

Answers to Some Questions Posed by Irving Wohlfarth

1. *How do I explain the place that the camps and genocide have come to occupy during recent years in the media and the printed word? What do I think of this phenomenon?*

Is an explanation needed? It would perhaps be needed if such horror belonged to a past we had thoroughly left behind. But we are done neither with National Socialism, which, as the last six years have suggested, may in the end prove more durable than Communism, nor with concentration camps and genocide. It would be comforting and we would be healthier, if this were not so. As things are, we would be irresponsible were we not to continue to struggle with what we would perhaps gladly shut out of our minds and life. And whenever unhappy anniversaries or political events make it more difficult for us to distance ourselves from this past, we should expect media and printed word to give it increased space.

2. *What is my position on the "uniqueness" of the Shoah?*

I am profoundly suspicious of all invocations of "uniqueness." There is a sense in which everything real, including every historical event, every person, is unique, and another in which nothing we can talk about is unique. Much depends here on how "unique" is to be understood. The dictionary defines "unique" as "what has no like or equal." But the disjunction invites questioning: "what has no like" discourages comparison, leaves us without words; "what has no equal" invites comparison. Too easily insistence on the uniqueness of the holocaust removes what happened into a quasi-sacred realm that discourages responsible reflection and careful research, threatening to make out of the horror of Auschwitz something like a demonic golden calf, its mystery as closed to reason as is Abraham's God in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Anyone committed to reason should be on guard whenever something is called "unique."

3. *In what sense do the camps and genocide mark a new phase in human history?*

Much of what I have said about "unique" applies also to "new." To understand the camps and genocide as a radical break blocks efforts at understanding. To be sure, Auschwitz belongs into this century, marks it, and demands of us an inquiry into the conditions that

made it possible so that we can attempt to make sure that nothing like it will happen in the future. Among these conditions I would list an understanding of reality, inseparable from our science and technology, that would have us reckon with human beings, too, as material to be used, used up, and discarded when for some reason no longer wanted.

Among these conditions I would list also a still growing self-centeredness that makes it ever more difficult to respond to and assume responsibility for the suffering other; list also the death of God and the desire to reoccupy the place now left vacant with golden calves of one sort or another.

How do they affect collective memory and collective behavior?

"Collective" is another word that makes me suspicious. But bracketing such suspicion, I would want to ask just what collective we have in mind here. Most Germans, e g., are affected differently than most Americans, most eighty-years olds differently than most twenty-years olds. All this seems obvious and calls for finer distinctions. I do feel that especially for Germans and Jews, if for very different reasons, Auschwitz has made it more difficult to openly confront the past in its entirety, more difficult to be open to themselves and each other; that it threatens to open up false abysses. Insistence on the absolute "uniqueness" of the Shoah threatens such an abyss.

4. *How do I evaluate their moral, legal, and political consequences?* I hesitate to answer this question. My immediate reaction is to say that these consequences should have been much greater than they appear to be. Bosnia, to give just one example, hardly reassures one on this score. And unfortunately it is easy to add others. I wish Auschwitz had indeed been a moral, legal, and political cesura. But we should work to make it such a cesura, so that, looking back, some future generation, remembering what now seems almost incapable of casting a light into the future, will not only be able to say "never again," but say it with confidence.

5. *Do I think that artistic and intellectual work produced since the war has been deeply marked by these events?*

Again I hesitate to answer. It is of course easy to give examples of work that has been so marked. In that sense the answer seems simple: yes. I suspect, however, that the

question has something else in mind: not just particular works but such work in general. But so understood, the question seems too ill defined to permit a convincing answer.

6. *Do I live with this experience?*

No: I did not personally experience it. I was eight when the war ended, when I saw the first horrifying images in some newspaper — if I recall, of survivors of Buchenwald. Before that just scattered memories: memories of conversations between my parents about something horrible, conversations that stopped when I intruded, but that left even the child with a sense of a horror to be kept from it; memories also of what even the child found hard to look at: an old man in Berlin-Eichkamp wearing the *Judenstern*; despair on the faces of the inmates of a small prison camp my brother and I stumbled upon when we lost our way on the backside of the Große Gleichberg. Such memories are now joined to other images, e.g. of what remained of the house diagonally across the street in which a number of our playmates died after a bombing raid, images of the burning Berlin seen from an attic window, of being strafed by American planes, images that were to come back for many years in countless dreams; memories of what seems now a *verkehrte Welt* -- but this child had known no other. Do I live with these experiences? As I go about my daily business I give them little thought. But never is their shadow far away. There is a sense in which this shadow lies over all my philosophical work, which has been a struggle against all sorts of *Verkehrungen*.

Have I been marked by "knowledge" of its existence? If so how?

I am convinced that to affirm myself as more than a disembodied subject, who just happens to be a German male, now living in the United States and married to an American, if I am to be myself, I have to confront, struggle with and appropriate the past that has made me who I am. That past includes the Nazis and a way of standing in the world that made camps and genocide possible. No doubt, my life and work, especially my work as a teacher, have been marked by this past.

7. *Can I explain the place such knowledge and experience has in my work?*

It is hardly an accident that my dissertation was on the problem of nihilism and that much of my philosophical work has been on Heidegger, including inevitably also on Heidegger's National Socialist engagement. From the very beginning my work on

Heidegger has also been a struggle with my own past and thus with myself. Before this year is over my in some ways quite Heideggerian *The Ethical Function of Architecture* should appear. Although it mentions the extermination camps in only two places, they cast a shadow over the entire book.

8. *Do I think that these events have -- or should have -- given rise to new taboos or new practices in the domains of art, poetics and philosophy?*

No doubt they have, although here, too, one should be careful to differentiate: taboos in one community are not taboos in another. But that the art world with its practices and taboos, be it here in America or in Europe, has been marked by the holocaust seems obvious. And the same goes for the world of philosophy.

To get beyond generalities I would have to look at particular artists, poets, or philosophers. I might consider, e.g., the long-lived Heidegger controversy, which boiled up once again a few years ago, when Fariás published his accusing *Heidegger et le nazisme*, still more specifically, the way Blanchot, Lacoue-Labarthe, Levinas, and Sheehan dismissed Heidegger's notorious statement that agriculture, said by him to have become today "a motorized food industry," is "in its essence the same thing as the manufacture of corpses in gas chambers, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of a region to hunger, the same as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs," as so scandalously deficient that it merited only condemnation. But monstrous as they are, it is not difficult to make sense of Heidegger's equations, given his understanding of the essence of our modern world as dominated by the dehumanizing power of technology. Here a taboo threatens to become an obstacle to thoughtful confrontation and critique. It would be easy to continue.

Should there be such taboos in the realm of art, poetry, and philosophy? I would like to say no. They all require a freedom that will not be bound by quasi-religious injunctions. Not that they should be beyond criticism, and such criticism could take the form of outrage, of ridicule, or of indifference. And artistic expression, too, should be bound by law when necessary. But taboos today seem both an ineffective and an inappropriate way to protect what we most deeply care about.

9. *What do I think of this inquiry? What immediate reactions does it prompt?*

My first reaction was a sense of annoyance: why does it have to reach me so late, leaving me less than two weeks, and why just now, when the semester is about to begin, when several deadlines weigh on me. This all too quotidian pressure of time compounded a sense of inadequacy, of the abysmal disproportion between whatever I might have to say and what happened: would I be able to stand my own words? My second reaction was something resembling responsibility: it would be too easy to say nothing. I felt that I owed at least some response, owed it first of all to myself.

What then do I think of this inquiry?

I am unable to give a clear answer to this question: on the one hand I am suspicious of such inquiries, afraid that talk will substitute for the kind of work that now needs doing, that preoccupation with the past will hinder rather than help us to confront the challenge of the future; on the other hand, I am also convinced that part of living well is burying the dead well, repeating it in commemoration, so that the dead will bless rather than haunt the living. Such burial seems all but impossible when the dead are those of Auschwitz. And yet for the sake of the living we need to make the effort: an inquiry such as this one and your two-year seminar of which it is an offspring could make a contribution to such work.

10. *Would I be willing to allow you to publish my contribution?*

You can do with it whatever you wish.

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