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Karl Jaspers on Nihilism and Responsibility

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Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) relates the concepts of nihilism and responsibility to each other. Already in 1919 he suggests that responsibility is the adequate way of relating to nihilism. At the time he is not very clear on what this means. By retracing his treatment of nihilism this paper clarifies it, and it will also show that the way he is putting the two concepts together is relevant for contemporary discussions of responsibility. The aim of this paper is to expose an underlying historical connection between the two concepts whereby the concept of responsibility is elaborated as a response to the concept of nihilism. I shall show an affinity between these concepts which is also a conceptual constellation of relevance for today, although so far it had been drawn on only infrequently.

Context

The concept of nihilism was not unknown to Weimar Germany's intellectuals, as it had a tradition in Germany and had been used to connote Russian revolutionaries. Furthermore, it had been promoted

by Nietzsche. For these reasons the concept was readily available for inclusion into discourses on culture and society.

Jaspers talks about nihilism in the context of contemporary criticism made after the merging of the German states to one empire in 1871 and the economic boom that followed it. The discussion was concerned with urbanization, industrialization and secularization. The topics of contemporary criticism were the depletion of culture through atomization, mechanization and the dissolution of values. Nietzsche, who is central for this discussion, calls it a cultural degeneration and provides it an effective expression through his concept of 'European nihilism'. During WWI Thomas Mann writes extensively in this critical tradition. Mann makes a distinction between the German culture which is anchored in values and the French civilization which he regards as being without a future. For him the criticism of civilization is a criticism of nihilism.

This takes us to the widely spread critiques of civilization in Germany of the 1920s and 1930s. To these critics count thinkers of various kinds. Max Weber belongs to this group although he died already in 1920. His view on rationalization and bureaucracy that is restricting our lives exerted a strong influence on it. The Frankfurt School of Marxist thinkers criticized modern technology and analyzed phenomena of mass culture as its logical outcome. The founder and leader of the Pan-European movement Richard Coudenhove-Calergi, who pleaded for technical development but argued for the need to compliment it with a strong ethics, was another important voice at the time. An important step was taken when nihilism was being seen as the force behind technology, degeneration and other objectionable aspects of culture. Thereupon it was an obvious move to connect this view with Nietzsche and to start using the concept of 'European nihilism'. These civilization critiques regard neither technology nor machines nor the idea of progress as the fundamental problem; rather, it is nihilism that is designated as being the contemporary master and the cause for degeneration. Nihilism was being considered by them as a European phenomenon that spread everywhere. Nihilism was being identified as underlying the positivism of the 19th century,

the denial of moral and inner values, the making of everything permitted and the removal of God from man.ⁱ

The critique of civilization was also a common theme among the young group of conservative intellectuals that opposed Enlightenment ideas and the democracy of the Republic, and which happily read the pleading by Hugo von Hofmannsthal for a conservative revolution. During the final years of the Weimar Republic they acknowledged the Nazis as allies in the battle against liberal and socialist ideologists. They considered the French and Russian revolutions, as well as the Enlightenment and the idea of progress, as phases in the development of nihilism.ⁱⁱ

They were determined to bring the expanding nihilism to an end. However, some of these conservatives became strong critics of Nazism, which they proclaimed to be nihilistic itself. A good illustration of this is Hermann Rauschning, who for a while was a member of the Nazi-party and an official in Danzig. After the Nazis had risen to power he became bit by bit more critical of the regime. He lost his work, was being harassed by Nazi adherents and fled subsequently with his family to the USA. During the 1930s and the 1940s he wrote books on the Nazis' misdeeds and criticized them in lively terms for their lack of respect for traditional and Christian values. In 1938 he coined the epithet "the revolution of nihilism" in order to characterize in what way the Nazis were changing the society.ⁱⁱⁱ

Nihilism as an anthropological prerequisite

Jaspers was professor in Heidelberg from 1921 onwards. In the Weimar Republic he was not a clear-cut defender of its democracy. But this changed with the rise of Hitler. Not wanting to adhere to National Socialism he had to leave his professorship in 1937 and he lived in internal exile throughout the war. After 1945 he contributed extensively to the discussion on civic morality and the evolving

German democracy. His advocacy of existential philosophy evolves from reading Kierkegaard and reconstructing Kantian philosophy.

Some of his philosophy's claims are anthropological. He uses the concept of nihilism to define an anthropological feature of man. He is very much aware of Nietzsche's historical definition that emphasizes nihilism as a Christian phenomenon, as Christianity separated this world from the other world, leaving man with promises that never were being fulfilled.^{iv} By defining nihilism in another way he can set out for another focus. His anthropological definition of nihilism is already a main point in the book *Psychology of Worldviews (Psychologie der Weltanschauungen)* which was published in 1919. This is where he presents his thesis of the "border situations" ('Grenzsituationen') of life, the idea he is most remembered for.

"Border situations" refer to the fact that each human being lives in an ongoing process of border crossing, in a movement between areas of rest and dissolution. For Jaspers this constitutes a basic given on both the individual and the societal level. The dissolution and the crossing of borders is the result of our knowledge of other ways of living. Both individual lives and societies are involved in a ceaseless process of changes and new portrayals or interpretations of existence. Jaspers sets out from this description in order to describe worldviews. They have the common aim of helping man to escape the worries, the suffering and the pain that issues from the changes. Jaspers also posits the development of urgent needs for dissolution that are nihilistic. Nihilism is, thus, interpreted by him as an essential force (he characterizes it also as an idea or a principle).^v This means, that nihilism is a part of life itself, with its different situations and contexts.

In Jaspers' anthropology there is a barrier within man against nihilism. Thanks to this there are very few who fully affirm nihilism. The German word being used is "Feste", which denotes that which holds up something, e.g. the stars on the firmament, it also signifies a fortress or a stronghold. It can be translated as a hilt, an attachment or simply a protection. Something exists within man that does not accept life to be a nothing. Jaspers describes it in terms of the last powers to be found of the

human soul. This hilt may occur as mere fragments, that are capable of keeping the nihilist alive, but it may also occur as a hardware equipment (an integral part of a person's character or what do you mean by that? – it sounds to me like you're talking about a computer and not human beings), or fully embrace the individual life.^{vi}

Man has to defend himself against different kinds of nihilism. Jaspers identifies these forms of nihilism. One kind consists in the belief in another world, which is generated when the present life seems meaningless because values and meaning are placed in the life after death. Nihilism also appears among individuals who do not share this belief, provided that a self-denying attitude is gaining strength and given importance. The average nihilist tries to find fulcrums, by looking for something which he perceives as being authentic. This can be music, art or a worldview.

Alternatively, it can be sensual pleasures or the aiming for higher tasks.

Nihilism is according to Jaspers antagonistic to what he calls "das Gehäuse", which is the word for a capsule or cover. This is where we seek shelter when we no longer can stand the questioning of every form of existence. When everything is relative, we can fall back on a power within ourselves which helps us to identify an authentic worldview or a ranking of values that appears to be final. This is where man can find peace, but it is also where he can find starting points for taking action. An inner longing for sustainable truths can grow, when everything is changing and nihilism becomes unbearable. Jaspers describes this process as an encapsulation. The one who is within a capsule has shut out the border crossing. He has built himself a convenient and secure existence for himself, but the price paid for it is a frozen attitude against the world, where the worldviews have taken over.^{vii}

Jaspers introduces nihilism in the later parts of *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (The Psychology of the Worldviews). He is in these parts inspired by Hegel and uses some citations from *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. Hegel's description of the decomposition of the self-consciousness is put forward in order to illustrate a specific kind of nihilism, in which learning and education are not incorporated into the self-consciousness, but are used as mere tools. This marks a poor and

delimited self-consciousness. In support of it he cites a few lines from Hegel on the vain ego (((that lives by showing itself in all that it can manage, but abides even in its soul. (290-95)))) (This part of the sentence is incomprehensible – either rephrase or delete it). Jaspers alludes to Hegel's description of the development of the self-consciousness when he argues that nihilism is inevitable from a psychological perspective: those who want to achieve a more developed self-consciousness cannot avoid nihilism. Nihilism is part of an authentic life.^{viii}

Psychologie der Weltanschauungen is an academic dissertation of more than five hundred pages. It is systematically structured, written in a prose that oscillates between being picturesque and vivid, and presenting dry statements of fact. The issue is extensive. Jaspers' ambition is to clarify the powers of the soul, without venturing into the worldviews that we meet in life. The distance to life outside the university library may at times feel uncomfortably large. However, he will eventually bring up nihilism writing in a different genre, a genre frequently utilized by German university professors, whereby they deliver lectures, meditations and polemics in a smaller format which is aimed at a wider audience.

Jaspers discusses the expansion of nihilism in a number of minor pieces during subsequent decades. The first example is 'Die geistige Situation' from 1931. In it the exposition of the contemporary culture is quite general. When describing contemporary society, Jaspers often portrays historical changes in general terms – for instance, he makes the observation that people have been uprooted and have begun to invest more hope in earthly existence than in the dream of an afterlife. The consequences of these changes are crucial to the contemporary worldview: people feel imprisoned in a transitory universe, which nourishes a sense of powerlessness. They are beset by the awareness that everything perishes, by constant questioning and by an endless whirlwind of self-deception.^{ix} In the spirit of Weber, Jaspers also takes to a more sociological approach. Whereas Weber spoke of the disenchantment (in German *Entzauberung*) of the world, Jaspers uses the term de-deification (*Entgötterung*) to describe the legacy of Protestantism and scientific thought. The result of which has

been the rationalisation and mechanisation of production and organisation, as well as the triumph of methodical thinking. Jaspers emphasises that technology is extending its tentacles to the entire world. It squeezes its way into and schematises everyday life, making human interaction impersonal.^x He characterises the modern world as the epoch of the machine that reduces individuals to cogs. Nations and cities, factories and shops, are bureaucratic machines that cannot see beyond the present. As a consequence people lose their sense for the past and the future. The only thing that matters to them is their ability to operate the machine in the present moment.^{xi}

Jaspers on Nazism and WWII

In 1948, Jaspers writes that World War II has carried nihilism to its logical conclusion. He provides a basic definition of it that coincides with the one used in the 19th century. Nihilists have only temporary dogmas since they question and relativize everything. To them, there is no truth and all is permitted. Nihilists are driven by vitality and the lust for power.^{xii} The result was Nazism and the disaster of war.

Thus, Jaspers identifies the fundamental features of nihilism and relates them to fanaticism (which clearly hints at Nazism) and disrespect for human life (highlighted by WWII), criticising a society in which the machine has taken over and people have resigned themselves to serving it (which repeats the civilisation critique). Nor can modern science escape his criticism. On the contrary, Jaspers regards science and faith in progress as the main threats to the post-war world.^{xiii}

If 19th century society is said to be dominated by nihilism, the logical question becomes how to relate to this. One obvious insight is that then much also became possible which was not possible before, since an increasingly broad and profound nihilism neglected all values and authorities. All loyalties might be reconsidered, allowing for a fresh start. Martin Heidegger pointed in this context without hesitation to Nietzsche's "will to power". It is apparently tempting to argue for decisionistic

ideas, where initiative and power is owned by those that act. "In the beginning was the act" as Goethe's Faust said, and Thomas Mann later repeated in Dr. Faustus.

Jaspers responds differently when he addresses the possibility of man to be in himself and to develop his own personal abilities. In 'Der Philosophische Glaube' he speaks of man's essential being, which is about living with the border situation. The meaning of life is to see them as a call to freedom and to man's transcendence, the ability to go beyond himself in order to become something enhanced.

Jaspers turns to existential philosophy in order to find an alternative to contemporary technological thinking. The possibility of freedom that it points out offers people no peace; existential philosophy is not supported by the great heroes, it lacks the prophets and demagogues, it is a struggle that has no front. The change occurs in the small, in the ordinary everyday life.

Future and responsibility

For Jaspers, Nazism and the Second World War were large and fundamental issues. He often uses the two notions responsibility and future to describe alternatives to the rampant nihilism. Responsibility is presented as being the best way to cope and live with the basic human situation of boundary crossing, as a kind of third way on the one hand beyond the fear of change and on the other hand beyond nihilism. The future is adduced as a viable option leading beyond nihilism: people can decide that in the future they will be free.

After the war, he publishes a lecture he gave in 1946 entitled "Europe von Heute". The lecture is motivated by a single thought, namely, that nihilism may not take over. The argument in short is that the experience of WWII and the threat of a future nuclear war might be an excuse for thinking that the end of the world is inevitable. For him, the greatest threat is that people turn to a nihilistic attitude. Therefore, he wants to highlight the opportunities that are now available for Europe. He has

in mind nothing less than the possibility of a new world order, in which no culture is ruling over the others, in which no world empire is taking over. (38ff) Yet nihilism is simultaneously portrayed as being so profoundly interwoven with the European experience that it is unavoidable.

When Jaspers talks about the future the idea of Europe is of importance to him. After World War II it was not obvious to think of Europe as a unity. Some European leaders also argued for an united Europe. For instance, Winston Churchill made several speeches in which he pleaded for the need of the European powers to cooperate and in which he claimed that integration would be the best way to avoid future wars on the Continent. Jaspers goes a step further than Churchill when he argues that Europe should no longer be characterized as being a mighty colonial power.

Jaspers sees Europe as a cultural entity, which sought to distinguish itself from its neighbors, by regarding them as barbarians. He depicts the spiritual principles that gave Europe a deeper meaning than being the geographic foothills of the Asian land mass. According to him, the principle during the Middle Ages has been Christianity and in the modern era it has been colonialism.^{xiv}

In his determination of the European culture and its 'spiritual principles', he brings together Hegel's conception of the spirit that develops its self-consciousness with Kant's conception of the theoretical principles of reason. Jaspers speaks with Hegel when he points to a European spirit, the European traditions and morals that have been developed throughout history. It is expressed by the great artists and writers, it is reflected by the culture-bearing towns and monuments. With Hegel, Jaspers speaks about the historical experience of which nihilism is an important part and through which a more informed self-consciousness can be reached.

He draws on Kant when stating which the European principles are, namely, freedom, historical consciousness and science. First comes freedom of thought, which sets the scene for the European

spirit, as its highest principle. Like Kant, Jaspers argues for the importance of not lapsing into arbitrariness, without having asserted one's own conviction and truth. At the same time we need to be aware that the terms and conditions of freedom are tied to an ever-changing history. Jaspers also is careful to note that European history is marked by contradictions. Some of them relate to Europe's real historical development. There have been periods of order which were interrupted by revolutions. Europe has had on the one hand the church as a superior organization and on the other hand the state. Catholicism and Protestantism contradicted each other. Further contradictions are of a conceptual character. They regard science and faith, or the real world (materialism) and transcendence (idealism). The contradictions cannot be avoided; political freedom can at any time being disrupted since the preservation of freedom requires limits and rules, the truth is diverse and changing, science encounters limits, we will always live with an imperfect freedom and Europe will never be perfect.^{xv}

The threat of nuclear technology

In *The Atomic Bomb and the Future of Man* (1958) Karl Jaspers elaborates his view of nuclear technology as a threat to the world. Thereby he focuses on the consequences of the existence of nuclear weapons. He sees the atomic bomb in light of the technological age and the criticism of civilisation that he previously advanced. What has changed in comparison with former weapons is that the consequences of the use of atomic bombs are extremely dramatic. New war-making capabilities, of which the bomb is the quintessential expression, have lent violence an entirely different dimension. That which was once a battle of conflicting interests now threatens to annihilate the human race.^{xvi} People have already previously been able to kill themselves and others and even to commit genocide. But now technocracy had created a lethal threat to all life on earth.

Although the late Jaspers uses the word 'nihilism' much more infrequently, he is still conducting the same critique of culture and the idea of progress. Without doubt he considers the atomic bomb as the final outcome of nihilism. As a result, according to him, the consideration of political conflicts must shift towards analysing the forces that bind all social institutions together. Jaspers argues that our ways of thinking need to adapt to the new reality. The limited mindset of a philosopher or a public official falls short when existence itself is at stake. Every individual is affected by the nuclear threat. A new ethos that proceeds from trans-political motives is needed.^{xvii}

Jaspers alternates between presenting objective facts and engaging in philosophical reasoning. His solution is based partially on the Baruch Plan, which was proposed by the U.S. government in 1946 and eventually led to the signing of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and the foundation of the IAEA. In accordance with his plan, all stages of atomic energy production (both of uranium deposits and of reactors) would have to be placed under the control of an international agency, which would have the right to monitor and inspect plants and production processes at any time anywhere in the world. Jaspers posits that rational thought has the power to avert the threat. In the spirit of Kant, he distinguishes between two ways of thinking: human understanding is responsible for the mechanical approach of the technological age which gave birth to the atomic bomb. Reason, which goes beyond simple understanding, is a fundamental, independent way of thinking capable of making judicious decisions. In Jaspers' opinion, reason holds the seeds of salvation.^{xviii}

Jaspers proposes what he refers to as 'the principles of peace', which primarily encompass the renunciation of violence as a means of resolving conflicts when dealing with the dangers posed by the atomic bomb. He envisages a world in which laws and agreements are honoured, all countries waive their sovereignty and veto rights in international bodies, voting and majority decisions are complied with, news channels of information and public debate are honest and truthful, and human rights are broadly respected. In other words, he places his faith in 'soft' democratic values.^{xix} But Jaspers says that these principles are not enough. The more fundamental challenge for human beings

consists in the necessity to ‘change ourselves, our characters, our moral-political wills.’ The ethics he suggests is based on trans-political motives and generally on a moral attitude. Everybody must work towards such a change by creating peace in their own lives and by passing it on to others.^{xx} A political ethics of peaceful communication is needed.^{xxi} Such an ethics requires the courage to accept human limitations and to let go of our faith in technological progress.^{xxii}

ⁱ Martin Heidegger *Nietzsche: Europäischer Nihilismus*, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 48, Frankfurt am Main 1986 (1961), S. 2-16.

ⁱⁱ Hermann Rauschning *Die Konservative Revolution: Versuch und Bruch mit Hitler*, p. 62f. New York 1941.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hermann Rauschning *Die Revolution des Nihilismus*, Zürich 1938.

^{iv} Karl Jaspers *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin 1922 (1919), p. 216ff.

^v Karl Jaspers *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin 1922 (1919), s. 219, 280-284.

^{vi} Jaspers op.cit. p. 290.

^{vii} Jaspers op.cit. pp. 304f.

^{viii} Jaspers op.cit. pp. 303f.

^{ix} Karl Jaspers *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin: Sammlung Göschen, 1931, pp. 5ff, 14.

^x Jaspers op. cit. pp. 16ff, 26f.

^{xi} Jaspers op. cit. pp. 29ff.

^{xii} Karl Jaspers *Der philosophische Glaube*, München 1947, p. 103.

^{xiii} *Ib.* p. 128ff.

^{xiv} Jaspers op.cit. pp. 8ff.

^{xv} Jaspers op.cit. pp. 15-28.

^{xvi} Jaspers op. cit., pp. 82f.

^{xvii} Jaspers op. cit., pp. 21-31, 48.

^{xviii} Jaspers op. cit., pp. 33, 39-48. Citation p. 53: ‘...der grossen Vernunft, die mehr ist als blosser Verstand.’

^{xix} Jaspers op. cit., pp. 40-46.

^{xx} Jaspers op. cit., p. 50f. Quote p. 50. ‘...unseren sittlich-politischen Willen müssen wir verwandeln.’

^{xxi} Jaspers op. cit., p. 485.

^{xxii} Jaspers op. cit., pp. 53, 281f.