms of evil (cf. *ibid.*, p. 204).

⁶⁴ Notice again the connection (here left largely implicit) between guilt and shame. Todorov (*ibid.*, p. 265) refers to Primo Levi's (one of the best-known Holocaust survivors to write on his experiences) feeling of guilt "at being a man, because men had built Auschwitz", to "the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist", comparing this form of guilt to the one Jaspers calls "metaphysical" in *Die Schuldfrage*. Cf. here also, for related reflections on absurdity, mortality, and suffering, C. Fred Alford, *After the Holocaust: Primo Levi, the Book of Job, and the Path to Affliction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁵ In some more detail, one might, for instance, argue as follows for the thesis that no one ever does, nor ever can do, what is the right thing to do: (1) There are always conflicting moral demands. We ought to do X but we also ought to do Y. For example, we ought to help the children suffering from the earthquake of Haiti but we also ought to help, say, Finnish handicapped children. (This is an empirical

such an argument might be countered by appealing to the well-known principle that ought implies can. However, in this special context – a metaphysically and metaphilosophically relevant context of ethical reflection – this principle lacks force. It is part of the *infinity* of our moral task – and thus part of the seriousness of morality and the overriding nature of the moral perspective – that we never fully can meet the requirements of morality, that we never *can* do what we ought to do. Here, definitely, ought does not imply can. We, or even I, ought to have, *per impossibile*, been able to render Auschwitz non-existent. This is, or would have been, our duty, or mine, and it is our cosmic, yet also historical, shame, or mine, to live in a world in which it did happen. These notions, again, come close to the traditional Christian one of original sin. Morality and religion are in the end perhaps closer to each other than we usually want to admit in our secular culture. We cannot appreciate the infinity of our moral duty and our constant failure to be moral without appreciating this crucial link. Thus, in a sense, my reflections – just as those by Gaita, Todorov, and others I have cited – ought to be read as intended against moral hubris of any kind.

The argument showing that no one ever does the right thing, if sound, would in a way make morality illusory. Moral nihilism, and perhaps even metaphysical nihilism,

premise.) (2) We should choose to do what we morally ought to do. (This is trivial, following from the meaning of the moral “ought”.) (3) There is no single thing we ought to do but always a plurality of such things, and doing one of them (usually) prevents us from doing the others. (4) We cannot do conflicting things. (5) Therefore, no one ever does, nor ever can do, what is the right thing to do. (Of course, this argument presupposes that we do not live in a morally ideal world in which all moral requirements could be met. Thus, this imagined argument is an empirically – and also historically – informed philosophical argument. However, let me note that I only said one *could* argue for the thesis that no one ever does, nor ever can do, what is the morally right thing to do. I won’t. I am here only invoking this thesis “for the sake of argument”, metaphilosophically, hoping to illuminate larger issues, namely, the tragic (transcendentally guilty) condition we are in – a condition itself historically conditioned and transformable, yet transcendentally constitutive of our historically situated moral perspectives – and also what I have elsewhere called the limits of philosophical argumentation: cf. Sami Pihlström, “Ethical Unthinkabilities and Philosophical Seriousness”, *Metaphilosophy* 40 (2009), 656-670. I am here also crucially indebted to Kenneth R. Westphal’s many insightful papers on rational justification and its fallible, socio-historical nature in the Kantian-Hegelian tradition: as Westphal has repeatedly noted, rational justification in non-formal domains cannot be infallibilistically construed, and the same holds for the kind of argumentation on the foundations of ethics I have been engaging in, or imagining. Westphal maintains that Hegel actually showed, in connection with his analysis of recognition, that acknowledging the social and historical dimensions of rational justification is a necessary, transcendental, condition for our being able to rationally justify our judgments. See, for some of his recent accounts of this, Westphal, “Mutual Recognition and Rational Justification in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*”, *Dialogue* 48 (2009), 1-47; and Westphal, “Urteilkraft, gegenseitige Anerkennung und rationale Rechtfertigung”, in Hans-Dieter Klein (ed.), *Ethik als prima philosophia?* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2010). I do not want to take any stand on Westphal’s reading of Hegel – or Kant – but I am impressed by the conception of justification he develops through that reading.)

threatens us at this point. At the same time, the argument I have imagined (not defended!) enables us to appreciate what is really deep in ethical life. Morality is, for us, a profoundly paradoxical phenomenon. Reflecting on the paradoxes it yields, we have seen that ethical solipsism expresses a truth, to a certain extent: we can never know what our ethical state “really is”, at least not that we have been able to meet our moral requirements. This, however, is *not* a skeptical conclusion. Fundamentally, neither our guilt nor the foundation of our moral life is (primarily) a matter of knowledge but a matter of what may be described as our personal being in the world, a way of being that again includes both historical (factual) and cosmic (metaphysical) dimensions.⁶⁶

There is, then, instead of foundationalist philosophical theories of what is right or good from a for us unimaginable God’s-Eye View, just the moral life we lead in any case, the life always already situated in an ethically demanding context transcendently structured by guilt. It is our continuous task to make *this* life morally better, making (morally better) sense of it,⁶⁷ better appreciating “our common humanity”, thus continuously facing the (irresolvable yet paradoxically unproblematic) “problem of life” – a problem itself deeply connected with guilt – that Wittgenstein saw as irreducible to any scientific or everyday (or any other linguistically expressible) questions about the world,⁶⁸ the fundamental and inescapable problem we repeatedly need to engage, either solipsistically or anti-solipsistically.⁶⁹

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⁶⁶ This is a kind of moral realism (cf. Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism*), though perhaps it would be best to avoid the terminology of “realism” and simply speak about the seriousness of the moral point of view, etc.

⁶⁷ On the notion of our making sense of things, deeply entangled with ethics, see Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty*.

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, § 6.521.

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