



Taking Charge

On Responsibility and Personal Identity

Manuel Cruz

Foreword by Gianni Vattimo



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and Personal Identity

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Translated by Richard Jacques



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Taking Charge

Foreword

I can begin by saying that this book by Manuel Cruz, which is now finally available in Italian, is an excellent example of the “ontology of the present.” However, I do not know if the author will consider this a compliment, since it is more a way of trying to associate his work with a philosophical project he may not share, despite our ties of friendship. So let me say just this: Cruz’s book, like few others I have read this year (one of them, in the field of philosophical narrative, is certainly Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*), is a text I would like to have written myself. I would just clarify, for the many readers who quite legitimately do not understand the term, what I mean by “ontology of the present.” I take the expression from Michel Foucault, who in one of his essays proposed a distinction between two kinds of philosophy: an “analytics of truth,” which engages in the study of the traditional questions of knowledge (science, logic etc.), and an “ontology of the present.” The latter is an expression that, I am not sure to what extent being faithful to Foucault, I use in a Heideggerian spirit to say that since metaphysics (the theory of being as being, of the stable and universal foundations of all entities) is finished, what philosophy can and must do is try to grasp the meaning of being in its present configuration, since being is not a stable structure (it will thus be reduced to an object, while it is the condition of any objective possibility occurring); it is history, the history of the configurations, or “openings” as Heidegger says, in which it gradually occurs.

But enough autobiography. It was only to state my admiration for, and harmony with, Cruz’s work, whatever the difference of emphasis behind our basic positions. Although at the beginning — I say this for readers with a more strictly “continental” training — the text seems mostly interested in a rather detailed description of the term “responsibility,” as we read on we realize that at the heart of his analysis there are far vaster problems than

the usual ones of analytic philosophy (or at least of the caricature of it we continentals often adopt to stir up controversy). We are reminded of (even if not explicitly referred to) problems similar to the ones we remember having found in the Sartre of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, or (though here the references are more specific) the Gadamer of *Truth and Method*; and perhaps to the Heidegger of *Being and Time*; the question of individual responsibility in our globalized communication and easy exchange mass society and, in different terms that Cruz has opportunely reviewed, the question of the hermeneutic circle or the authenticity of Heidegger's theorized existence, or the problem of alienation and the meaning of history that Sartre talks about. As you will remember, in the "Question of Method," which is the introduction to the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre proposes the thesis that the alienation Marx speaks of must be read as the impossibility for the individual to understand and control the effects of his actions. In capitalist society, in which the product of labor is taken from the producers to become the capitalist's profit, all individual actions, including those not directly "productive" of goods, take on a significance that the agent is not aware of and cannot control. The social order of capitalist domination expropriates the whole historical meaning of what he does, uses it for purposes that remain unknown and strange to the actor, just as the global meaning of what he is doing escapes the operator on the production line, in the framework of the division between manual labor and managerial tasks, and so forth. For Sartre that expropriation can only end when, in revolutionary action, the individual identifies himself with the "group-in-fusion" and finally appropriates, along with other things, the meaning of history at the very moment he does so. The trouble is that when the revolution is over, by a sort of principle of inertia, the unifying heat of the group tends to burn out: the hierarchy is reestablished and the division of labor returns, and so alienation does too. Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason* appeared at the beginning of the 1960s and seems like a synthesis of the revolutionary hopes of that decade and their defeat. It is in the climate of that "failure" (we cannot deny that for many people it was a sort of return to sanity) that we are still living today, and therefore also the reason the issues Cruz discusses in this book are current and urgent. In the meantime, the reasons for what to Sartre seemed a desperate relapse into alienation have revealed themselves with increasing clarity; at least in the sense that the mass society, developing toward the present condition of

a thrusting globalization, makes the division between what we know about the meaning of our actions and their effective scope in the overall picture ever more dramatic. Not only that: more or less paradoxically, what Cruz calls “nostalgia for the horizon” has been heightened enormously, whereas our power of intervention in what happens seems to have shrunk — at least in proportion to the amount of information we are supplied with. We might think that, in the conditions of information “in real time” we live in (and despite the manipulation the news is subjected to by a wide range of interests), we citizens of the new millennium must be in ideal conditions to identify the immediate and the “general” meaning of our actions. On the other hand, we know very well that our very alienation from them increases our neurosis: the use of tranquilizers is spiraling every year and not only through the fault of advertising by the pharmaceutical companies. It is an imbalance similar to the one biologists have pointed out behind the predictive capacity of diagnostic medicine and its therapeutic capacity: you can know that there is every possibility of developing a cancer in the next few years but you do not know how to prevent it.

Obviously, in light of that, Cruz’s discussion recalls so many other subjects of the philosophy of the last two centuries, beginning with the Nietzsche of the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, the one “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life.” In it he had already described contemporary man as sick with the “illness of history,” a kind of indigestion of the notions of his past and his current world that cannot be truly digested and so weigh on the stomach, foiling any initiative. The excess of “historiography” kills the capacity to make history.

In many ways that sickness is ours too, that of “democratic” societies, in which we wonder with increasing frequency if there is really anything to be said about collective life. The so-called crisis of the parties, an easily recognizable version of the relapse into the “inert practice” Sartre spoke about, is just one aspect of the general “neutralization” through which we all feel responsible (for the AIDS epidemic in Africa, for “hunger in the world,” for environmental degradation, etc), but we soon quiet our conscience with one of many symbolic initiatives, such as the classic rock concert, the profits of which go to any of the good causes popularized by the media . . . In that framework, what Cruz observes about responsibility by omission is decisive. And sins of omission may be the most frequent and difficult to recognize,

and the expression “taking charge” which gives the book its title is highly appropriate to indicate the “virtue” that should save us from that sin.

Even in our philosophy, complex reasons militate against a frank and decided affirmation of the taking charge that Cruz discusses, and we must admit to not having thought about it sufficiently. First of all, the diffidence about the emphasis placed on the subject and his decisions, an emphasis that seems quite disproportionate to the “medianess” in which our existence takes place. If in traditional societies everything developed according to custom, and rarely did anyone, at great risk, question that custom and common prejudices (except for sinning, naturally, often “fortiter,” feeling remorse and tranquilizing oneself with confession or, worse still, with the purchase of an indulgence), today what Heidegger called the world of “man,” of “speak, do, die,” of everyday falsity, has so expanded its boundaries that it is becoming more and more difficult not to be a conformist. Young people no longer have the traditional possibility of abandoning the church for the path of sexual liberation, and the confessors have become extremely indulgent . . . ; but even the most traditionally stigmatized “vices,” such as homosexuality, have become “lifestyles,” widely accepted, and most of all cultivated by the economy as niches of potential profit. Should we lament that liberalization? Of course not, not even Cruz proposes that; he merely expresses with clarity and decision (the word is appropriate here) his discomfort at the side effects of all that on the meaning of our lives, collective and even individual. Nietzsche rightly warned, in the notes to his “The European Nihilism” of the summer of 1887, that in the world of complete nihilism — but we can say: of the media neutralization of any difference — if one does not become an *Übermensch*, a “superman” (one capable of interpreting himself), one perishes. The ways out Cruz proposes are only apparently far from that Nietzschean imperative; they can be read as by no means banal developments of the premises presented by the great classics of authenticity, from Nietzsche to Heidegger, enriched by an attention unaffected by the analytic tradition. The insistence of many masters of contemporary philosophy on meeting and listening to the other — we think most of all of Lévinas, but also of Gadamer’s or Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, or Habermas’s communication action or Benjamin’s “messianism without a messiah” and then Derrida — which in Cruz has become a specific proposal for rereading tolerance in terms of knowledge. Tolerance, a term rightly suspected for its paternalistic implications, can become “a gnoseological

virtue, a way of reaching the *I*, because with knowledge of the other we know ourselves in our specific historicity as well.” The motto of Greek wisdom can still be the guide of the man of “globalized civilization.”

Gianni Vattimo

Preface

This book was written bit by bit, in short bursts. I would not want anyone to think that I am making a virtue of necessity, but the truth is that that procedure allowed me to enjoy the rare privilege of submitting the ideas I finally put together here to a sustained examination. The rareness of the privilege does not allude solely to the proverbial absence of criticism in our community of philosophers — always more inclined to silence than debate — but to the quality of the interlocutors. I have had the opportunity to present the first drafts of this book at different forums and in various publications. And it was what we might call the *critical benevolence* of the successive readers and listeners that finally led me to publish it.

I shall try to the best of my ability not to make these first pages an endless list of people, congresses and specialized journals, which would sorely try the reader's patience, though I must admit that the list of acknowledgments is a very long one. I have begun this preface by warning that, not only because to my way of thinking transparency is the author's elementary obligation to the reader (whose anger when what he was presented with as new turns out to be familiar is fully justified), but also because certain contextual references to the origin of the works and the interlocutors who put forward objections and suggestions — that is, from the particular *companies* of each one — can often help the reader to compose a more complete image of the scope of the theoretical framework in which the idea is being presented.

Various drafts of the first chapter were presented at the International Colloquium "Spinoza: teología, ética y política," held in Santiago de Chile in May 1995, and the Philosophy Congress "¿Para qué Filosofía?" held in Granada in September 1995. I also had an opportunity to discuss some of the arguments in the cycle "O destino dos valores ó final do milenio," which took place at Fundación Paideia, La Coruña, in March 1996. There is a version,

which does not coincide with the one that appears here, as an introduction to Hannah Arendt, *Entre historia y acción*, published by Paidós, and another, different again, in Italian (“Il dibattito che ci coinvolge: soggetto e responsabilità,” *Iride* 21, Year X, August 1997, Florence).

The ideas for the second chapter (“Toward an Innocent Responsibility”) were first discussed at the colloquium “Problemas de universalismo y contextualismo,” held at the Universidad Veracruzana, Jalapa, Veracruz (Mexico), in May 1996, as a result of a happy initiative of Mariflor Aguilar. As the work grew I could compare its development in other spheres: as part of the conference “¿De qué se habla cuando nos referimos a la discapacidad?” held at Fundación Paideia, La Coruña, in February 1997, at the international symposium “La reflexión histórica en las disciplinas humanas y en las prácticas sociales,” held at the Humanities Faculty of the Universidad Nacional del Comahue, Neuquén (Argentina), in October 1997, organized by María Inés Mudrovic, or in the cycle on the subject of responsibility organized jointly by the chair of contemporary philosophy at the Universidad de Barcelona and the CSIC Institute of Philosophy, to which I shall refer later. Part of what appears here was published in the journal *Isegoría*, no. 17 November 1997, under the title “Conviene cambiar de figuras. Sobre acción y responsabilidad.” Shortly afterward an expanded version appeared in Italian, from where the definitive title comes: “Verso una responsabilità innocente,” *Filosofia Politica*, Year XII, no. 2, August 1998, Bologna.

A first draft of the third chapter, “Nostalgia for the Horizon,” was read at the conference “Jornadas sobre individuo y subjetividad,” held in Jalapa, Veracruz (Mexico), in May 1997 and, a few months later, at the IX Congreso Nacional de Filosofía, organized by the Asociación Filosófica de la República Argentina and held in La Plata (Argentina) in October 1997.

The ideas for the fourth chapter were basically discussed at two forums. The first was the cycle “Concepciones y narrativas del yo,” organized by the philosophy department of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters Faculty (Universidad de Málaga) in April 1997. The second, the colloquium entitled “Fraternità, ostilità, comunità,” organized by the philosophy department of the Università degli Studi di Salerno, the philosophy and politics department of the Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli, and the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, in Naples, in May 1998. Useful elements were also provided by the debate at the Third International Workshop “Paradigmas

Emancipatorios. Balance y Perspectivas de Fin de Siglo,” in Havana in January 1999. Part of the work is included in M. Cruz (comp.), *Tolerancia o barbarie* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 1998).

Lastly, the Epilogue, “The Insomniac’s Meditation,” was the text of the inaugural lecture of the Cátedra Libre de Estudios Hispánicos “Maria Zambrano,” organized by the Spanish Embassy and the Philosophy Faculty of the University of Buenos Aires in September 1997. It was published in the journal *Debats*, no. 57/58, Autumn–Winter 1996.

In addition to all those activities I cannot omit the mention of two other initiatives that enabled me to put many of the theses presented here to the test. One was the cycle “Individualismo e responsabilidad,” held at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura de Barcelona in April 1996, and the other, the conference on the subject of responsibility and personal identity in modernity that, with the same title as this volume, was held in Barcelona and Madrid in December 1997 and January 1998. This second initiative was the result of a collaboration, which can only be described as happy and profitable, with the research group coordinated by Roberto Rodríguez Aramayo, of the CSIC Institute of Philosophy, a collaboration that in administrative language is called, somewhat reiteratively, *Unidad Asociada*. I must also express my thanks — not solely for obvious theoretical reasons but also for personal ones — for the observations that, with the healthy ferocity that is their salient feature, were made to me by Ernesto Garzón Valdés, Reyes Mate, Javier Muguerza, Concha Roldán, Carlos Thiebaut, Antonio Valdecantos and José Luís Villacañas, as well as the coordinator himself.

I am aware that the list is starting to be excessively long (although I have tried to keep it short), but since economy can never be used as an alibi for ingratitude, I have left for the end a mention that is particularly important to me on different levels. Antonio Aguilera, Fina Birulés, Santiago López Petit, Román Gutiérrez Cuatango, Julieta Piastro, Marina Garcés, Laura Llevadot, not forgetting Carmen Corral in the first stage of the team’s life, have been far more than an administrative unit for my work in the last few years. I could confine myself to saying that they read the text with generous attention as it was taking shape and made some valuable comments — the spirit of which I hope I have been able to capture — but that would fall short of the truth. They have been a true research group — of which I am proud to have been a member — but also a discussion group; a small, warm, living community

who provided me at every step, with rare intuition, with the dose of calm and enthusiasm, support and censure, necessary to guarantee the continuity of the work. Together or separately, their suggestions, their observations and even their silences have been a permanent reference point, a tutelary criterion, for me at all times. I would like to think I have made good use of it and in any case I can only express my gratitude to them.

Perhaps most of the people mentioned will not recognize the final text they gave their opinions on at the time, owing to the number of changes I have felt obliged and delighted to introduce thanks to their contributions. It is true that little remains of the first drafts. But I prefer not to draw the obvious conclusion that any mistakes that might remain after so much sifting are all mine; I would rather emphasize that the final text is in many ways a collective work. A collective of friends, if you like, but friends who are that thanks to their intelligence and passion for philosophy, which is a reason for added satisfaction for this author, who has benefited from both.

Manuel Cruz

Contents

<i>Foreword by Gianni Vattimo</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	xii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 The Problem that Concerns Us: Responsibility and Identity	15
Chapter 2 Toward an Innocent Responsibility	33
Chapter 3 Nostalgia for the Horizon	59
Chapter 4 An Opportunity for a Different Identity (More on Tolerance)	69
<i>Epilogue: The Insomniac's Meditation</i>	103
<i>Index</i>	121

Introduction

Philosophers have a tendency to give articles, books or chapters titles like “the return of the concept of . . .”, “toward a new notion of . . .” and so on. Titles of which the purpose is to arouse in the reader a slightly dizzy feeling of being an eyewitness to a transcendental moment in the history of thought, or perhaps to insinuate, without giving it too much importance, that what he is witnessing is not a simple change but a complete break with the past, not to say a revolution in theory or perhaps even a leap into the abyss of thought itself.

However, the sum of our experience should make us more prone to caution. There is often something deceptive about such phrases. In this venerable activity, no idea resigns itself to being definitively retired. They are all, in a certain sense, always on active service, although that activity may be frankly languid or even merely residual. In fact, above and beyond their exaggeration, what those expressions indicate is a change of direction, a shift of emphasis or a variation in perspective that, with time, may enlighten a different way of thinking. But in their present, things are always confused and, at the moment they appear, what will later be called tendencies, conceptual revolutions or any other terms from the usual historiographical toolkit, will hardly amount to anything more than an excessive becoming, a disordered course of events to be interpreted.

In recent times the idea of responsibility seems to have recovered a certain theoretical attraction in intellectual spheres that, until a short while ago, were resistant to it. Various factors of different natures (sometimes decidedly extraphilosophical) have contributed to this. It is not yet the moment to embark on an analysis of the reasons for either the attraction or the rejection, but perhaps it is the moment to note that change and try to insert it into a provisional framework of meaning. The aim is to inform the reader

of something of this from the beginning; in the case of a book, it is always the title. As I understand it, the expression “take charge” has the virtue of supplying that initial indication, of pointing out the path to be followed, the direction presumed to be the right one. Because the Spanish phrase for taking charge, *hacerse cargo*, is unambiguously an ambiguous expression, we can use it both to claim responsibility (what happens when we wonder, for example, who is going to pay for the damage caused by a particular action) and to ask for understanding (what happens when we ask someone else to put themselves in our place).

We shall observe that the ambiguity is greater or smaller according to the contexts. It might be argued that there is a context in which the ambiguity becomes so blurred that it no longer seems like ambiguity. With a person, the argument goes, we use the same expression in both contexts, because we are actually saying the same thing. We are demanding or asking — as the case may be — him to assume, or to make his own, a situation or an action. To put himself in our place for whatever is required, including both responding to possible demands and understanding our point of view.

Far from invalidating any hypothesis, the possible existence of a semantic territory where the uses are confused even strengthens some of the hypotheses underlying this text. The reader will notice that the subtitle includes another category, personal identity, which has a strong theoretical link with the previous ones. It has not been put in such a strategic place just to announce that the subject may be found as the book unfolds but, rather, to explain the almost indissoluble character of the categorical pair. If there are no people, there is no confusion (for example, it would make little sense — beyond a not very poetic anthropomorphization — for anyone to ask the administration to put itself in their place), but perhaps because there is no genuine responsibility — or, rather, the responsibility that matters most to us — in such uses.

Together with this theoretical determination, from its very utterance the title *Taking Charge* also seeks to focus attention on another, generally less emphasized, aspect of the question, an aspect we might well term gnoseological, or pertaining to knowledge. The matter is neither obvious nor trivially true. The persistent and widespread tendency to identify the subject of responsibility with a subject that belongs basically to the sphere of the discourse of ethics should undoubtedly be analyzed from the perspective of the history of ideas, and here it would not be difficult to find important

motives for explaining the identification. But genealogy cannot exhaust the analysis or prevent us from recording other aspects of it.

For it may be that this permanent recourse to ethics is related to the fact that the ultimate origin of responsibility is found in notions linked to discourses of a fundamentally theological nature. And so such a fact may be a limitation at some moment, but in no way can it become a condemnation (which, to cap it all, would not admit redemption). In the end, almost all our notions have the same or a similar origin, and that has not prevented humanity from taking firm steps toward an immanent conception of the world. The question, therefore, should not be posed in terms of a previous ruling about a presumed epistemological *blood cleansing*, but of a consideration of the extent to which, beyond their variable origins, the notions we use have undergone a genuine process of secularization or, to put it another way, of emancipation from the guardianship of religion (I am thinking specifically of the analyses Giacomo Marramao has made throughout his work in relation to the unequivocally Judaeo-Christian origin of the ideas of freedom and equality, an origin that has not prevented, indeed has even encouraged, the emergence of an effectively secularized modernity).

That emancipation, we might say, is the kind that liberates the host of meanings of the category of responsibility, as is the case with the category of identity. The latter must also be examined as far as possible from the present, and an effort made for the weight of the past (for example, of certain impossible humanisms) not to blind us to a cluster of transformations that oblige us to reconsider some of its features. This general, initial affirmation — which will be dealt with in more detail on several occasions later — could be exemplified in the light of some of the subjects raised in the fourth chapter.

For, indeed, in the case of identity, the correlate of that danger of *moralizing* responsibility is the danger of essentializing it. And we should warn that that danger does not appear solely in the old guise of traditional, metaphysical, historical essentialism — the kind, for example, that enjoyed likening identity to the old, gross categories of traditional philosophical anthropology (Man, Person and a few others), all of which can be gathered under the idea they all spring from, the idea of the soul. Oddly enough, far from making them disappear, many of the criticisms leveled in recent years at any of those notions have made them multiply on another scale. In a certain sense — which needs to be qualified immediately so that surprise does not