



## Karl Jaspers on the Atomic Bomb and Responsibility

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**Abstract:** In his treatment of the atomic bomb, Karl Jaspers identified new dimensions for the concept of responsibility by relating it to the destructive potency of this new weaponry. The essay examines the concept of responsibility and its meanings in Jaspers' work by examining various contexts of intellectual history; furthermore, it addresses the discourses on the nuclear technology of the 1950s, the etymology of responsibility, as well as the concept of responsibility within politics and international relations. Jaspers ingeniously anticipated the increasing awareness of world responsibility of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, philosophers pointed out the long-term global dimensions of responsibility, including nuclear proliferation and environmental threats. Today one can recognize in much nationalist and populist rhetoric an insurgency against world responsibility, which makes it timely to return to its origins.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; atomic bomb; nuclear proliferation; responsibility; world responsibility; peace; conceptual history; contexts.

In the 1950s, Karl Jaspers argued that warfare with nuclear bombs might soon lead to the end of humanity, recognizing that the atom bomb had created a new situation. Still speaking from a position of hope, he described possibilities to manage the novel context whilst avoiding any usage of the weapons. In this essay I use conceptual history to examine the entanglements of the nuclear threat and the responsibility required by it in two texts by Jaspers, the speech published in 1957 and the substantial volume from 1958, both are titled *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*. The way Jaspers argues for taking responsibility is in a sense a revival of the older and etymological original uses of responsibility, which is to deliver an answer for a cause. However, his arguments and his use of the word simultaneously go beyond that. Thus, he sets out a notion of responsibility for the post-war era that points

forward to the advocates of world responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

### Facing Nuclear Technology

In 1956, German radio stations broadcast a speech by Jaspers on the implications of the atomic bombs for the future. Eleven years after the first atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he concluded that this weapon in no way had stopped wars. Even if the American president Harry Truman presented the bomb as the bomb capable of stopping all wars, and even if

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was first presented at the Eighth International Karl Jaspers World Conference: Karl Jaspers in a Global Context, in conjunction with the XXIVth World Congress of Philosophy, August 13–20, 2018, Beijing. I would like to thank the participants at the session on the Atomic Bomb for their comments, which were most helpful in the development of this article.

there had not been direct confrontations between the two superpowers, such a statement was proved wrong by the wars in Indochina, Korea, and elsewhere. Under conditions of the United States and the Soviet Union developing their nuclear weaponry, and Great Britain on its way of doing so, Jaspers stressed that humanity was now living with a new reality. That is, the destructive capacity of atomic bombs had brought humanity to the possibility of its own annihilation, for which Jaspers used the German word *Vernichtung*. Life on earth could now be terminated through acts of men; mankind now had to face the possibility of the extermination of human life by the very acts of men. Jaspers concluded this not only to be a possibility that might take place, but something that was most likely to happen. Moreover, even if it can be avoided, mankind will still have to live with the threat of its potential usage, as the knowledge of how to produce atomic bombs now exists.

Salvation, he noted, would lie in founding what later was to be named a multilateral order, where states not only coexist but also cooperate via treaties and shared institutions that in specific regards limit their sovereignty. In practice the treaties would rule over the states. To the historical framing of Jaspers' treatment of the atomic bomb belong the discourses and practical attempts to set up a new world order that emerged after the First World War, failed in the thirties, then were further developed after the Second World War. Its main fundament was the growing number of states, nationalities and national identities, together with the willingness to avoid new catastrophes such as the two World Wars. This was a fruitful ground for notions of internationalism allowing for international exchange, a worldwide public sphere, international bodies with the power to intervene, the idea of human rights, and so on. Such elements are included and crucial for Jaspers' treatment of philosophical concerns related to the atomic bomb.

With these pleadings Jaspers is not original, he is in alignment with proposals that had been circulated in political discourses at his time. When it comes to nuclear technology he appears to be in a way quite trivial in his exposition, as he follows some of the 1946 Baruch Plan and the 1953 Atoms for Peace proposal from the US government under President Eisenhower.<sup>2</sup> This

means that Jaspers endorses states that sign the non-proliferation treaty and refrain from building nuclear weapons will be supported in developing technology for nuclear energy production. In hindsight, both of these proposals were seen as an overture for the cold war. Moreover, Jaspers shares the naïve trust of this era in the belief that nuclear energy production is safe and that nuclear waste is a problem that can be solved and will be solved in the very near future (AZM 19). Furthermore, he upholds utopian hopes for an era of nuclear energy. It would bring a new age with enormous amounts of energy resources at disposal. Applied to automation, it will radically reduce the working hours needed, bring exemption from traditional work and open possibilities for freely-chosen activity (AZM 243).

Reading these texts today, one finds this a surprising standpoint for two reasons. In the first instance, the dangers of nuclear energy production can nowadays hardly be treated so lightly. In the aftermath of Jaspers' writings there collapsed six reactors, one at Three Mile Island, additionally one in Chernobyl and four in Fukushima. This amounts to a total of more than one percent of all commercial reactors being built that led to catastrophic outcomes. Moreover, there are large quantities of dangerous nuclear waste stockpiled around these installations, without any viable solution being in place for its management. With regard to nuclear waste Jaspers stresses the need to be critical about science and technology and he knew about the grave accident at the Windscale plant in England in 1957 and he also knew about the unsolved problem of the disposal of nuclear waste. Jaspers raises the issue of scientific progress, stating that we must let go of having trust in that idea; he calls upon scientists as well as intellectuals to question as to what point this progress has brought us (AZM 5, 412, 451). Regarding peaceful nuclear energy utilization, however, Jaspers allowed himself to be convinced by experts that they would solve all the problems associated with it.

One can conclude that Jaspers to some extent enjoyed the aura of modernity and the progress that framed the nuclear technology of the fifties, when it was presented as the way to replace much of the coal and some of the oil consumption with a clean source of energy. These are the years when nuclear energy generation was initiated and the first commercial reactors opened, when it was presented as a white

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[Henceforth cited as AZM; here and in the following the translations from Karl Jaspers' texts are mine.]

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewusstsein in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1958, p. 39.

form of energy in contrast to fossil fuels. Popular culture connected nuclear power with utopian ways of travelling fast and for long distances; planners discussed the possibilities of locating energy reactors in the cities and of building small reactors for all kinds of uses. In this discourse, the risks of nuclear technology were limited to the production of weapons.

Of course, other discourses were also in place. One of them advanced not only positive views of the new technology, but proposed putting the new weaponry to use on the battlefields, for example, by way of bombing out the Soviet Union before it had the bomb, or by way of using it against the communists in Korea.

A third type of discourse feared the new technology and its consequences. It was one that comprised fears manifested by renowned intellectuals such as Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell. In 1957, the well-known German physicist Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker wrote:

The security we are hoping to achieve along this route seems to me merely to be that roulette security behind which catastrophe lies waiting. Can one rely on bombs that one basically should not dare to throw? At long sight we must fear those bombs, already at short sight we must fear the mentality depending on those bombs.<sup>3</sup>

This discourse also included literary representations of the fear coming from irresponsible science; for example, the poem *Aniara* by the Swedish Nobel laureate Harry Martinson about a space ship travelling far away with refugees from a planet that is so polluted by nuclear radiation that it was not possible to live there anymore. The discourse also sparked civil movements such as the annual Easter marches against nuclear weapons that started in Aldermaston, UK in 1958 and still takes place in European cities.

Jaspers' thinking on the atomic bomb is mainly fuelled by the last of these discourses mentioned; his aims are to underline the threats of nuclearization and to point out how to deal with them in order to actually find a means to the end of the salvation of mankind. However, his main thrust is not political in the sense of establishing a new international order. Jaspers seeks to add something else: in order to manage the new situation, societies need to go beyond what politics can achieve. Indeed, the status quo demands a new world order; if it is not installed there will be

a new world war with disastrous consequences for humanity. However, he disbelieves that politicians will be able to find the solution to avoid the outbreak of a further world war. The old order, dominated by wars and marked by the ambition of the main powers to rule the international order, is still in place. Jaspers concludes that the world is still living under the rule of that order, the only difference being that atomic bombs are now being added. Not only are there quite a number of them but also there is in progress a continuous production of weapons of mass destruction. In short, huge financial and intelligence resources are generated to increase the capacity to kill. Jaspers warns that one cannot have confidence in the promise that treaties and institutions will be sufficient to establish a ban on atomic weaponry.

### Bringing in Responsibility

In order to find a way forward Jaspers argues in favor of going beyond politics; the questions raised by politics should lead into philosophy. This is the point where he turns to responsibility. The issues that made him think like this are the existence of the Atomic Bomb and the threat of Mankind meeting extinction, not only as a possibility, but also as something that is likely to happen. He mentions responsibility in the 1956 radio speech, as documented in a pamphlet dated May 1957,<sup>4</sup> saying that the new situation demands a potent answer that is political as well as moral (*sittlich-politisch*):

How we respond in thought and deed to the real possibility will decide on the death and existence of humanity. The situation begets a responsibility that only can be made conscious through complete truthfulness. [AB 17]<sup>5</sup>

In fact, this is the only passage in this pamphlet where he uses the word responsibility (*Verantwortung*). Apart from that he states that humans have accountability (*Verantwortlichkeit*). However, on the following page he espouses the need to give an adequate response (*Antwort*) to the atom bomb.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag, 1957. [Henceforth cited as AB]

<sup>5</sup> *Wie wir auf die reale Möglichkeit durch Gedanken und Tat antworten, entscheidet über Tot and Leben der Menschheit. Die Situation erzeugt eine Verantwortung, die nur bei vollkommener Aufrichtigkeit zum Bewusstsein kommen kann.*

<sup>3</sup> Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Major Texts on Politics and Peace Research*, Heidelberg, DE: Springer 2015, pp. 23–30.

Politics itself is in need of a different handling.

As stupidity and maliciousness so far had limited consequences, today they bring all of humanity to ruin, for from now on we will perish if we do not all live together with and for each other, the new situation demands an answer that corresponds to it. [AB 18]<sup>6</sup>

Let me at this stage address two points. The first one is that this is where Jaspers introduces the concept of responsibility in his treatment of the atomic threat. In contrast to it, in his extensive treatment of the issue in *AZM* he uses the word responsibility much more frequently. He was well under way with this book when he published the pamphlet, yet it is only in the book that he seems to be fully confident in using the word. Only there does it help him to conceptualize his ideas on the philosophical answers to the political questions of the atomic bomb. The second point concerns that his use of the word responsibility (*Verantwortung*) alludes to its original meaning but simultaneously it goes beyond its individualistic foundations. In the next section I address this with a short historical exposé of the concept.

### Conceptual History of Responsibility

The word responsibility was not part of medieval vernacular but it formed in early modern Europe. Germanic dictionaries give examples from its use in the fifteenth century, while it appears in English in the mid-seventeenth century and still later in French and in Italian. The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (1854–1971) by the Grimm Brothers contains the earliest example of the word *verantworten*; it used to be synonymous with *beantworten* and is exemplified by a prince who was obliged to reply to a letter received from his master the emperor. Thus, at the time the meaning of the concept was "to give an answer." In the days of Martin Luther it signified "defending one's own cause." Luther argued that his books and letters were written in order to take responsibility for what he believed in. The word's meaning then was to justify oneself as Luther did it before princes and theologians and to respond to accusations of misconduct. In the seventeenth century,

<sup>6</sup> *Der politische Weg selber bedarf einer anderen Führung. Weil Torheit und Bosheit, die bisher begrenzte Folgen hatten, heute die ganze Menschheit ins Verderben reißen, weil wir nunmehr, wenn wir nicht insgesamt miteinander und füreinander leben, insgesamt zugrunde gehen werden, verlangt die neue Situation eine ihr entsprechende Antwort.*

its signification referred to defending one's cause before a moral authority or before the court, and "responsibility" has thus become a legal concept. The next step in the concept's etymological development is the distinction between "responsibility" and "accountability" (in German, *Verantwortung* and *Verantwortlichkeit*), which for example indicates that a shopkeeper is required to keep a book of accounts. That is, responsibility is then regarded as an obligation. In the nineteenth century responsibility has been used denoting both moral and political meanings. Representatives of the Romantic intellectual movement connected it with strong feelings of virtue and an inner sense of obligation. As a political concept it was entangled with parliamentarism and representative government, meaning that politicians and officials were expected to be responsible and accountable to the electorate.

As a philosophical concept, responsibility had its breakthrough with the emergence of existentialism in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Of course, moral and ethics was being discussed well before that, as were the distinctions between on the one hand "free will" and "law and determinism" on the other. However, Richard McKeon points out that the term itself had not been used.<sup>7</sup> Even Immanuel Kant, to my knowledge, used it only once, and only in a footnote in an appendix with the older meaning of defending oneself.<sup>8</sup> In the latter part of the twentieth century the horizons for a philosophical treatment of responsibility became broader and the notion of world responsibility—as I have argued elsewhere—was developed.<sup>9</sup> In summary, the word "responsibility" had initially a meaning equivalent to response, with the passing of time it becomes a legal, an economic, a political and a philosophical concept. For a long time, it refers to the concerns of oneself or a particular interest. The change in meaning toward universalism occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Of course, Jaspers refers to responsibility on

<sup>7</sup> Richard McKeon, "The Development and the Significance of the Concept of Responsibility," in *Freedom and History and Other Essays: An Introduction to the Thought of Richard McKeon*, ed. Zahava K. McKeon, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press 1990, pp. 62-87.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag 1977/1797, p. 627.

<sup>9</sup> Mats Andréén, *Nuclear Waste Management and Legitimacy: Nihilism and Responsibility*, London & New York, NY: Routledge 2012, pp. 56-64.

different occasions and in several contexts long before he vindicates the consequences of the atom bomb. It closely relates to the idea of existential philosophy of living up to the demands the very existence puts on the individual, as developed in *Psychologie der Weltanschauung*, his treatment of the anthropological prerequisites of being a human: "to take 'responsibility' means to be ready to accept the inevitable guilt."<sup>10</sup> The individual should transcend the fear of recognizing one's own guilt by accepting responsibility for one's actions. Hence, Jaspers writes: "The real meaning of 'responsibility' for actions is to be prepared to accept the guilt" (*PDW* 242).<sup>11</sup> The individual should take responsibility to grow and to be creative, instead of avoiding the sufferings of *Grenzsituationen* (limit situations) by hiding behind the barricades of a *Gehäuse* (shell, capsule, or cover) or losing oneself in a nihilistic life of up-rootedness.

In such treatments, responsibility connotes what everyone has to accomplish in order to meet the fundamental existential situation of being as individual alone in this world. This partly changes in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War when he discusses the shared moral responsibility of all Germans for letting the war and the treatment of Jewish populations take place. The horizon of responsibility now encompasses a larger collective. That is, the individual German has a moral responsibility for what happened. He writes, even if "we the Germans" are suffering now, we "have the greatest responsibility for the development until 1945."<sup>12</sup> Evidently, now Jaspers not only focuses on responsibility as an accomplishment regarding the individual's actions. He widens the concept in order to encompass the individual responsibility for the actions of the collective. However, he nevertheless refrains from extending it to humanity as a whole.

In the 1957 pamphlet, Jaspers' position is representative of post-war's more extensive horizon of responsibility. All the while he is also continuing

using the concept's narrower meaning in existential philosophy. The individuals must give answers even when these answers concern humanity at large. They will not represent their answers through a specific opinion or worldview, but rather through how they live their lives. This he points out as being a "slumbering possibility" to be used in the context of the new realities and shortcomings of politics (*AB* 20).

With this, Jaspers brings about a shift in the history of the concept of responsibility, during which its meaning changed from defending one's own case to the defense of the larger community of humankind. For the end of taking that step, he describes the contemporary situation of the 1950s in utterly dramatic words. Humans must find new goals and change the very direction of human life away from convenience and thoughtlessness, moving away from violence and preparedness for war. Instead of giving in to this constant drive toward extermination (*AB* 19), society must provide for the survivors of the recent wars, find peaceful ways of contestations, seek truth, and contemplate beauty. Clearly, the alternatives put forward by him in the 1957 pamphlet can be regarded as being vague.

### Responsibility and the Ethos of Peace

In his 1958 book, Jaspers begins with a few lines on the precarious situation with regard to the new weapons and by declaring that the aim of the book is to clarify that they will literally end human life unless humanity radically alters its condition (*AZM* 5). Responsibility is as a key notion on the first page; humankind needs to change its ethical and political outlook, which is possible if humans become aware of their responsibilities (*AZM* 5).

Jaspers describes the new situation in terms that are dramatic and often drastic, for instance, when he provides his account of the changing capacity to kill; before the production of the atomic bomb, death by human hand meant the capacity to commit suicide, to kill others, or to commit genocide. Afterwards the threat concerns all life on earth. He remains true to his existential philosophy in situating the human being in the world without knowing whence or whither. The new capability of a complete termination of human life has consequences for the very being of humanity (*AZM* 22).

The text is philosophical, yet it raises issues to do with technology, international relations, and

<sup>10</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin, DE: Verlag von Julius Springer 1919, pp. 46ff, [Henceforth cited as *PDW*] 'Verantwortung' zu haben; das heisst, der die unvermeidliche Schuld an sich nehmen kann und will.

<sup>11</sup> *Es ist der eigentlichen Sinn der 'Verantwortung' beim Handeln, dass der Mensch die Schuld auf sich zu nehmen gewillt ist.*

<sup>12</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*, Zürich, CH: Artemis Verlags AG 1946, pp. 88f.

politics. Jaspers sees the atomic bomb in light of the criticism of the civilization of the technological age that he and others advanced in the *interbellum*. Thus, he states that after the invention of the atomic bomb, the consequences of technology are much more severe than before. While war was in the past the settlement of a battle of conflicting interests, today technology has turned it into a possibility to extinguish the human race (AZM 82f). In international relations between states, he does not see the necessary steps being taken toward a change of conditions of relating that would effectuate a ban on the bomb. In politics, he finds continual decisions to enlarge the arsenals and he recognizes the risk involved in the dissemination of atomic weaponry to ever more countries. All in all, he is highly critical of the contemporary developments and he stresses that the belief in progress constitutes a fundamental problem.

Let me underline the plentiful uses he makes of the notion of responsibility. He repeats that it is necessary to bring together philosophical thinking with political action; for him, it is the responsibility of the philosopher to think, while it is the responsibility of the statesman to act (AZM 7). Moreover, responsibility requires every scientist and all intellectuals to think critically about the options open with respect to the application of scientific knowledge (AZM 412, 451). A change must be brought about in everyone in order to further a sense of responsibility that goes beyond oneself and one's own institutions. Political leaders have the responsibility to act together, for in this precarious situation there is a need to go beyond the borders of the nation states: "Political action becomes unbridled when restricted to the narrow horizons of singular peoples and states" (AZM 106). To be able to grasp the real state of affairs it is necessary to see the whole; substantial politics needs to include both the fellow man and the whole while addressing responsibility (AZM 106). An ethic of responsibility goes beyond politics; the responsible politician does not want power for its own sake but in order to accomplish something. However, Jaspers states that taking responsibility in political leadership is only possible in a society of responsible individuals (AZM 76ff). He sees responsibility as a task set for every individual and he, therefore, urges everyone to take responsibility in his or her life, towards children and parents, by not lying, not cheating and keeping to the truth. Responsibility comes from the individual capacity for transcendence, from the ability of individuals to disseminate responsibility in expanding circles. From

practicing responsibility grows a community of reason (AZM 50, 111, 310ff). Thus, he conceives of a concept of responsibility that connotes the individual's capabilities to go beyond oneself and that fosters universal values.

For Jaspers, who is steeped in the Kantian tradition, reason holds an ethos that can bring salvation. In AZM he proposes an ethos that proceeds from his trans-political motives, namely, the adherence to a principle of peace and the fostering of a world that honors treaties and laws, the forging of international relations that are based on democracy and on what one today would call "soft power." A prerequisite for such a world community goes beyond politics, as Jaspers words it: "It is not enough to establish new institutions; we must in ourselves transform our basic convictions, our ethical-political will" (AZM 49). What is needed is the cultivation of a general inner disposition toward creating peace in one's own life and to convince ever more people to do the same. Jaspers links this ethos closely to responsibility. The one who does not take responsibility for one's private life, "does in small matters, what in large matters leads to humanity's self-extermination" (AZM 50). Thus, all human action has political consequences.

In presenting his inquiry, he never dedicates responsibility entire chapters or sections and there are no specific paragraphs on the concept either. However, responsibility is obviously central for the argument on the matter of the atom bomb; the notion widely used throughout the book and integrated into the very core of its philosophical content. The reader finds a dynamic issuing from his use of the concept so that one can almost feel that Jaspers himself must have experienced it when enlarging the horizon of responsibility to humanity.

### Responsibility and Politics

The question arises whether Jaspers' turn to philosophy in order to answer political questions at the same time represents a conceptual difference between philosophy and politics? His understanding of responsibility of the 1950s might well be a philosophical concept that is not valid in politics and especially not with regard to international relations. As I have outlined above, responsibility was a concept established in political writings of the nineteenth century. However, writing in the same period as Jaspers, also McKeon recognizes a quest for a language of ethics within politics and international relations. McKeon himself takes part

in this, leading the scientific commission that helped prepare the proposition for the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights. He argues that moral problems have become important in broad parts of society, they are not only relevant to religious leaders and theologians, but also in business and labor unions they are being considered, and scientists and social scientists often reflect upon them. McKeon writes that the use of the word responsibility stands for a will to "turn from warfare of interests to the advancement of common justice and the good life, and in so doing to develop criteria to distinguish the emergence of values from the multiplication of desires."<sup>13</sup> International relations need cooperation that involves judgment, understanding, prudence and wisdom; this means there is a need for an ethic of international influence. According to McKeon, in a large range of contemporary issues moral problems are being raised, and this is reflected in an amplified use of the word responsibility.

With McKeon one can make a point through referring to a concept of lived responsibility and in this way giving an alternative to accountability and decision making as mere results of desires and group interests. Another lesson learned from the early post-war years is that appealing to responsibility stands out as an alternative to succumbing to nihilism, not least among German thinkers. During the war, National Socialists were represented by their opponents as being nihilists with no respect for differing values and as a glorifying a regime that amounted to a simplistic will to achieve power. War itself represented a nihilism that had run amok, the killing and destruction was being executed to hitherto unheard of dimensions. Atom bombs became the ultimate sign of a nihilism potent enough to take over the world and to being a final threat to civilization and mankind. Jaspers shared this view, even though in his early writings he had developed the idea of nihilism as an anthropological necessity, as humankind was torn between the urge for safety and the will to seek new grounds.

It can safely be assumed that the Second World War, the atomic bomb, and the continuing exploitation of nuclear warfare technology were on people's minds in the 1950s. It became a breeding ground for a novel interest in the concept of responsibility. Henceforth the

concept was common currency and it was frequently used to represent universal values, in politics as well as in philosophy.

### World Responsibility

Looking forward, a further step was taken in the conceptual history of responsibility in the 1970s and 1980s, when not only mankind but also the integrity of nature was included in an ethics of responsibility for the world. For example, Hans Jonas argues that in order to protect humanity and nature, a more encompassing concept of responsibility is needed.<sup>14</sup> There is a need for a global ethics that can guide humanity, declares Karl-Otto Apel while also mentioning the risk of atomic war and the environmental threats.<sup>15</sup> These two otherwise very different thinkers both argue that ethics needs to be expanded in order to embrace the entire planet. Further, they prescribe a collective sense of responsibility that includes future generations as well. Both identify the need for an ethics of responsibility as a response to modern science and technology. Both argue that a new historical situation has arisen and it forced humanity to assume collective moral responsibility.

Thus, one differentiation regarding the post-war concept of responsibility concerns its extension in space to all of mankind (Jaspers) or, additionally, it is conceived to include the environment (Apel, Jonas), another differentiation regards its extension in time to the presently living or to the inclusion of future generations. Apel and Jonas are more explicit in bringing these ones into discussion, although future generations are by no means excluded by Jaspers, albeit he does not explicitly talk about them. A fundamental dividing line in the various interpretations of responsibility concerns the origin of responsibility. For Jonas it is clearly a trans-historical condition that reflects the biological origin of humankind, being a primal phenomenon (*PV* 196ff, 234-42). For this understanding he has been criticized by Peter Kemp who pointed out that by treating responsibility as a trans-historical phenomenon, it becomes hard to distinguish changing

<sup>13</sup> Richard McKeon, "The Ethics of International Influence," *Ethics: A Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy*, 70/3 (April 1960), 187-203, here p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation*, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Insel Verlag 1979. [Henceforth cited as *PV*]

<sup>15</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, *Diskurs und Verantwortung: Das Problem des Übergangs zur postkonventionellen Moral*, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988. [Henceforth cited as *DV*]

phenomenon and cultural differences.<sup>16</sup> Apel also raises objections: Jonas' treatment of responsibility does not allow for moral progress or take account of individual living conditions into account, the biologically founded standard is designed to prevent the extinction of humanity and life on earth, but it does not pay attention to the conditions in which this objective is reached (*DV* 196).

Jaspers and Apel offer divergent views, yet both are writing in the Kantian tradition. Jaspers proceeds from reason and its capability of making judicious decisions; he proposes to turn to reason in order to adapt one's ways of thinking the changed reality. It is the insight of the novel state of affairs that cultivates responsibility. Apel also starts from reason; in his view, people realize the requirement of responsibility in their capacity as rational creatures. Thus, in contrast to Jonas, both Jaspers and Apel regard the new kind of responsibility as an end point and not as a starting point.

One must not forget the differences between the 1950s, the 1980s, and today. Jaspers imagined a catastrophe that would terminate humanity's existence, thus, it was not meaningful for him to make a distinction between the now living and coming generations. For Jonas and Apel, many of the threats they perceive are rather of an incremental character. The environmental threats have dissimilar timetables, coming out into the open at different points and advancing stepwise at different speeds. The consequences of climate change were still occurring on a much lower level in the 1950s than today and they were a dormant issue for the public. Importantly, the threats caused by the use of nuclear technology now include waste issues with incremental impact. Firstly, the production of nuclear energy produces long-lasting waste, now stored around the world with no solution at hand as to what to do with it. It will be dangerous for humans and the environment for many thousands of years and its quantity is steadily growing. Secondly, the production of nuclear weapons also brings a legacy of such waste, which is further expanding the mass of nuclear waste.

In conclusion, Jaspers forcefully sets out the path for ethical considerations concerning nuclear weapons, which is strengthened by the pleas for a new ethos and by using and developing the concept of responsibility. In the conceptual history of responsibility Jaspers

stands out as important in developing the notion of world responsibility.

Reading Jaspers' texts more than sixty years after they were published and seventy-five years after the atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is striking that he rings the alarm bell in a way that still is of high relevance today. The entirely new dimension of violence is indeed caused by humans. The threat of immediate destruction and the ending of mankind is a given, even if one has learned to live with it and has become used to it. The power play logic for states and politicians to develop the weapons and to threaten to use them is still present. What makes Jaspers still relevant today is his ambition to hamper hopelessness. That is, one might argue that his suggestions seem to be outdated judged from what we know today about the enormous difficulties in changing the direction away from the nuclear threat, with the knowledge that the weapons are being continuously developed to extend their capacities and that there are arsenals enough to put humanity to death several times and to exterminate humanity within minutes. However, taking Jaspers at his word and to begin in one's own life brings at least some trust to live under the sign of reason in the sense that it is always possible to intervene and do something. From Jaspers one can find motives to begin with oneself in creating an ethos of peace and to spread it to wider circles. It is an open question as to whether the latter can be seen as a support for movements for peace and nuclear disarmament. Be it as it may, the very acts of doing something are seeds for hope in these matters.

Although he addresses the responsibility of politicians and statesmen, the weakness of Jaspers' view on the atomic bomb concerns exactly this point. In the end, it allows politics to be left out of the picture when it comes to the possible ways to move forward and accomplish a ban on atomic bombs. One can read Jaspers as a suggestion to temporarily leave politics out of the picture until one has transcended oneself and has disseminated an ethos of peace to many others. Yet this would be a dangerous path to take with regard to the present situation.

Today humans are facing an insurgency against world responsibility. The rhetoric of populist movements and the political action by some political leaders are focused on particular interests. This stands in contrast to much of the post-war political thinking and the notion of an international order that favored multilateral agreements included the idea of a shared

<sup>16</sup> Peter Kemp, *Das Unersetzliche – eine Technologieethik*, Berlin, DE: Wichern Verlag, 1992.

responsibility for the world, there are good reasons to ask whether we are experiencing in present times a shift away from this.

World responsibility might be seen an untimely issue nowadays in the sense that common values in politics are challenged and possibly in decline in favor of nationalism and a blind power. However, for the same reason it is necessary to keep the questions

of world responsibility at the top of the agenda, not least for the reason that Jaspers pointed out; humans have to live forever with the threat of they themselves terminating the existence of humankind. It is a threat that one always will have to stand up against in order to overcome it. As Jaspers observed: This is a challenge that Humanity needs to show itself worthy of, there is no alternative to it (*AZM* 247).