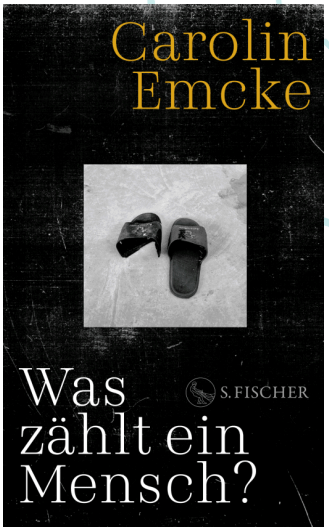
Carolin Emcke

What Does a Person Count For?

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An incorruptible philosophical reflection on one of the greatest conflicts of our time

How does one preserve one's humanity in the face of a protracted conflict?

Are we capable of infinite compassion, or is empathy a finite resource? At what point does the moral duty to speak out become a choice rather than a mandate? Can we truly sustain the idea of a "universal humanity" when the world is so deeply divided? Long before the 7th of October, Carolin Emcke was already haunted by the limits of our empathy. Today, those questions have become an emergency. For twenty years, Emcke has traveled between Be'eri and Jenin, Tel Aviv and Ramallah, searching for the "universal we." Amidst a fractured discourse, she returns to the only question that truly matters: What is a human life actually worth?

"Human rights exist only as a whole; they are indivisible, apply to everyone, and that means equally for all." – Carolin Emcke

Carolin Emcke studied philosophy in London, Frankfurt am Main and Harvard. She has travelled to crisis regions around the world and addresses issues of violence, democracy and human rights in her essays. Her books have been translated into over 15 languages. She has received numerous awards, including the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the Carl von Ossietzky Prize and the Soul of Stonewall Prize. S. Fischer has published 'Echoes of Violence: Letters from a War Reporter', 'Silent Violence: Reflecting on the Red Army Faction', 'How We Desire', 'Because you may say it: On witnessing and justice', 'Against Hate', 'Yes means yes and ...' and 'Journal - Diary of a Crisis'.

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch
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Berlin,

Their slogan, my silence

Mute. I wanted to speak out. Or believed I ought to want to, and ought to be able to. But the words would not come. Mute. Three words. No more. I could not do it. Perhaps it has to begin like this. With my own failure.

Je suis juif
I am Jewish

Why could I not do it?

I scrolled through Twitter and saw how others managed to do it. How easy it seemed for them. How the same words appeared, one post after another, and how those who could write them found one another. I alone, it seemed, did not follow suit. As if something barred my way to the words, a magnetic field that pushed me back whenever I drew near. I knew what those words meant. I knew what I ought to want, what I ought to be able to do. It would be right, I thought, it would be right to post them. And yet I could not. Nor would it be right. Not for me.

How could it be right and wrong at the same time?

Je (ne) suis (pas) juif

I am (not) Jewish

Why had I kept silent?

An inability to speak out preoccupies me. It always has. What gives rise to it and makes it so hard to break. The cultural or religious codes that keep us from putting feelings or convictions into words. The power relations, the social hierarchies that strike us dumb. The shame laid upon us and instilled in us, which keeps us quiet about what we think or who we are. What holds the silence together from within? What barely legible imprints does it bear? What traumas, what taboos have lodged themselves in our bodies, our reflexes, our associations, and are passed down the generations? What does the silence conceal? What boundary does it keep in place? Does it help or does it harm?

Why had I kept silent?

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Perhaps I have to go back to the terrible days when the words first emerged.

It was January 2015. The brothers Saïd and Chérif Kouachi, who claimed allegiance to al-Qaeda in Yemen, had turned the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris into a bloodbath. The magazine had published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, which the perpetrators regarded as an intolerable provocation and an insult to the Prophet, and which they seized upon to justify their terrorism. They had forced their way into the building on the Rue

Nicolas-Appert and shot dead eleven people: first the maintenance technician Frédéric Boisseau, who happened to be standing in the entrance hall, and then, in the editorial office, the publisher and cartoonist Stéphane Charbonnier, the cartoonists Jean Cabut, Bernard Verlhac, Philippe Honoré and Georges Wolinski, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Elsa Cayat, Bernard Maris, economist and co-owner of the magazine, the copy editor Mustapha Ourrad, the arts organiser Michel Renaud and the police bodyguard Franck Brinsolaro. A ghastly massacre. Many others were gravely wounded and scarred for life.

One of the survivors, the literary critic Philippe Lançon, describes in his book *Disturbance: Surviving Charlie Hebdo* the moment after the attackers had left. He describes the stillness among the dead, when he lay on the floor with his jaw badly injured and looked about him at the scene of horror that resembled one of Hieronymus Bosch's hellscapes:

'The dead were almost holding hands. One person's foot was touching the belly of another, whose fingers lightly grazed the face of a third, which was turned towards a fourth person's hip, while that person seemed to stare at the ceiling. In these postures, and for ever after, they had become my comrades […] I was one among them, but I was not dead. In the minutes after the murderers had left, I did not at first see them that way, because I did not see them at all. My field of vision was confined to the emptiness that followed the event and my own immobility or, to be more precise, my state of suspension.'[1]

I had been following events on Twitter. Trembling. Every minute brought desperate messages, pictures, videos of people seeking shelter on the roofs of the surrounding buildings, and of the two Kouachi brothers, whose names, whose ideological allegiance, whose histories were not yet known, out on the streets,

raging, ecstatic, bellowing *On a vengé le prophète Mohammed*, plainly drunk on their own violence. I remember how the perpetrators' pumped-up physicality filled me with revulsion, how I thought, 'they're strutting', and only then understood that what I was watching was pride. How they roamed through Paris with their phallic weapons, deluded into thinking that killing people made something greater of them. The auto-erotic brutality of the violent has always sickened me, that flaunted relish in beating, tormenting and killing, and the admiring pack of fans that goes with it. Whatever the political milieu.

Je suis Charlie. Within half an hour of the attack, the slogan had appeared. As an expression of sympathy for the victims. *Je suis Charlie* as a gesture of solidarity, as an affirmation of artistic freedom, as a signal to the perpetrators that to strike at them was to strike at me. That was right. Satire and caricature generally make me rather uneasy, because they tread a fine line between the recognisable and the stereotypical. But *Je suis Charlie* was right, because the cartoonists must be protected unconditionally, because no one may deny them their right to make satirical art, because being blasphemous, mocking or critical, even when it strikes at the sacred, *must* be defended as something art may do. Had I been editor-in-chief, would I have *wanted* to publish every one of these drawings? No. But that is hardly the point. Would I stand up, with all I have, for other people's right to be *able* to make that decision, would I stand up with everything I have for these drawings to be *allowed* into print? Absolutely and unequivocally, yes.

At this point, some argue that the caricatures must not be criticised on aesthetic grounds, and some insinuate that having any misgivings about a particular image is reprehensible, because it is seen as a withdrawal of solidarity, or as failing to condemn the terrorists' violence firmly enough. That is a dubious simplification. I have *no* desire, *truly none*, not the slightest, to play down *anything*

about these murders, and nothing can justify them. I have no sympathy whatsoever for the killings or their supposed 'justification'.

But just as artistic freedom protects these caricatures, and must protect them, so it must *also* protect sceptical or critical questions about them. That is precisely the precious promise of a secular democracy, that both are possible, criticism *through* satire and criticism of satire itself. Anyone who believes that artistic freedom can be protected only by placing art beyond all critical reflection or aesthetic scrutiny does neither art nor its impact any favours. Of course the media and museums, theatres and opera houses decide, and of course everyone who wants to show or share something in public decides, too, whether it is any good, whether it is stimulating, witty, unsettling, soothing, illuminating, expressive. Of course they also consider what it does, whom it addresses, what it expresses, what it reflects, what it counters or ironises, what references it carries, what it quotes, whom it contradicts. These are questions as natural as they are necessary to ask of any piece of art. Asking them does not delegitimise publication. It is part of aesthetic and creative practice.

The unqualified rejection of violence and the unqualified solidarity with threatened artists[2] do not rule out a curious, open, critical engagement with their work. A democratic public sphere must be able to bear both, without ever being denounced as unethical.[3] Nor can that change in the aftermath. Even after an attack, even after murder, it must remain possible to look at art as art and to reflect on it critically.

In their flight, the jihadists shot dead Ahmed Merabet, a Muslim police officer. There is a video of it. It shows Merabet, already wounded in the groin, lying on the pavement while one of the two masked terrorists walks up to him. Merabet writhes

in pain, turns his face to the attacker as if he is about to say something, raises an arm to protect himself … and is executed at point-blank range.[4] *Je suis Ahmed* appeared shortly afterwards. Again as a gesture of sympathy, again as an expression of solidarity, but also as a signal to those who wished to cast suspicion on all Muslims, or to those on the other side who wanted to co-opt Muslims for their own ends. *Je suis Ahmed* was also aimed at the perpetrators, who wanted to see Muslims isolated and cut off from secular democracy. Against them, *Je suis Ahmed* declared that we as a democratic society would not let ourselves be divided by origin, faith or skin colour. We do not mourn certain victims of terrorist violence more than others.

And then came 9 January, the day Amedy Coulibaly, a friend of the Kouachi brothers, attacked a kosher supermarket at Porte de Vincennes. The supermarket's cashier, Zarie Sibony, later recounted how she had offered the gunman all the money in the till, only for Coulibaly to reply, 'Do you really think I'm here for the money?' and then to add, 'You are what I hate most in the world. Jews and French. 'Coulibaly murdered four Jewish men, Philippe Braham, Yohan Cohen, Yoav Hattab and François-Michel Saada. Two of them, Yohan Cohen and Yoav Hattab, died trying to disarm the jihadist. After some four hours, the police finally stormed the building and freed the hostages. Amedy Coulibaly was killed in the operation.

Je suis juif. There they were. The three words meant to express solidarity with the Jewish victims. Online and on the streets. As with *Je suis Charlie* and *Je suis Ahmed*, everything about it was right. It was naked hatred of Jews that had driven Coulibaly to murder. It was antisemitism that had made him choose the kosher supermarket and kill the people inside it.

Perhaps it was chance, but at each scene and for each set of victims, solidarity had fastened on a different point of reference. *Je suis Charlie* was accurate in so far as those murdered there worked for the magazine whose caricatures were held to have insulted the Prophet. With Ahmed Merabet, by contrast, sympathy and solidarity gathered around his first name. *Je suis Ahmed*. Not his profession. Even though he had presumably been executed because he was a policeman standing in the attackers' way. *Je suis policier* or *Je suis flic* would have been more fitting. Why had that been avoided? Would some have found it harder to say? Would some people's dislike of the police have outweighed their sympathy for a Muslim officer gunned down by Islamist terrorists? It could also have been *Je suis musulman*. That too had been avoided. Because it would have provoked racist, Islamophobic resentment? Because then Muslims would also have been seen as victims of terrorist violence, and not only as perpetrators? Because the distinction between Islamists and Muslims would have had to be acknowledged? Was that the reason? One can only speculate. And at the kosher supermarket, the point of reference for the solidarity was neither the scene of the crime nor the name of a victim but the victims' Jewishness. That was accurate, for they had been killed as Jews.

Je suis juif.

What was there to hesitate over?

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For years I have wrestled with that moment. For years I have wanted to understand what happened. What had come between me and that sentence? What had stopped me from typing those three words?

Had it read 'I stand with the Jews' (*Je soutiens les Juifs*), I could have put my name to it. I was not lacking in compassion or support. What I found troubling was not the object of the solidarity but its subject. The person who is asked to say something that is *not true*. Me. It was a false statement of fact. I am not Jewish. The trouble was not in declaring solidarity but in having to declare myself to be someone, to claim an identity, in order to do so. And, on top of that, to declare myself *as* someone I am not.

That is sensitive in *two respects*. The first question is why identity or identification should come into it *at all*. Why it should be necessary to declare myself Jewish in order to express my solidarity. The second is whether the statement demanded of me is true or not. And why, in this particular case, it would be an especially unforgivable lie. I would like to take the two questions in turn.

First, then. The slogan tied solidarity to identity. Why?
The way solidarity is practised suggests such a link. It is often those who resemble one another, often members of the same social, cultural or religious group, who feel called upon when something is done to one of their own. And who then not only feel empathy but also come together *to act*. It is a well-rehearsed reflex to stand beside those who share something with us (a history, a sexual orientation, a faith, a physical condition, economic hardship, an experience of exclusion). So it is not always possible to say whether this sympathy springs from concern *for others* or concern *for oneself*.

But that is how it plays out. It may be more habitual, more intuitive, more natural to side with those who have something in common with oneself. But is that a precondition? Is solidarity open only to those who are themselves affected by an injustice? Must I belong in order to share in the grief, to raise an objection, to resist,

to express solidarity? Why? Because empathy comes more easily to me, because I can feel the pain more readily when it strikes 'us'? Because acting in solidarity is easier when social ties already bind me to others?

In principle, that ought not to be necessary. I should not *have to be* Jewish to reject hatred of Jews, and to want to protect Jewish people. I should not have to be Black to reject racism and to want to protect people of colour. I should not have to be Catholic to defend a devout life or the practices of believers. Nor need I be a fan of caricatures to defend the right to draw and publish them.[5]

Similarity is no precondition for human rights. Sameness is no precondition for equal worth. I do not have to belong to a cultural, religious or social group in order to refuse to accept it when its members are wronged. I do not have to be part of the same 'we' to raise an objection when those who live in a particular way are attacked or hurt. Someone's idea of the good life may be wholly foreign to me, culturally or socially, and still I can defend their freedom to choose it. The way some people shape their lives may strike me as absurd, stuffy, comic, dreary, wild, inhibited, old-fashioned or wasted. And yet I recognise and understand what is done to them when they are robbed of their freedom, their bodily integrity, their dignity. For we share *something*. We are vulnerable beings. I do not have to understand who someone is; I only have to understand *what* an injury is, what disrespect is, what it means to have one's boundaries violated.

It may be what the survivor Jean Améry describes in this passage from *At the Mind's Limits*:

'… the certainty […] that the other person will spare me […] The boundaries of my body are also the boundaries of my self. My skin surface shields me against the external world. If I am to have trust, I must feel on it only what I want to feel.'[6]

All of us, as vulnerable beings, must be able to trust that our skin will be touched and nothing more, that on our skin we will feel only what we want to feel, that the other will spare us. That we count as human beings.

Our mutual vulnerability is the *conditio humana*. We are linguistic beings, and what we do to one another (in words and beyond them), how we wound one another, how we can be scarred by it, shapes and binds us. And how we protect one another, how we acknowledge one another, how we can turn towards one another shape and bind us too. Our mutual vulnerability is what we have in common. However different or familiar we may be to one another, however much or little we like one another, we are bound by a shared immersion in a communicative form of life, by our dependence on one another. As 'concrete others', in Seyla Benhabib's phrase, individuals with our own life stories and circumstances, we may each stand in a different place, but we share and acknowledge a mutual vulnerability.[7]

Ultimately, that means we need not be affected individually in order to be affected collectively. We need not be the intended target of an act of terror, whether as individuals or as a member of a group. We need not be the ones experiencing exclusion, contempt or violence in order to understand, as *human beings*, the pain being inflicted on someone else. We need not know anything about the other person or group. We need only know something *about what they suffer*. What matters is not the other person, as such, but the act, the wrong, the pain that is inflicted. That has to be enough.[8] Granted, not being affected oneself

can make solidarity and sympathy harder, because understanding another's suffering can demand a good deal of interpretive effort. But more of that later.

What does this mean for the words I could not say?

Je suis juif … The slogan sought, through *the act* of saying it, to widen the circle of those affected by group-focused enmity and jihadist violence. The victims were not to be left isolated, nor were the perpetrators to imagine that a silent majority was on their side. Terror cannot triumph when more and more people stand against it. As a strategy, the slogan was persuasive. But it rested on a notion of solidarity that required one to claim an identity. Yet solidarity that makes identity its precondition, that extends only to those who are like oneself, is no solidarity at all. This kind of merely identity-based sympathy is too essentialist.

That was the first problem.

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But there was something else I wrestled with. It also troubled me to have to say something that was *not true*. Why did that matter so much? I am not Jewish. True. Nor, after all, am I Ahmed. Why was it so hard to claim another identity for a good cause? To balk at a false statement, one might object, is to misread the context of the act of speaking out. Nobody at that moment is *really* saying anything about themselves. The sentence is a gesture of sympathy meant sincerely. It is not a statement of identity that has to be true.

And yet to me it was a lie, one that everything in my body resisted, a lie that would have scarred me, one that would have clung to me and stayed in me, one for

which I could not have forgiven myself.[9] It carried an association that I could not have pinned down at the time, but that belongs here:

'… and he went out, and wept bitterly …'
(Matthew 26:75)

For me, denying where I belong was bound up with that 'and wept bitterly', with the scene in the New Testament in which Peter three times denies that he is one of the disciples and is caught out in his own cowardice. 'And wept bitterly' is disappointment in oneself at having chosen the comfortable lie over the uncomfortable truth.[10]

For me, *Je suis juif* would have been a kind of betrayal, similar to the New Testament scene and utterly different from it.[11] In that statement, belonging would have been reversed and denied, and victims and perpetrators would no longer have been held clearly apart. Claiming something untrue on this point touched an ethical core that had to remain inviolable for me. 'I am not Jewish' was not a fact that could be denied as lightly as 'I am right-handed' or 'I am musical'.

For as long as I have been able to think in terms of belonging, of origin, of nationality, the mark that lay over all the others was that of being *non*-Jewish.[12] And that meant belonging *not* to the descendants of the victims but to those of the community of perpetrators. The two could not be confused.

'Tact is a determination of difference,' wrote Theodor W. Adorno in *Minima Moralia*.[13] Pointing to difference can be a double-edged undertaking, especially when it betrays an intention to belittle. But the difference one insists on naming and preserving can also be an ethical one, a difference that seeks to tell right

from wrong. A sentence in which the line between Jewish and non-Jewish, between victim and perpetrator, is erased is at the very least *tactless*. Anyone who thinks the two are interchangeable at will, who thinks one can simply slip into a Jewish identity, fails to recognise, and so denies, the suffering and pain inflicted on Jewish people.

To be non-Jewish, by contrast, for me meant belonging to those who had been spared, to the 'unbeaten', as Jean Améry once called them.[14] It meant belonging to those who had left the others to their fate, who had not stood up when neighbours, colleagues, friends and schoolmates were singled out and taken away. It meant belonging to those who had turned a blind eye, who had been complicit, who had joined in, jeered, humiliated, exploited and profited, to those who had compiled the files, driven the trains, guarded the ghettos, locked people up in camps and gassed them. It meant belonging to those who had robbed, tormented, driven out and killed Jewish people.

This self-image also carries a danger of its own, that of growing immune to criticism. Misunderstood or misused, the emphasis on responsibility for the crimes of our fathers' and grandfathers' generations turns into atonement that is merely professed, a hasty way of cleansing oneself of a past one would rather not be pinned to. It must not become that. If dwelling on one's entanglement, if displaying a guilty conscience, is no more than a performance staged in the hope of absolution, then it is not tact. Those who claim to be so thoroughly purified sometimes end up standing with Jewish people so unconditionally that it is as if there were no difference. That, *too*, is tactless.

In a passage on resentment, Jean Améry explains why the difference between those who were beaten and those who never were, between the victims and their tormentors, must not be hastily smoothed over.

'I do not wish to become the accomplice of my tormentors, and demand instead that they negate themselves and in that negation place themselves alongside me. It is not through a process of internalisation, so it seems to me, that the mountains of corpses lying between them and me are to be cleared away but, on the contrary, by bringing the unresolved conflict to life in the arena of historical practice.'[15]

The 'mountains of corpses lying between them and me' … perhaps this image is needed – perhaps this bluntness is needed – to show *the nature* of the difference between those who tormented and those who were tormented, what lies between them, what cannot be cleared away or overcome so briskly. Mountains of *corpses*.

For Améry, his resentment towards the perpetrators is a necessary ethical barrier. I am not sure that his word 'resentment' fits here. I would rather speak of 'tact'. But I regard the analytical distinction between those who tormented and those who were tormented as indissoluble, and those born later should bear it in mind. It must not become analytically irrelevant. The question of which acts, which crimes were committed by whom, and how people were marked by them, must not simply dissolve into a blur.

This happened.

Here. In this part of the world. And in all those European countries and regions over which National Socialist terror descended, with war, occupation, the archipelago of ghettos and extermination camps, and all its criminal violence.

I am not Jewish. In a certain sense that was fundamental to my ethical position. This fact cannot be denied, and this difference must not be eroded. The distinction between the beaten and the unbeaten is necessary. To treat it as dispensable would show disrespect for the victims. It would level right and wrong; it would render invisible the suffering inflicted on some by others and passed down the generations. That was what had come between me and the words.

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So my inability to speak out at the time can be examined. I can trace it back to its roots and look at what nourished it. But doing so raised new contradictions and questions. My hesitation rested on two different motives. The first had to do with an idea of tact, and this tact drew on a particular background, a particular identity. The second had to do with an idea of universalism. The first was the conviction that belonging to the community of perpetrators, even by later birth, brings with it a special ethical and political duty. The second was the universalist conviction that respect, recognition and solidarity must *not* depend on belonging at all.

How do the two fit together?

'For us it is unique, but the lessons we draw from it, Germans and Jews alike, should be universalist.'

Ernst Tugendhat[16]

How do identity and humanism fit together? Not only in this particular situation, but in other settings too? A whole series of questions follows from this. Should my own identity matter here, or is the point that it should not? Does a universalist outlook ask me to take where I belong into account, or to look past belonging altogether? What exactly does the memory of Auschwitz commit us to? And above all, whom does it commit? When is the hesitation that came over me considerate and fitting, and when does it stand in the way of other ethical obligations?

Is the lesson that must be drawn from the Holocaust, that crime against humanity, an individual or a collective one? One for particular groups or one for everybody? What does that mean when we look at the violence in the Middle East? What is Germany, with this history, obliged to do?

If identity and belonging are to matter, how can our politics of memory take account of the many origins and ties that make up this society? How much longer is the postmigrant reality to be ignored? And does that not mean that the experience of racist exclusion and violence is always denied, and so repeated? Where is the tact towards those who live with it? When will the politics of memory take in the stories and experiences of those who came here from elsewhere?

When will it be acknowledged that the post-migrant community, which has no family ties whatever to the community of perpetrators, has engaged, and goes on engaging, seriously with the Holocaust, and when will we recognise the ways in which it does so? What can we non-migrant Germans learn from them about thinking universally? What other forms of remembrance can be devised, forms

that admit different perspectives and draw from them not a weaker but a deeper understanding of violence and trauma?[17]

Hesitation as a sign of tact may be more universal than I first thought. It arises in other situations of inequality and of historical guilt too. Other forms of belonging may oblige me/us/them to show consideration. Other corpses may lie between us/them. When is such hesitation sensitive and called for, and when is it out of place?

I was asking these questions before the crimes of Hamas on 7 October and before the crimes of the Israeli army in Gaza. Since then they have grown deeper still and taken on a new urgency. What is historical responsibility? To whom, or to what, does it apply?

We each have to put ourselves to the test:
What do the suffering and despair of others stir in us?
In the end it comes down to one question:

What does a person count for?