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THE CONCEPT OF RESPONSIBILITY: DILEMMA AND NECESSITY*

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with a critique of Max Weber's famous, but misleading distinction between an 'ethics of intention' and an 'ethics of responsibility', the article brings attention to the elucidating analysis of the concept of responsibility by the German philosopher Georg Picht. Originally a juristic term, responsibility was applied to eschatology and so became a fundamental ethical concept. By separating the concept from its theological background it remains a necessary idea for modern societies but increasingly loses its definition. The concept suffers from overemphasising the autonomous subject, which is overburdened by the universality of responsibility. Therefore a 'polis ethic' is needed: not the isolated subject, but subjects in community are its authors. For Christians all human responsibility is preceded by God's actions and held by God's grace.

KEYWORDS

autonomous subject, concept of responsibility, eschatology, Georg Picht, Max Weber, political ethics

Few other concepts have acquired such wide circulation in the recent ethical discussion—even to the point of appearing self-evident—as has 'responsibility'. It is impossible to imagine the absence of the term in current discourse, not only among academic ethicists but in the public square as well, which has led to the tendency to absorb this term as a basic virtue for nearly all areas of life. Yet it is exactly this continuing trend that easily leads to the suspicion that the word is taking on completely different meanings and connotations in the various contexts in which it is used.

* Translated by Stephen Hamilton.

Has 'responsibility' become an equivocation which allows one to stealthily go from one place to another, taking categories which gain their meanings from their direct interrelationship to one another and relegating them to anonymous, institutional structures that rob these concepts of their original meaning and yet allow them to retain their moral punch? Or even further: Has this inflationary use of the word in political and economic rhetoric led to its becoming practically worthless?

Already in 1967 the philosopher Georg Picht brought attention to the fact that the seemingly unavoidable recourse to 'responsibility' had led to its remaining peculiarly general and nondescript. 'There almost seems to be an advantage in preserving the concept's ambiguity,' he wrote. 'This, at least, allows people to talk about responsibility without obligating or committing themselves to anything in particular!'¹

The situation has hardly changed. It still must be said that the self-evidence of the term is at best only apparent, if not misleading. Therefore what responsibility actually is must always remain the object of reflection if the concept is not to become merely a piece of ethical counterfeiting: What is it that has enabled the concept of responsibility to gain such value at the price of such arbitrariness? And what is it that fascinates us about the concept, to the point that it appears almost indispensable for any ethical statement?

In order to answer these questions it is helpful to return to a text that has contributed like no other to this term's political and ethical popularity: Max Weber's famous lecture, from 1919, published under the title 'Politics as a Vocation' (*Politik als Beruf*).² Weber's text is attractive precisely because it leaves essential questions unanswered at its most crucial points, therefore displaying the advantages that the concept of responsibility offers but also the closely connected set of problems. The second part of my article attempts to better understand this problematic by tracing the analysis of the concept as laid out by Georg Picht. Picht does not simply stop at diagnosing the concept's lack of content in popular discourse or blame its ambiguity on the individual usage, but instead inquires into the ideological and socio-historical contexts which make the term necessary while

¹ Georg Picht, 'Der Begriff der Verantwortung', in *idem, Wahrheit Vernunft Verantwortung. Philosophische Studien* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1969), pp. 318–42 (318). Here and in the following citations, the translation of Winston Davis will be quoted: 'The Concept of Responsibility', *Religion* 28 (1998), pp. 190–203 (190). This translation, which was published in a journal, is a slightly condensed version of the German text.

² Max Weber, 'Politik als Beruf', in Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf (1917/1919) / Politik als Beruf (1919)* (ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Wolfgang Schluchter; Max Weber Gesamtausgabe, I/17; Tübingen: Mohr, 1992), pp. 157–252. From here on the text will be cited in its English translation, by H.H. Gerth und C. Wright Mills: *Politics as a Vocation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965). The German title could also be translated as *Politics as Profession*, as both connotations are contained in Weber's phrase: the ethical, indeed religious aspect (Luther's ethic of vocation [*Berufsethik*] was known to Weber and helped to determine Weber's use of the concept) as well as the professionalism in accordance to Weber's basic ideas of rationalization and economization as basic marks of modernity.

simultaneously depleting its meaning. The challenge for contemporary ethics that results from this analysis will then be expounded in the final sections of my essay.

Intention or Responsibility: Weber's Distinction

Even when the predominant sections of 'Politics as a Vocation' reveal Weber's characteristic linking of socio-historical analyses with ideal-typical categories in the attempt to grasp historical and present realities, it is not these insights and analyses which have made his text so famous. It is instead the final section, which expressly poses the question of the relation between politics and ethics and answers this question by making the famous distinction between an 'ethics of intention' (*Gesinnungsethik*) and an 'ethics of responsibility' (*Verantwortungsethik*). Weber makes the well-known remark that they are 'two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims'³ and leaves no doubt that he is convinced only one of them will be adequate for the political realm.⁴

This stark contrast obviously leads to many questions. It is not clear, for instance, who exactly is implicated with the label 'ethics of intention'.⁵ Weber mentions the revolutionaries of 1918–1919, as well as so-called 'Syndicalists', but then gives the term a religious characterization, particularly referencing the Sermon on the Mount. This all forms a quite heterogeneous mixture which does not easily fit into one consistent ethical concept. Simply looking at the criteria given by Weber, 'ethics of intention' could be a Kantian moral philosophy, although Kant is never explicitly mentioned in the text. In any case, the concept is undefined and therefore must remain so, because almost nobody has seriously defended the position of a Weberian 'intention ethics'.

Similarly, the concept of responsibility, which is supposed to carry the entire ethical burden of the argument, remains peculiarly vague. Weber names as one of its characteristics little more than the disposition to take all possible consequences of an action into account. In accordance to this he must deny the 'intention ethicist' (*Gesinnungsethiker*) any consideration of consequences: 'You may demonstrate', Weber illustrates, 'to a convinced syndicalist believing in an ethic of ultimate ends, that his action will result in increasing the opportunities of reaction, in increasing the oppression of his class, and obstructing its ascent—and you will not make the slightest

³ Weber, *Politics*, p. 46.

⁴ For more on Weber's reflections concerning an ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, see also Wolfgang Schoberth, 'Die bessere Gerechtigkeit und die realistischere Politik. Ein Versuch zur politischen Ethik', in Reinhard Feldmeier (ed.), *Salz der Erde. Zugänge zur Bergpredigt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 108–40.

⁵ The prevalent translation 'ethics of ultimate ends' only partially captures the meaning of the German *Gesinnungsethik*. *Gesinnung* primarily refers to one's inner disposition, one's principles, one's moral identity or character; therefore *Gesinnungsethik* is not the focus on final ends, but instead the moral focus on the integrity of one's motives.

impression upon him'.⁶ Weber's remark is, to say the least, an oversimplification of the criticised position: A syndicalist's answer would be that one ought to accept the short-term worsening of affairs, because the minimal improvements achievable through 'Realpolitik' hinder or at least delay any radical change. In other words: the momentary difficulties are worth accepting for the sake of the radical improvement in the long run. Yet this argument would seem to be no different than Weber's 'ethics of responsibility', so the antithesis that Weber chooses is therefore quite misleading.

A critical reading of Weber's remarks suggests that the ambiguities of his argument result from the fact that his fundamental distinction follows a concrete political agenda: the discrediting of a political rival whose goals Weber detested. His contemporary political context reveals that Weber was not concerned about accounting for the consequences of actions in general, but instead about achieving or preventing certain particular consequences.⁷ No one debates at all *whether* the consequences of a political action should be accounted for or not, but instead *which* consequences should be considered realistic and acceptable: therefore Weber's designation of the concept 'responsibility' is ultimately empty of content.

It is not the concept of responsibility itself that provides the basis for Weber's understanding of politicians and politics. Quite the opposite: the gaps in this concept can only be overlooked when one assumes Weber's picture of a politician and his understanding of politics. The term 'responsibility' therefore has no fundamental or critical function in Weber's argumentation, but instead a legitimising one. This becomes noticeable towards the end of the text, when Weber, after introducing the contrasts between 'ethics of intention' and 'ethics of responsibility' with a large rhetorical flourish, must then qualify this distinction to the point of it sounding like a retraction. These two kinds of ethics are 'not absolute contrasts,' he writes, 'but rather supplements, which only in unison constitute a genuine man—a man who *can* have the "calling for politics."'⁸ Yet this statement is completely different from 'two fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims'.⁹ It is in this latter context that Weber appeals to a blatantly religious approach, obviously that of Luther, yet without naming him: It is very moving, he writes, when a mature human being accepts responsibility for the consequences and 'somewhere he reaches the point

⁶ Weber, *Politics*, p. 47.

⁷ The concrete political motive was the publishing of documents which could be seen as evidence of Germany's guilt in initiating the First World War. This particularly bothered Weber (*Politics*, pp. 43–44), but he ignores the fact that even his enemies were aiming for deliberate political consequences with this action. It should also be mentioned that Weber's position undeniably implies very problematical political consequences: the suppression of the question of German political guilt led to the solidification of the myth of a Germany that acted in self-defence. This myth played a very important role again during the downfall of the Weimar Republic.

⁸ Weber, *Politics*, p. 54; original emphasis.

⁹ Weber, *Politics*, p. 46.

where he says: "Here I stand; I can do no other."¹⁰ It remains unanswered how something that in one case is so contemptible can be in another an expression of maturity. That Weber follows the lead of Luther is an irony, and not an intended one, insofar as the out-and-out theologically grounded perspective of Luther could never be labelled 'ethics of intention'—and neither could it be labelled as an 'ethics of responsibility' in Weber's sense. It has far more to do with a situation of radical responsibility, and in a quite literal sense: Luther must answer before the emperor at the Diet of Worms, but his first responsibility is to God.¹¹ The decisive question appears here in a very different manner: *To whom am I ultimately responsible?* Luther is concerned with this conflict between different responsibilities, which is also the crucial question for ethical reflection in general.

Therefore when this distinction—which Weber has presented as an exclusive one—cannot be put into practice, then what is its value? Understood as it has been introduced by Weber and solely defined by this formal criterion, the concept of responsibility obscures any questions that arise insofar as it can absorb any ethical or political position. Weber's argument therefore cannot be regarded as fruitful, but the issue he points out remains important. For, aside from their directly political focus, Weber's reflections are to be understood here in relation to his religio- and socio-historical analyses. The opposition between 'ethics of intention' and 'ethics of responsibility' is then not a question of making a decision concerning a present action, but instead refers to two historical manifestations—or 'ideal types'—of two different stations in Weber's theory of modernization. Put more simply, the 'ethics of intention' represents the ethical type that since the beginning of the Reformation has dominated modern ethical theory.¹² Insofar as the term is described with concepts which stem from Kant's moral philosophy, this is historically accurate. According to Weber, even this type is admittedly no longer appropriate for the presently developing conditions of modernity. He wants to outline this modern type with the concept 'responsibility'. Even if the model of historical dynamics, as Weber develops it, raises many critical questions,¹³ he still assigns an essential difference in the ethical *foundation*. In my opinion, this is not to be understood as the difference between (ideal) types, which again does not manifest itself in

¹⁰ Weber, *Politics*, p. 54.

¹¹ We will not deal here with the historically debated question of whether Luther actually said these words.

¹² The 'ethics of intention' or *Gesinnungsethik* would on the other hand be an important step past the 'ethics of law', or *Gesetzesethik*, of the Middle Ages, whereas Weber's assessment of the ethics of the Middle Ages is not exactly strong. See Wolfgang Huber, 'Sozialethik als Verantwortungsethik', in Wolfgang Huber, *Konflikt und Konsens. Studien zur Ethik der Verantwortung* (München: Kaiser, 1990), pp. 135–57 (140).

¹³ It is, for instance, somewhat questionable, whether Reformation ethics is adequately covered by this model, even if the distinction is made between Luther and Lutheranism. To name a more basic topic: Weber's famous Calvinism thesis would need a careful revision.

the concept of responsibility, but instead as a shift in the perception of the authority that assures the validity of ethical norms, principles and rules. And here lies the difference between the traditional, predominant Western ethical system, which is religiously grounded throughout, and the modern situation: namely, that when the authority that establishes the validity of ethical criteria is no longer transcendentally grounded, it then must 'somehow' be immanently established. Weber, on the other hand, clearly recognises that they cannot be established naturalistically (and it is not only on this point that a large part of contemporary moral discourse has regressed from its previous standard), but that the obligation must be grounded in the act itself. Exactly in this self-justification of human action, however, lies the central aporia of modern moral theory; and exactly this topic is the focus of Georg Picht's reflections on the concept of responsibility: How can ethics be consistently grounded without recourse to God or to an (always very questionable) 'equivalent' of God?

Picht's Analysis: The Eschatological Dimension of Responsibility

One of the most solid analyses of the concept of responsibility was presented by George Picht, who taught philosophy of religion at the school of theology in Heidelberg. Such a position is very unusual in Germany and can be seen as characteristic of his thought. In Germany, academic philosophy typically understands itself as something essentially separate from theology, while theology, if it even takes the time to engage philosophy (and in its contemporary academic shape philosophy often dismisses theology), usually finds its conversation partner in nineteenth-century thought. Picht's position is, for both mainstream philosophy and theology, that of an outsider, which is exactly why his reflections are so relevant: namely, because he calls attention to points that do not appear in the common academic discussion. This is particularly true of his investigations of the concept of responsibility. Even if several conceptual studies of 'responsibility' have been published in the meantime, Picht's reflections are still not outdated because he insists on a certain connection that, while mostly ignored by others, is actually of central importance for our set of problems.

Picht begins with the observation that the concept 'responsibility' appears relatively late, not only in terms of the German *Verantwortung* but also in English and French. The origin of the word, which is quite obvious in English and French, is most probably similar for the German term as well: namely, that it was adapted from the Latin concept. In Latin, however, the word had a precise meaning, being native to the field of law and consistently used in this context: to be responsible meant to *respond* (German *antworten*) to an accusation in front of a court. Thus the Latin expression has a clearly judicial meaning—but not an ethical one, which it accrues only later in its Christian reception. 'Responsibility is frequently used in

the sense of justifying people before the Judgment Seat of God. It seems to me this alone explains why in German, English and French, responsibility moved from the law to ethics in general, a transition which is not found in the Latin language'.¹⁴

It is this eschatological interpretation of an originally juridical concept that allows it to become a basic ethical principle. Through this expansion, a concept that was first bound to a specific situation now can become a universal category. In the original context, it becomes clear that as long as responsibility is understood as a purely legal term, it assumes a formal accusation; and this requires a claimant, without whom the process could not get underway. In this case there can only be responsibility when a potential claimant is damaged; without any potential claimants or their intimidation there will be no (juridical) responsibility in this system. It is not by accident that the expansion of this concept corresponds to a change in the legal system: the petition-oriented system, in which there is no need for a judge when there is no claimant, is replaced by the establishment of the 'public offence', which is prosecuted *ex officio*. By broadening the list of possible litigable misdeeds, this essential category of modern law serves to protect the weak as well as punish the offences of the powerful, who in this system cannot elude prosecution so easily.¹⁵

The connection between the juridical category and the eschatological expectation of a final judgment does not yet suffice for an explanation of the modern concept of responsibility. It still would not explain why this concept was not already developed in early Christianity, or why it was not discovered by Islam, which has a very elaborate and active doctrine of a last judgment. When Winston Davis objects to Picht that if the concept of responsibility 'is really a theomorphism spawned by eschatology, one would expect to find it in its most highly developed form in Islam, not in Christianity',¹⁶ he seems to miss the point of Picht's analysis. Picht's thesis does not need any more 'highly speculative' elements: contrariwise he elaborates in numerous detailed studies of the theological and primarily philosophical conditions of modern thought and modern science as well¹⁷—which he also does in the case of the modern concept

¹⁴ Picht, 'Concept', p. 190.

¹⁵ This is consistent with Picht's conjecture that the concept of responsibility stems from legal practices of the Inquisition: as shocking as this might sound to contemporary ears, the Inquisition was indeed an important step for the modernization of the legal system exactly in its introduction of the public offence, which was initially used to prosecute the misdeeds of local (particularly spiritual) authorities. See Peter Segl, 'Die Inquisition—eine schwarze Legende?', in Helmut Altrichter, Klaus Herbers and Helmut Neuhaus (eds.), *Mythen in der Geschichte* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2004), pp. 261–90 (279–81).

¹⁶ Winston Davis, 'Introduction to Picht, "The Concept of Responsibility"', *Religion* 28 (1998), pp. 185–90 (189).

¹⁷ Most of these analyses had been published posthumously since 1985 in the series 'Vorlesungen und Schriften' (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta).

of responsibility, which depends on specific conditions that only had been given in early European modern history.

Picht demonstrates this by starting with the essential element of the concept of responsibility. Responsibility is something one has *for* something and *to* someone. If this 'someone' refers in the original legal context to a court or a claimant, then in the eschatological setting of the concept (here Picht cites 2 Cor. 5:10 as a background for this idea) it refers to God, to whom every person must be responsible for his or her actions and life. It is characteristic of the modern concept of responsibility that this authority is shifted *inward*, i.e. into the conscience, and later, in what is a more secularised context, into one's own autonomous reason. Thus the double reference that characterises this concept is reworked into a modern form: because modern thought since Descartes knows only to seek the assurance of truth in itself, it must also locate the authority for moral worth in itself as well. 'Accordingly, modern thought bases all responsibility for people and things on the responsibility of moral reason for itself, or more precisely, for the freedom which is thought to be the condition of our rational nature. The responsibility of people now means their responsibility to themselves and for themselves'.¹⁸ This shift of responsibility inwards is what constitutes the moral subject: the authority to whom the subject can and must answer is to be nothing other than that which the subject realises in itself. 'That to which and for which they are responsible is their own 'autonomous reason'. The classical formula for the concept of responsibility referring back to autonomous reason is therefore Kant's categorical imperative'.¹⁹

The central point of Picht's analysis is not the demonstration of the eschatological basis for the concept of responsibility but rather the tracing of its development: for the first time, the different elements that make up this concept (in its modern sense) are put together. And this is where the analysis also has its meaning for the contemporary discussion: it identifies the roots of the modern concept's inner inconsistency and its previously described tendency towards a loss of meaning. For the concept's entire plausibility and its intellectual force depend on this authority to which the subject sees itself as responsible, being able to hold up against any doubts or scepticism; and, even more important ethically, they depend on this authority being able to be seen as binding and firmly reliable—theoretically as well as factually. As soon as these assumptions are not seen as given—because I can identify no final authority to which I can make myself responsible—the all-encompassing ethical importance of the concept collapses. And this has been exactly the case since the assumption of pure, absolute reason was broken.

Now it might be objected that this scenario only applies when the concept of responsibility is expanded into something universal, as Picht's analysis

¹⁸ Picht, 'Concept', p. 191.

¹⁹ Picht, 'Concept', p. 191.

purports. Put in more pragmatic contexts, the collapse of the notion of absolute reason would leave the concept more or less undamaged. As important as the emphasis on concrete, small-scale responsibilities are—and we will return to this subject later—this objection undercuts the complexity of the problem, and the concept's multiple dimensions that transcend such pragmatic contexts would be obscured. Picht's analysis does not end with a description of the modern concept's genesis but instead aims at the awareness that this concept is effective and even indispensable exactly in its contradictoriness, since it accurately displays the truly aporetic nature of our contemporary moral universe and the inconsistency of our lives.

It would be a huge misunderstanding if one assumed that the problem Picht sketches is only a theoretical one for experts in the history of philosophy. Rather, Picht is able to show how much unsolved philosophical problems are reflected in our actions and in the requirements we make for our lives. Two developments are particularly worth mentioning. Firstly, the fundamental modern concept of 'autonomy' means, not only in philosophical discourse but also in our normal, everyday self-understanding, that responsibility is no longer linked to an identifiable 'other'—which could provide the limits of responsibility—but instead to one's own intuition of his or her own rational abilities. Inasmuch as 'the individual' is made the subject of responsibility, the sphere of his responsibility becomes increasingly limitless, since autonomy, if it is not to become a mere cloak for arbitrariness, must then be applied to a general subject and not to an empirical one. No more, then, does responsibility's horizon lie at what can and ought to be expected of an individual, but now expands to include all of humanity itself. This is where the second development comes into play, which is particularly important to Picht: one's possible courses of action, and therefore one's responsibilities, have certainly grown due to an exponential increase in humanity's technical abilities—without ethical and juridical institutions that have been formed in response to these changes.

The insight that the modern concept of responsibility has been boundlessly expanded because it is no longer defined from the outside is both a theological and a philosophical one, thus it corresponds to the awareness that humankind's technological possibilities likewise infinitely expand this concept's scope. It is not at all a rhetorical exaggeration to say that the survival of nature as we know it depends upon our actions. Because this survival depends on human action, the scope of human responsibility is certainly not going to shrink anytime soon. 'Since the development of science and technology put universal instruments of power at our disposal, we can no longer avoid responsibility's universality,' writes Picht.²⁰ Of course, a single individual's influence on the actions of humankind is various and most of us even may think that their influence is negligible: since even the actions of governments and economic power brokers are not independent from the actions of

²⁰ Picht, 'Concept', p. 198.

citizens, voters, and consumers, every individual is in a certain sense included in the responsibility of all human beings. This universalising of the concept of responsibility, which Picht places before our eyes, is not the result of excessive theorising, but instead something unavoidable. 'The universality of this concept is a reflection not of the universalistic tendencies in Christian thought, but of the sheer facticity of our world'.²¹

Picht is certainly aware that the concept's unavoidable universality affects its very substance, since a universal ratio is no longer attached to it. The main importance of Picht's investigation is that he does not avoid this consequence and does not attempt to relieve or reassure the reader through some kind of reduction of the concept. Far more important for Picht is that our thinking be able to withstand this aporia and, recognising this crisis for what it is, search for new ground without engaging in self-appeasement or self-delusion. Accordingly, the inconsistency of the modern concept of responsibility must be clearly articulated in a way that does not forget to reference its theological foundations. 'To be sure, while people have not given up the concept of responsibility, for a long time they have ceased to look upon human life in the light of the Final Judgment'.²² Does this mean 'that we must eliminate the eschatological nuances which responsibility once had if we want to interpret the concept for the twentieth century'?²³

If the concept of responsibility has lost its eschatological plausibility, but this plausibility cannot be replaced by another foundation, then what actually comprises this concept? Because of this lack of substance, responsibility will tend to be a one-size-fits-all concept—on the one hand overused because everyone wants the concept for everything, on the other hand more and more devoid of content because no one can quite identify before whom or to whom we are supposed to justify ourselves: 'At a time in which our deeds and omissions determine the course of the future, the concept of responsibility threatens to become a generic term for obligations we cannot fulfil'.²⁴ Yet this kind of responsibility is not just a subjective feeling but something that corresponds in its peculiar antinomy to the present circumstances, in which our moral faculties are overburdened by so many technological possibilities. 'But responsibility points us in the direction of a universality which we cannot avoid. Nevertheless, because of this universality, obligations imposed on us by responsibility run the risk of completely losing their obligatory nature'.²⁵

Picht's own proposal for a retrieval of a more substantive concept of responsibility will not be attempted here. This can only be hinted at by looking at some of his other remarks: Picht sees the inner structure of a

²¹ Picht, 'Concept', p. 198.

²² Picht, 'Concept', p. 197.

²³ Picht, 'Concept', p. 197. According to the German text this objection should not be identified with Picht's point of view.

²⁴ Picht, 'Concept', p. 198.

²⁵ Picht, 'Concept', p. 198.

post-metaphysical concept of responsibility in the temporality and historicity of human existence, in that every person can only understand him- or herself when both past and future are brought to bear on the present. Because one's history and one's future is not something private, but instead interacts with the history of one's family, nation, and ultimately with humankind in general, each self can only be understood in this universal human context.

In this way Picht anchors the concept in human existence itself, since responsibility can no longer have an 'objective' correlate in a religiously plural society whose members share no common transcendental authority. The universality of responsibility is thereby not to be thought of as an ontological feature of humankind, but instead results from the measureless expansion of possibilities of human action: because the consequences of technological mastery over nature could lead to the destruction of the biosphere, humanity is in turn responsible for its preservation; and because the web of human interaction is so densely woven, no one can escape from this responsibility for the whole. Because the policies and economies of rich countries are also influenced by every voter and consumer respectively—even if this is a very limited influence—and because these policies and economies in turn affect every corner of the earth through their technological effects, every human being is bound to this universal responsibility, whether he or she recognises this or not. The religious foundation of the concept may not be comprehended by many; yet in the analysis of the modern *condition humana* it proves to be an expression of the state in which humanity finds itself.

Implications

Picht's analyses intentionally take no position that would be dependent upon theological premises. Neither do his conclusions encourage a simple return to the religious or, more specifically, the eschatological foundation of responsibility. In fact, his conclusions imply the irretrievability of any commonly accepted religious basis for responsibility. The question still arises, however, of how to justify this concept without basing its plausibility in a transcendental authority. It is certainly questionable whether Picht's 'existential analysis' can achieve this plausibility: when he anchors the concept completely in human historicity, he presupposes that this analysis can be comprehended by human agents themselves and then put into practice. Yet this is a very difficult requirement indeed, and its fulfilment can hardly be assumed. Picht's analysis, therefore, at least needs to take some steps back into the present social reality in order to be effective.

Picht's essay appears to be open to considerable criticism, from which two essential objections arise. The first raises the objection that a new 'metaphysical' authority has been created as the concept's foundation; the second rejects his expansion of the concept. However, both of these criticisms fail to grasp the core of Picht's argumentation, as well as failing

to grasp the contemporary significance of the concept of responsibility itself. A return to its classic metaphysical form is exactly what Picht does not want; on the contrary he criticises modern thought for unconsciously presupposing this metaphysical form, but in a deficient way.²⁶ It is his conviction that a post-metaphysical philosophy must be developed—and a post-metaphysical theology as well, which can offer a new awareness of what ‘revelation’ really can mean. Therefore it is absolutely essential to uncover and to overcome the fundamental prejudices that are embedded in the premises of modern thought.

The second objection refers to the ethical core of Picht’s argument. Due to modern technological developments and socio-political relations, the notion of responsibility’s basic boundlessness—which, as has previously been shown, can be demonstrated both systematically as well as historically—appears to be leading to the very vacuity of the concept that Picht criticised because such a responsibility does not seem realizable anymore. Ludger Heidbrink therefore sees in Picht’s thesis a self-destruction of the concept, inasmuch as Picht fails to ‘adequately relate the necessity of moral-political action to the objectification and functionalisation of social interaction’.²⁷ This criticism can be seen as representative of the perspective that derives responsibility completely from the responsibilities that develop in social interaction, responsibilities whose importance no one doubts. Advanced societies certainly depend very much on the existence of binding and openly enforceable responsibilities. Yet where that does not happen, responsibility degenerates into an empty formula, such as in the often heard expression about taking over ‘complete political responsibility’, to which no concrete action is actually tied.

As important as it is to establish and specify the concrete responsibilities that can be fulfilled, it does little to adequately engage our overall problematic. The boundlessness that Picht identifies also belongs to the meaning of the term—especially in an ethical and political respect. It is exactly this sense which makes it possible to speak of responsibility not only where no socially established obligations exist—since ecological consequences, for instance, produced an action that was not foreseeable²⁸—but also where

²⁶ When Winston Davis sees Picht’s belief that the modern sciences, like the modern state, ‘are based on the “theomorphic idea” of the autonomous freedom of God’ as ‘a far-fetched idea’ (Davis, ‘Introduction’, 186), he misses the point. Picht not only backs up his argument with numerous detailed analyses, but his thesis is also quite plausible from the standpoints of both the history of science and the philosophy of science—which is obviously too complicated to be put into detail here. The question, then, is what conclusions are to be drawn from this finding.

²⁷ Ludger Heidbrink, *Kritik der Verantwortung: Zu den Grenzen verantwortlichen Handelns in komplexen Kontexten* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2003), p. 121.

²⁸ Picht’s investigations are connected with his interest in developing moral categories for the prevention of an impending ecological disaster; the dimensions of this threat—corresponding exactly to the dimensions of the expanding technical possibilities—made the established ethical concepts appear unusable.

such obligations are inadequately (or not at all) institutionalised due to political interests. If we downplay the moments in Picht's argumentation that appear excessive in the eyes of his critics, not only does it result in the loss of any insights gained through reflecting on the modern concept's historical genesis, but also in a loss of the concept's relevance. The universality that constitutes this concept as an ethical one is not 'just' a theological inheritance, it is ethically indispensable: without it, responsibility would be unthinkable in cases of secret misdeeds and crimes without witnesses, as well as in cases of injustices not acknowledged by society.

Furthermore, it is precisely the concept's open-endedness which provides its productivity as a kind of ethical awareness under such conditions I like to call 'structural irresponsibility'. It is the tendency in certain parts of sociological theory, particularly the ones that view themselves as up to date with the processes of modernization, to downplay the relevance of agents in favour of systematic processes. The everyday-life justification that one 'could not have acted otherwise because the practical necessities just happened to be like that' (and the excuse based in economic ideology that the laws of the market require certain actions), seems to be transformed into a theoretical maxim by systems theory: the limitation of responsibility to direct liabilities on one hand corresponds to the obscurity of the whole on the other hand; and every responsibility that is more than mere loyalty to the employer disappears in this obscurity. Heidbrink sees this tension but focuses on the figure of the 'practitioner of responsibility, washed with the waters of contingency', who knows that large parts 'of highly modernised societies are liable to irresponsibility'.²⁹ In this perspective, the attainment of concretion clearly results in bidding responsibility farewell: limiting the concept to things that can be attributed to particular agents allows 'responsibility' to lose a certain degree of its complexity, but when no one sees the whole picture, then no one can carry responsibility.

Placing such restrictions on responsibility could also be the dissolution for Weber's concepts. The 'practitioner of responsibility', for instance, corresponds well to Weber's figure of the official, who does not take responsibility himself but instead has his privilege 'in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities'³⁰—whereby it plays no role whether or not these authorities are persons (as in Weber) or system-borne pseudo-subjects such as 'inherent necessities'. It would accordingly depend on not recklessly disregarding the expansion of this 'realm of irresponsibility', but on politically limiting and controlling it. That this overburdens an individual is no objection but instead an indication of the fundamental problem in the prevalent use of the word 'responsibility'.

²⁹ Heidbrink, *Kritik der Verantwortung*, p. 313.

³⁰ Weber, *Politics*, p. 20. Just how questionable it is to legitimise the submission of officials to their superior authorities was seen in Germany only a few years later, when the officials' duty to unquestionably ensure the system's functioning made an apparatus of terror first possible.

The present financial crisis reveals this problem quite clearly. The cause of the crisis rests not with the few who can be held responsible in a legal sense, i.e. because they violated laws, and who attract attention as representatives of an inscrutable and incomprehensible system. Instead, the cause of the crisis rests with the many who acted quite responsibly in limited respects and thereby triggered this chaos. In every case these agents acted in the interests of those for whom they worked, and therefore they can subjectively justify their actions. Moreover, the fact that these interconnected actions of many rational and responsible individuals led to irrationality and irresponsibility is not something that can be simply charged to an individual. But is the individual therefore exculpated and discharged of any responsibility?

The consequences of the financial crisis reveal a further dimension in the concept of responsibility, one which has to date been too little emphasised. If responsibility *to* an authority and *for* something or someone are two indispensable aspects of the concept, then it needs to be given a third: namely, that responsibility is not to be thought of without a person who is ready to carry it or take it over. The subject of responsibility is certainly not necessarily the one who caused the situation (legal and ethical responsibility also diverge here). The guilty parties of the financial crisis are clear, even when they have hardly done anything wrong in the legal sense of responsibility. But it is not only about the many investors who played their part in the system with their often small amounts of money: far more important is the fact that the results are affecting everyone, and now an action is needed to mitigate these results. The agents who must remedy these problems are precisely not those who caused them—the universality of responsibility is in this case undeniable.

The core of Picht's analysis remains significant: namely, that its eschatological structure and basic boundlessness are essential to the ethical concept of responsibility. Indeed, it is these elements that make the concept indispensable, as well as giving it a peculiar paradox. This paradox, as previously discussed, is seen in the fact that responsibility's practicality and indispensability as a fundamental ethical concept can only be kept at the expense of taking on a utopian or eschatological dimension. In this respect the concept points to a religious foundation, no matter how pragmatic or secular one may want to understand it: without an ultimate authority to which or whom responsibility can be referenced, it cannot be consistently conceptualised without robbing it of its ethical substance.

This is also the reason for the twofold ethical problem that arises: on the one hand, the concept gains relevance just to the extent that it loses precision after being freed of its religious connotations. On the other, it becomes increasingly obscure exactly *why* a person would ever assume a responsibility at the expense of his or her own personal interests when no authority can be found to obligate or compel that person.

Obviously, what has been referred to as 'religious' is not necessarily embedded in a specific religion. It can also be defined quite vaguely, for instance in formulations such as the *invocatio* or *nominatio Dei* in constitutions

of religiously neutral states. Regardless of the problematic that such general religious references cause, and regardless of whether such formulae should have a place in constitutions, it is clear that no equivalent can be found for *what* these formulae express. This becomes particularly apparent in the case of the preamble to Germany's constitution, which states that the German people have given themselves this basic law in the 'consciousness of [their] responsibility to God and humanity' [*Bewußtsein seiner Verantwortung vor Gott und den Menschen*]. This formula is a direct consequence of Germany's experiences with the terrors of National Socialism, which produced the conviction that the law and political power cannot be grounded in themselves alone without the danger of misuse and even totalitarian self-destruction. This insight is articulated in the word *responsibility*, for this word expresses the fact that the limits of the law are not merely a *self*-limitation that can be taken away if necessary, but instead a limitation established by an 'other'. It is important to note that the previously mentioned 'responsibility to humanity' is not any less transcendent than to God, as 'humanity' is not an empirical measurement and does not name a subject who can enforce any legal responsibilities.

This aporia of a quasi-metaphysical foundation under the condition of religious and ideological neutrality is exactly reproduced in the establishment and international enforcement of human rights, which must enter uncharted legal territory for the sake of their global enforcement. Without this presumption of a global consensus in fundamental convictions about justice and humanity, any violation of human rights which does not breach national law would remain unpunished. This is why political and legal imagination is necessary for finding new and preferably agreeable ways of doing this without losing any moral substance. There are urgent needs for structures in which concrete responsibilities are established, for which it is necessary to find acceptance as broad as possible without being able to provide consistent grounds for it. Pragmatic as well as partial consensuses are needed here from participants who are most likely at odds in terms of to whom and for what their ultimate responsibility is dedicated. Establishing concrete priorities is therefore important, as well as the establishment of an institution of authorities which can actually hold people responsible. That such a thing is possible can be seen in the attempt to establish international courts of law, which concretise this responsibility. Certainly in this case an array of problems also arises, but this characterises the dual nature of the concept of responsibility: it is tied to the concrete, yet also partial and provisional responsibilities, but it is also tied to an ultimate foundation and justification of our actions that transcends every empirical boundary.

Perspectives for a Christian Ethic

The task for a Christian ethic arising out of these reflections can only be briefly foreshadowed in the following; a more detailed development would leave the boundaries of this essay.

The discovery of the irreducibly religious dimension of responsibility should by no means imply that theological ethics must seek to 'restore' the concept's religious finality or to limit it to religious contexts. On the contrary, responsibility must remain feasible in non-religious contexts in order to retain its substance in 'secular' society³¹—even as questionable as the concept's foundation may be. However, it is certainly an essential task of Christian ethics to *remember* this dimension, as it is one in which fundamental criteria of perception and action are anchored. A Christian appraisal of what responsibility can mean should therefore not simply reproduce what society generally accepts as responsibility: it should protest the cheapening of the concept as well as the excessive demands placed on it.

This is why H. Richard Niebuhr was convinced that his anthropological understanding of responsibility offers new inroads for ethics. The 'new symbolism of responsibility ... represents an alternative or an additional way of conceiving and defining this existence of ours that is the material of our own actions,' writes Niebuhr: 'What is implicit in the idea of responsibility is the image of man-the-answerer, man engaged in dialogue, man in acting in response to action upon him.'³² With this Niebuhr differentiates his starting point from the two dominant models of understanding personhood, 'man-as-actor' and 'man-as-citizen', which are in his opinion unable to provide adequate models for the challenges of today.

Niebuhr ends up very close to Picht in that both thinkers locate the concept of responsibility not primarily in *action* but in *being*. The ethical problem is inextricably bound up with the anthropological.³³ Niebuhr's approach is also close to Picht's in that he resolutely seeks a position that is independent of theological premises, speaking instead of a 'Christian moral philosophy'. With this phrase, Niebuhr clearly does not have in mind some generally plausible conception of being, or even one that can be established by argument—such attempts end up being either mostly devoid of content or filled with assumptions—but instead asks about what forms a Christian understanding of being and responsibility. For this reason, Niebuhr's identification of the human being as *that which can respond* is more concrete than Picht's existential analysis: for while Picht's philosophical argumentation must carefully pay attention not to leave the boundaries of the 'rational', Niebuhr is able to sketch a picture of personhood that is clearly influenced by Christianity. Additionally Niebuhr's primary philosophical dialogue partner is not the existential philosophy of Heidegger but the interactionism of George H. Mead, which adds more empirical plausibility to his

³¹ The dubious nature of the idea of 'secularization' is not to be discussed here.

³² H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, with an introduction by James M. Gustafson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 56.

³³ It would be premature to think of ethics as dependent upon a certain conception of human nature. Much better would be to speak of a relation of interdependence between anthropology and ethics. See Wolfgang Schoberth, *Einführung in die theologische Anthropologie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

approach—although not being without its own dangers. The advantages and disadvantages become clear when Niebuhr anchors responsibility in the expectation of a reaction from those with whom one interacts: here the question arises as to whether social acceptance and moral justification overlap, which would lead to the result of that which is socially acceptable becoming that which is morally justified.

Picht's and Niebuhr's reflections on the concept of responsibility complement as well as correct each other in a fruitful way. What is more, they agree at the most important point: both imply a renunciation of the idea of an autonomous subject so dominant in modern thought. This renunciation does not mean ignoring the importance of individual agents or undervaluing it, but instead has much more to do with having a better understanding of our actions, which is something that cannot be adequately grasped with the fiction of an autonomous subject. We saw this in the previously outlined problem of structural irresponsibility, which results from the fact that no individual subject can be identified because the consequences are the result of many actors. The theoretical atomization of human action, which results from this idea of an autonomous subject, cannot do justice to such a problem. Picht and Niebuhr are in complete agreement in this matter when they search for a more realistic understanding of our actions, and in doing this they distinguish themselves from the mainstream of ethical theory.

This mainstream adheres more to the fundamental distinctions made by Weber. These basic principles are not something that Weber invented, but instead were merely expressed by Weber as something that appears self-evident in the modern period. It is from the idea of an autonomous subject—which ignores what first constitutes this subject and where it finds its meaning and boundaries—that Weber's conception of politics results: by being restricted to the actions of the isolated individual, the resulting paradigm of political action is the monarch, whose sovereignty can only be limited by the presence of another ruler. This is also the prevalent conception of (negative) freedom, which finds its own boundary drawn by the freedom of the other, and therefore its only quality is having as much power as possible at its disposal.³⁴ This absolutist conception of freedom and the subject has been so democratised in modernity that the citizen is now thought of as sovereign—which is indeed not an overcoming of this despotic political concept, but merely a variation of it. This concept leads Weber to concentrate on politics as a profession, which continues the monarchic ideal, now under different, pluralistic circumstances. This political concept is in its essence undemocratic: its realization *must* be autocratic.

In the conditions of developed societies, with their expanded technological possibilities just like our own, such a conception of the subject is quite simply dysfunctional, and it produces exactly that inner inconsistency

³⁴ Or should one say, conversely, that the modern subject is based on the model of the absolute ruler?

found in the concept of responsibility. The subject who under the given circumstances must take responsibility for the whole is an empty fiction and, at the most, a romanticised after-image of a renaissance despot. With the opportunities for responsibility decreasing and the seriousness of consequences increasing at the same time, the 'subject' for today is no longer the individual, but instead the *polis* in the sense that Hannah Arendt gave the word: i.e., the new foundation of the democratic ideal. The development of a *polis* ethic, which would be based not on the individual subject but on the subject in community with others, could also help clarify the concept of responsibility.

Critical reflection on this concept requires awareness of the narrow boundaries of our opportunities to be responsible, and at the same time an awareness of the extent to which responsibility is necessary. As a result of our analysis, then, we can (with some irony) agree with Weber when he asserts: "'The Christian does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord.'"³⁵ In contrast to Weber's point of view, this is a reasonable statement to make if one cannot adequately grasp the consequences of his or her actions—although here it all depends on what is considered 'right' and how one recognises this. For Christians this connection presents itself very differently, since they recognise the particular commandment of Jesus: 'But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you' (Matt. 6:33). The life portrayed in Jesus' commandment would not avoid the consequences of its actions or irrationality of the world, and especially would not avoid taking responsibility for others.

It now becomes apparent that responsibility should not be understood as a demand or as something like one, but instead as an ability that arises from the essentially social nature of human beings. Thus responsibility is an expression of human dignity. It belongs to the errors of historical Christianity that the word has often turned out to be the exact opposite, simply having its original legal context theologically glossed so that accusation and vindication are still always bound up with it. Picht's historical analysis again is instructive in a systematic respect as well: the roots of the concept of responsibility in the practice of repentance and in pietistic introspection at least has the flipside that the ego has its centre not in pride but in self-depreciation—though still not in God's action.

In the context of self-searching or self-accusation, however, responsibility can be perceived as nothing more than an ultimately unrealizable demand and therefore an excessive one. But should the appearance before the judgment seat of God (2 Cor. 5:10) have to be interpreted through a pagan legal concept? And should a Christian ethic then follow these categories?

A Christian conception of responsibility can only succeed when it places God's action before the definition of human abilities, and when it reflects on human agency as secondary to God's gifts. The eschatological

³⁵ Weber, *Politics*, p. 47.

aspect of responsibility would then not be a completely unachievable demand but instead the invitation to a better, more solidary life. That such an understanding of responsibility cannot be appreciated by everyone is no surprise but simply the result of the fact that it cannot aim for general plausibility if it wants to retain its distinct character. Its task is to witness to a life-affirming existence under God's guidance and to communicate this in a pluralistic society without reproducing the latter's assumptions or recognising its terms and conditions as binding. In the public square this means being aware that responsibility gets short shrift when only pragmatic concerns (as important as these are) come into consideration. Christians cannot conceive responsibility without the reference to God's will. At the same time, Christian ethics rejects any promethean attempt to put impossible expectations on an action: the Christian teaching of responsibility is nourished by its message of grace.