



What is to be done? In the age of ignorance

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Abstract

This paper is dedicated to the issue of collective guilt and the interconnection between theoretical political thinking and ethically grounded political action, collective guilt, and personal responsibility. It assumes that facing political events in a form of media representation (such as with the war conflict in Ukraine), we mostly deal with simulacra, which affects and creates passive shock content consumption instead of active participation. The interconnection between irrational and rational ways of interpretation of political conflict is shown together with the attempt to rethink the social responsibility of nowadays, switching the perspective from synchronic to diachronic dimensions. Instead of producing descriptions that multiply monstrous zombie/victims-blaming apocalyptic discourse or subconsciously continuing to symbolically support “fratricide”, it is proposed to think about the legacy for future generations and see the moral dimension of politics in terms of “adults’ responsibility for children” as each one’s personal responsibility issue. Acting “as if you would wish all children on Earth to grow in safety and deserve a happy life no matter where (s)he would be born, as if it were a universal law” – this is proposed as an ethical-political common-sense formula, based on potential equality and global interconnection, maturity, and care – which could lead to a common goal of overcoming starvation, wars, sufferings, and catastrophes.

Keywords Collective guilt · Personal responsibility · Maturity · Media war · Simulacrum · Ethical action · Children · Russia · Ukraine · Belarus · Yemen · Global peace

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*For as you have been judging, so you will be judged, and with your measure will it be measured to you.
Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but don't consider the beam that is in your own eye?
(Matthew 7:2–3)*

Introduction

Many people in Russia may still remember two famous political novels of the nineteenth century, both formulating two crucial questions in their titles: Alexander Herzen's *Who Is to Blame?* and Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* It is hard to believe in any possibility of finding someone to be blamed until the conflict is over, the details are revealed, and the interests of the participants made evident; moreover, it appears to be a phantasmatic hypocrisy to speak about the *feeling* of collective guilt in general terms. "Not in my name" and "how come...?" have become the mantra of the minority, while the majority supposes: "Our leader and authorities know better". Deep collective guilt makes people vulnerable and in fact demotivates them. The problem is that whereas this feeling affects the most conscious people, the rest prefer to either remain ignorant or tolerate any media content, which would seem sufficient to provide "comfortable" explanations. This situation basically results in the social split (Magun 2022) and the incapacity to show such consistency or solidarity that would be strong enough to avoid denunciations and stop the lawlessness coming from the police and authorities. Honest questioning about guilt shall be possible and truly reasonable when the war is over, when the court starts to analyze the cases and when the sides are prepared for judgements. Therefore, I would like to focus on the "What is to be done?" issue. This seems to be far more important, as it turns many people from a passive reflection of their incapacities, anger, grief, fear, and depression towards the positive perspectives of responsible actions: overcoming violence, preventing starvation, and creating possibilities for open-minded dialog between different people.

On February 24, 2022, we all crossed another historical borderline – and there is no way back. The destruction and damage cannot be restored, the killed cannot be brought back to life. We have faced a human catastrophe, hence questions of responsibility for military crimes and destructions are following – even though we have to admit that these questions will meet their answers later. What are we, common people, representatives of the civil societies wherever we belong, supposed to do now? What should we stand for and whom can we trust? Have we remembered anything from Baudrillard lessons¹ of not taking the hyperreality for real – we, those who want to care about real people's lives and do not want to be affected by panic or shock?

¹ Let me recall the introductory quote from *Simulacra and Simulation*: "The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself" (Baudrillard 1994, p. 1).

Facing the irrationality of simulacra

Today, the political events are presented by the media in a symbolic form of “Zombies/Victims-Blaming Apocalypse”. We have to admit that some citizens are involved inasmuch as they manage to learn something from witnesses and participants as primary sources (for example, their friends or relatives in the Ukraine). However, many people may still tend to perceive the news via the ideological framework of media and rumors – whereas they have to choose between different sorts of “shock content”, which is perceived as *hyperreal*: the multiplied texts, photos, and videos only *seem* to refer to the events, they *seem* to represent to us “what is going on” in a form of a news report. Instead they serve as the affective machines full of content, requiring immediate and mostly passive reactions (such as “continue watching” or “switch the TV channel”, add “like”, “dislike”, or an emoji), as easily calculated opinions. Media content itself creates the distorted and asynchronous informational battlefield, which has its own hyperreal dimension: this hyperreality consumes spectators’ and readers’ time and vital energy, and to a certain extent creates a screen version, a small and concentrated abstract of events “in a pocket format”. The reaction towards media content is associated with the reaction to the event, but in fact is a *simulation* of compassion, joy, fear, and panic, which is perceived not in the same way as if we were there, being the active participants or eyewitnesses. Complex action is replaced with easy distribution, intensive feelings are replaced with immediate short-time affects. When interpretations are taken for granted, news and fake news may be two sides of the same coin.

However, each act of perception of the media content is easily replaced by the next portion of news. Radical mistrust leads to the incapacity of having any well-grounded judgment; the cynical minds consider any news as the result of “content production” with a certain “staged effect”. Baudrillard reminded us of four successive phases of simulation: 1) image that reflects profound reality, 2) image that masks, denatures, and perverts reality, 3) image that masks the absence of a profound reality, 4) pure simulacrum with no connection to any reality (Baudrillard 1994, p. 6). The flow of hype, which surrounds the event, has its own effects, such as distraction of attention, and these effects may be disproportional, exhausting, misleading, influencing the moral panic, involving into the ideological war, or even unveiling the truth. So, the first question is – how to participate and fight against violence (including the psychological and media violence) nonviolently? How to find trustful sources in the era of posttruth and global media war of images, perverted images, and pure simulacrum?

On the one hand, I think that physical violence and dangerous political actions require immediate political reactions and need to be stopped as soon as possible. On the other hand, when the immediate reactions are driven by emotions without being accompanied by reason, this may cause the opposite effect. The majority of political mistakes are motivated by emotions and driven by competitive pragmatics, and not by reasonable arguments for humanity – what if we now are facing an explosion of irrationality? Who can be – and should be – the judge in this world process, which appears to turn more and more Kafkaesque, when the guardians of the multitude are in fact spreading the message, an inversion of Kant’s words: “Do not argue –

believe!”² Even if we hypothetically consider this irrational factor, we have to admit that it can be there; if so, then the rational explanations of what is happening will all remain insufficient, and therefore ideologically corrupt and invalid. However, this still does not mean that the reactions should be irrational – in fact, it is vice versa! As Robert Aumann said, “if we simply dismiss it as irrational, we can’t address the problem” (Hart 2005, p. 734). Not rejecting the presence of irrationality, we have to overcome it with rational tools: even the delirium has its structures, and those can be grasped by an open-minded psychotherapist.

“Fratricide” metaphor. Taking responsibility as adults

Moreover, one cannot say that the current political conflict is radically new and does not resemble other cases in its motives. Considering the historical and ideological backgrounds of the contemporary war conflict and considering the rhetoric of “common history”, “brotherhood of nations”, and “political betrayal”, it reminds me of the historical examples of fratricide. This examples range from the very first biblical fratricide of Abel by Cain to the common narrative from the history of Kievan Rus’ of the eleventh century – I mean the complex relationship between four princely brothers, the fratricide of Boris and Gleb by Sviatopolk the Accursed, and his later war conflicts with Yaroslav.³ There is still no final historical judgment on which of the two brothers, Sviatopolk or Yaroslav, was to blame for the murder, and for what decisions exactly, whereas the two martyred victims, Boris and Gleb, have become the first saints canonized in Kievan Rus’. These examples show that the victims remain saints, while the villains try to hide their traces. However, even if any case of fratricide presupposes rational and even comprehensible conflict, there is a clash of interests – in the very heart of this opposition we may recognize the irrational competition of a son’s wills in the face of their Father (the Lord, the Authority), driven by either the succession of legacy or the freedom to choose one’s own autonomous path. Still, it is hard to believe that trust between “brothers” may be restored after the attempt of fratricide.

The problem of the fratricide model is that the conflict between persons does not correspond with the relationship between large groups of people. Perhaps the metaphor of fratricide could be explicated in a form of “*stasis* instead of *polemos*” (Agamben 2015), and then, despite all the quarrels and fights around “Russian/Ukrainian nationalism”, questions of any sort of nationalism, national guilt or responsibility would sound inadequate due to the fact that, as there are no united nations, there are only split “multitudes”. The ideological war now continues in the crossnational global media sphere, and the global disintegration became explicit during the global Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the chance to restore the humanity and the trust between people (at all levels) lies not in this inevitably damaged and polarized relationship, but in their vertical relationship with the next generation: with those

²In “What is Enlightenment?” Kant (1996) leads us towards the idea of acting in freedom according with human dignity.

³The main historical source is the medieval historical chronicle *Povest’ vremennykh let* (*The Tale of Bygone Years*). See, for instance (Malmenvall 2019).

whom they are responsible for. Despite all the Freudian motives, I can hardly imagine a parent who literally wants to be murdered by his own child. The attempts to reorient and consider the situation not synchronically, but diachronically may be a relevant argument in the contemporary situation, the one that is applicable to all participants. What image of the future are the people living for and fighting for? This logic makes us face the unexpected side of responsibility: whether we prefer to take responsibility for the living children and for the future generations – or the responsibility for us facing the end of the world?

At the same time, I do not want to react to the situation in a form of pure and doubtful reflection: this may lead to a posture of a narcissistic academic intellectual sitting in front of a crooked and distorted mirror. As a philosopher, I cannot react to the sufferings in a form of abstract intellectual concept-creation; the attempts at conceptual reflection must be *precise and specific*. Therefore, I would prefer to learn the lessons in a form of avoiding refined and secure name dropping and academic masquerade. There are already too many immoral language games, semiotic structures, implicatures, and simulacra around us to be sensitive to the simplicity of conceptual slogans. It may be easy to write: “let us become *l’homme capable!*” with reference to Paul Ricoeur (2000), or “let us practice *participative thinking!*” with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin (1993) and do nothing else. Ricoeur served in the French army since 1940 and spent five years as prisoner of war; Bakhtin spent six years in exile in Kostanay in 1928–1936 – and they both had their personal life experiences behind the concepts that they introduced. When Karl Jaspers was writing his essay about guilt and responsibility (Jaspers 1947), he was not making references – he was aware of understanding the existence. Sometimes intellectual work soothes pain, but when rationalization replaces actions, this solely academic intellectual “work” turns into a disaster.

Let me start from supporting the idea of adults’ responsibility for children, and all the rest may be solved by well-known political tools, peace treaties, reparations, and paying debts, instead of the crazy nationalism, limitations on freedom of speech, aggressive rhetoric, and the bringing of more and more children and teens to starvation. My thesis is simple: we are all equal as human beings, and humanity is interconnected: which means that all of us are basically responsible for the common sufferings, destruction, starvation, and global catastrophes.

Thinking of people instead of nations

Today, unprecedented economic sanctions are imposed on Russia, and this is accompanied by the growth of mistrust and the anti-Russian sentiment all over the world. It is important to realize how these actions may be perceived and what reactions and effects they may cause. For a long time, this has been the case with the situation in Belarus, deeply misunderstood by European colleagues and politicians. This was well explained by Uladzimir Mackevič:⁴ to understand the exemplary object, such as Belarus, you need to clarify the references and meanings, namely whether Belarus

⁴Uladzimir Mackevič is a philosopher, who is currently a political prisoner in Minsk, Belarus.

is a poetic image or ideologically driven feeling, intellectual concept or the result of certain *praxis*. Yet thinking requires not taking the abstract concept, but clarification of its meaning to the actual persons. Otherwise people may say that they claim that they *think of* Belarus, but they *mean* Russia, they may claim that they think of *civil nation*, but mean *people*. This is not a conscious hypocrisy, but a fallacy of non-creative thinking, which simplifies and replaces the absent, unfamiliar meanings – with those that are more familiar (Mackevič 2006). The same now appears to be the case with the policy towards Russia, which constantly refers to “the image of Russia” and the feelings that are associated with this image – but not with people. The typical ethical side of sanctions relates to the phenomenon of the so-called “cancel culture”: the idea of banning persons and states for their inappropriate actions in a form of taboo. However, the canceling and banning may play a far more ambiguous role by 1) increasing prices on wheat and enlarging the global food crisis, or 2) potential destruction of the freedom of speech and cultural and educational infrastructure by making the public space more and more homogeneous and vulnerable to propaganda. The rise of censorship and mistrust from both sides greatly affects the youth, not the authorities, and deprives people of common spaces of thinking, learning, and exchange of ideas. The isolation of Russian educational institutes from global education due to sanctions reduces the number of alternative sources of knowledge and does not lead to any positive changes. The aberrations of hastily prepared pseudopatriotic lessons in Russian schools, which simply reinforce militarism and nationalism (those “enemies” with whom Russian authorities themselves officially claim to fight!) are equally a bad sign. The parliamentary culture and the capacity to be responsible sides in the common dialog are the phenomena to be implanted into the educational system, and not banned. Vice versa, we need global scientific, cultural, and educational collaboration and cooperation as never before. As the German saying goes, “Das Kind mit dem Bade ausschütten” (“throwing the baby out with the bath-water”) will not do any good.

Maturing humanity: the maxim of parenting

Let us transgress, at least for a while, the rhetoric of military dangers and face the hidden side of this monstrous reality as morally responsible adults. While the people worldwide raise their voices for Ukraine, most of them remain almost silent on the problem of starvation in Yemen (and other African countries), which will turn even worse due to the war, to the broken supply chains, and to the economic sanctions in the global economy. The responsibility of mature people – is not to forget about billions of children who cannot protect and take care of themselves, whether in Ukraine or in Yemen. These billions are starving,⁵ because the global economy has not managed to find a sustainable solution to support African economies. Peter Singer once said: “if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it”

⁵UN agencies are warning that 17.4 million people in Yemen are now in need of food assistance. The IPC report emphasizes that across Yemen 2.2 million children and around 1.3 million pregnant or nursing mothers are acutely malnourished. See Vatican News (2022).

(Singer 1972, p. 231). This seems valid, and this should be accepted on both governmental and personal levels. But how to measure the moral importance? This may sound trivial and naïve, but each state and each person takes its part in international politics, either by action or inaction, and pays for it. However, from the global perspective, we cannot reach any good solution by making the situation even worse – by increasing starvation, by escalating war, by sending more and more troops to Ukraine reinforcing the military activism, by ruining agricultural, ecological, cultural, and educational systems. What sort of peace are we seeking? What world are we creating then? I have no better proposal other than quoting Peter Singer’s conclusion on the question of a personal moral responsibility once again:

Discussion, though, is not enough. What is the point of relating philosophy to public (and personal) affairs if we do not take our conclusions seriously? In this instance, taking our conclusion seriously means acting upon it. The philosopher will not find it any easier than anyone else to alter his attitudes and way of life to the extent that, if I am right, is involved in doing everything that we ought to be doing. (Singer 1972, p. 242)

In May 2018 Greta Thunberg wrote: “I want to feel safe. How can I feel safe when I know we are in the greatest crisis in human history?” (Tait 2019). I hope that Greta’s second true name is not Cassandra; and I think we should listen to her words. We must think globally, and act carefully. Even though we cannot feel safe yet – maybe we could strive for safety in being reasonable, responsible, and mature. We must move forward in this way if we would like to have any future for our children, one in which they are capable of trusting others and maintaining friendships, not taking betrayal and hatred for granted. I do not think that a child born from a woman raped during wartime should be stripped of care and love. None of us have chosen consciously where, when, and how to be born, but we may choose how to live our lives.

Summarizing everything mentioned above, I cannot invent any better rational formula other than the Kantian imperative as the moral foundation for the principles of children’ education and care. Let us take care of the future expressed in a maxim: you would wish all children on Earth to grow in safety and have a happy life, no matter where they would be born – as if it were a universal law. So, let us finally stop fighting with (s)words, and start to repair and recover, to literally save and feed those who are in danger. The whole world needs wheat and milk, gifts to God from both Cain and Abel – but not human sacrifice and Abel’s blood.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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