Nihilism and Responsibility in the Writings of Karl Jaspers

Mats Andrén

European Review / Volume 22 / Issue 02 / May 2014, pp 209 - 216
DOI: 10.1017/S1062798714000052, Published online: 13 May 2014

European Review, Vol. 22, No. 2, 209–216 © 2014 Academia Europæa
doi:10.1017/S1062798714000052

Nihilism and Responsibility in the Writings of Karl Jaspers

MATS ANDRÉN

Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 200, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.
E-mail: mats.andren@lir.gu.se

The aim of this article is to describe the connection of the concepts of nihilism and responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers. The article starts with his early writings in the late 1910s and traces his use of nihilism until the late 1950s. Jaspers first defines nihilism in a general, anthropological sense. It is essential to the human condition, which involves questioning everything. However, as his critique of contemporary society evolves, nihilism is treated as the impetus behind concrete threats such as National Socialism and the Second World War, as well as the post-war nuclear arms race.

Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) related the concepts of nihilism and responsibility to each other. He suggested in 1919 that responsibility is the proper way of relating to nihilism. At the time, he was not very clear about what this meant. By retracing his treatment of nihilism, this article clarifies what he was attempting to say and shows that his way of tying the two concepts together is relevant to contemporary discussions of responsibility. The article strives to identify the underlying historical connection between the two concepts: responsibility is presented as a response to the challenges of the present, although it has been used only infrequently so far.

Context

The concept of nihilism was not unknown to the intellectuals of the Weimar Republic, as it had roots in Germany and had been used to describe Russian revolutionaries. Furthermore, it had been promoted by Nietzsche. For these reasons, the concept was readily available to discourses of culture and society. The topic of contemporary criticism was the depletion of culture through atomization, mechanization and dissolution of values. Nietzsche, who was central to this discussion, referred to cultural degeneration and defined the concept of European nihilism. During the First World War, several leading German intellectuals wrote extensively

in this critical tradition. The best known was Thomas Mann, who made a distinction between German culture, which was anchored in values, and French civilization, which had no future. For him, criticism of civilization was criticism of nihilism.[1]

A widespread theme among German intellectuals of the 1920s and 1930s was their critique of civilization. Max Weber's view of rationalization and bureaucracy as forces that restricted human life exerted a strong influence on this group. The Frankfurt School of Marxist thinkers criticized modern technology and analysed the phenomena of mass culture as its logical outcome. Richard Coudenhove-Calergi, the founder and leader of the Pan-European movement, defended technological progress but argued for the need to complement it with a strong ethic.

An important step had been taken once nihilism was seen as the force behind unbridled technology, degeneration and other destructive aspects of modern culture. The next obvious step was to connect this view with Nietzsche and to use the concept of European nihilism. These critiques of civilization did not regard technology, machines or the idea of progress as the fundamental problem; rather, nihilism was the modern slave master and the cause of degeneration. They regarded nihilism as a European phenomenon that had spread everywhere. They saw it as underlying the positivism of the nineteenth century, the denial of moral and inner values, technology unleashed, and the separation of God and humanity.[2]

Jaspers started writing about nihilism in the context of Weimar Germany. He was professor at the University of Heidelberg from 1921 onwards. He was not an unapologetic defender of democracy in the Weimar Republic. But this changed with the rise of Hitler. Abjuring National Socialism, he had to abandon his professorship in 1937 and was prohibited from publishing after 1938. Once the war was over, he contributed extensively to the discussion of civic morality and evolving German democracy. His advocacy of existentialism grew out of his reading of Kierkegaard and the reconstruction of Kantian philosophy.

Nihilism as an Anthropological Prerequisite

Jaspers was very much aware of Nietzsche's historical definition emphasizing nihilism as a Christian phenomenon – Christianity separated this life from the world to come, leaving humanity with promises that were never fulfilled.[3] However, he used the concept of nihilism to define an anthropological element of human existence in accordance with certain claims of his philosophy. By lending nihilism an anthropological definition, he established a different focus than Nietzsche. This emphasis was central to *The Psychology of Worldviews* (*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*), which was published in 1919. The book introduced his thesis of 'border situations' (*Grenzsituationen*), for which he is most remembered and from which his exposition of nihilism took shape.

'Border situations' refers to the fact that both individual and social life is riddled with contradictions. They are especially evident when it comes to struggle, death, accidents and guilt. Such situations disclose the prerequisites of existence. Forces of both growth and destruction are released (Ref. 3, pp. 232, 247). According to Jaspers,

every human being lives in a constant process of transit between these extremes. People react to them in different ways – optimism, pessimism, dogmatism, and so on. These contradictions constitute a basic fact of life, an oscillation between repose and respite on one hand and fragmentation and decomposition on the other. A person may find vitality in this process or be destroyed. Thus, Jaspers sets the stage for the drama of nihilism – and it is no coincidence that he refers not only to Kierkegaard, but to *Werther*, *Faust* and several other dramas. One question is why people find themselves in this never-ending ebb and flow. The capability of acquiring knowledge is at the core of the answer. Fragmentation and border crossing are the result of an awareness that there are other ways of living. Both individuals and societies are implicated in a constant process of change and new manifestations or interpretations of existence. Jaspers proceeds from this insight to describe the concept of worldviews. Their goal is to provide an escape from the uneasiness, suffering and pain that change entails. Jaspers also posits the emergence of an urgent, nihilistic longing for dissolution. Nihilism is an essential force – he also characterizes it as an idea or principle. It closely resembles Nietzsche's concept of a power that tears down existing value systems and lifestyles. But Jaspers defines it as part of life itself, with its different situations and contexts. (Ref. 3, pp. 219, 280–284)

Jaspers' anthropology sees an internal barrier against nihilism. The nihilistic process of questioning everything is offset by an urge for stability. Thus, very few people fully espouse nihilism. The German word is *Feste*, which which holds something up, such as the stars in the firmament; it also refers to a fortress or stronghold. It may even be translated as an attachment or simply as protection. According to Jaspers, the human heart contains a quality that does not accept life as a meaningless enterprise. 'Der Mensch lehnt es ab, immer nur von Aufgaben und Fraglichkeiten zu leben' (human beings refuse to base their lives on obstacles and doubts). Jaspers speaks of the ultimate powers of the soul. This source of protection can consist of mere fragments that are capable of keeping the nihilist alive, but may also be an integral part of a person's character or fully embrace the life of the individual (Ref. 3, p. 290).

People must defend themselves against different kinds of nihilism. Jaspers identifies one form as the belief in another world, which emerges when life on earth appears to be meaningless. Paradoxically, such nihilism is the product of strong faith unrequited by a sense of closeness to God. Nihilism also arises among nonbelievers, provided that an attitude of self-denial gains strength and is assigned importance. The typical nihilist tries to find various fulcrums, something perceived as authentic, whether it be music, art, a worldview, sensual pleasure or a higher purpose.

Nihilism is antipathetic to what Jaspers calls *das Gehäuse* (capsule or cover) – a source of shelter when doubts about every form of existence grow unbearable. Once everything becomes relative, people resort to a power within themselves that presents them with an authentic worldview or a hierarchy of values that appears to be final. Both peace and a springboard for action may appear. An inner longing for sustainable truths can crystallize when everything is changing and nihilism becomes too onerous. Jaspers describes this process as encapsulation. The dweller inside a capsule has shut out border crossings. She has constructed a convenient, secure existence

for herself, but the price is inflexibility, atrophy and the dominance of worldviews (Ref. 3, p. 304f).

Jaspers introduces nihilism in the latter part of *The Psychology of Worldviews*. He is inspired by Hegel and quotes *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* on the vanity of the ego. Hegel's portrayal of the decomposition of self-consciousness illustrates a specific kind of nihilism in which learning and education are used as mere tools. Such self-consciousness is barren and limited. Jaspers alludes to Hegel's description of the development of self-consciousness when arguing that nihilism is inevitable from a psychological point of view: those who want their self-consciousness to evolve cannot avoid nihilism, which is an element of an authentic life (Ref. 3, pp. 290–295, 303f).

The Psychology of Worldviews is an academic dissertation that spans more than 500 pages. It is systematically structured, fashioned from a prose that oscillates between vividness and dry statements of fact. Jaspers' sweep is extensive. His goal is to elucidate the powers of the soul without venturing into the various worldviews that human beings encounter.

Nihilism and the Critique of Contemporary Culture

Jaspers eventually brings up nihilism in a different genre frequently used by German professors: lectures, contemplation and polemics in a narrower format but aimed at a wider audience.

Jaspers discussed the growth of nihilism in a number of minor works during subsequent decades. *Die geistige Situation* (1931) is an overall exposition of contemporary culture. Jaspers often portrays historical change in general terms – for instance, he observes that people have been uprooted and have begun to put more faith 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.[4] In the spirit of Weber, Jaspers also adopts a more sociological approach. Whereas Weber spoke of the disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) of the world, Jaspers coins the term de-deification (*Entgötterung*) to describe the legacy of Protestantism and scientific thought. The result has been the rationalization and mechanization of production and organization, as well as the triumph of methodical thinking. Jaspers argues that technology is extending its tentacles to the entire world. It squeezes its way into and schematizes everyday life, making human interaction impersonal. He characterizes the modern world as the epoch of the machine, reducing individuals to cogs. Nations and cities, factories and shops, are bureaucratic mechanisms that cannot see beyond the present. As a result, people lose their sense of the past and future. The only thing that matters is their ability to operate the machine in the here and now (Ref. 4, pp. 16ff, 26f, 29ff).

Jaspers wrote in 1948 that the Second World War had carried nihilism to its logical conclusion. He offered a basic definition of nihilism that coincided with that used in the nineteenth century. Nihilists have only temporary dogmas, given that they

question and relativize everything. There is no such thing as truth and everything is permitted. Nihilists are driven by a perverse vitality and the lust for power.[5] The result was National Socialism and the disaster of war. Thus, Jaspers identifies the fundamental features of nihilism and relates them to fanaticism and disrespect for human life, criticising a society in which the machine has taken over and people are resigned to serving it. Neither civilization in general nor modern science in particular escape his criticism. Jaspers regarded science and faith in progress as the main threats to the post-war world.

If twentieth-century society is dominated by nihilism, the logical question is how to relate to it. One obvious insight is that an increasingly broad and profound nihilism eschews all values and authorities, creating unprecedented opportunities. All loyalties might be reconsidered, allowing for a fresh start. Heidegger spoke of Nietzsche's 'will to power' in this connection. It is tempting to argue that initiative and power are owned by those who act. 'In the beginning was the act,' as Faust says and Mann later repeats in *Dr. Faustus* (1947), his showdown with National Socialism.

Jaspers responds differently when addressing the potential for human beings to dwell within themselves and cultivate their own abilities. In *Der Philosophische Glaube* he speaks of essential being, which is about living with border situations. The meaning of life is to see such situations as a call to freedom and transcendence, the ability to go beyond oneself in order to become something more. Jaspers turns to existential philosophy for an alternative to contemporary technological thinking. The possibility of freedom does not offer peace; existential philosophy is not a battle led by heroes, it lacks prophets and demagogues, it is a struggle that has no front. Change occurs in the seemingly trivial events of everyday life.

Future and Responsibility: The Idea of Europe

National Socialism and the Second World War were fundamental issues for Jaspers. He often uses the notions of responsibility and the future to describe alternatives to rampant nihilism. Responsibility is the best way to cope with the basic human situation of boundary crossing, a third way beyond both nihilism and the fear of change. The future is a viable option that leaves nihilism behind: people can decide that they are going to be free.

After the war, Jaspers published a lecture entitled *Europa der Gegenwart* (*Europe Today*). The lecture is fuelled by a single thought: nihilism cannot be allowed to take over. His argument is that the experience of the Second World War and the threat of nuclear conflict might be an excuse for thinking that the end of the world is inevitable. The greater threat in his mind is that people will adopt a nihilistic attitude. Therefore, he wants to highlight the opportunities Europe now has to offer. What he has in mind is nothing less than a new world order liberated from empire and dominance of one culture over another. Still he portrays nihilism as so intertwined with the European experience that it is unavoidable.[6]

When Jaspers talks about the future, the idea of Europe stands in the forefront. Europe as a single entity was far from a given after the Second World War.

Some leaders argued for unification. Churchill made several speeches in which he pleaded for the European powers to cooperate, arguing that integration was the best insurance against future wars. Jaspers went a step further and wrote that Europe should no longer be characterized as a mighty colonial power.

Jaspers sees Europe as a cultural entity that seeks to define itself by regarding others as barbarians. He describes the spiritual principles that lent Europe a deeper meaning than simply being the foothills of the Asian land mass. The overriding principle was Christianity in the Middle Ages and colonialism in the modern era (Ref. 6, p. 8ff).

Jaspers' definition of European culture and its spiritual principles unites Hegel's concept of the spirit that develops self-consciousness with Kant's concept of the theoretical principles of reason. Jaspers agrees with Hegel when he points to a European spirit – the traditions and morals that have developed throughout history. The spirit is expressed by great artists and writers, reflected by towns, monuments and the culture they bear. Like Hegel, Jaspers points to the historical experience of which nihilism is an important part and through which a more informed self-consciousness can be attained.

Jaspers draws on Kant when enumerating the European principles: freedom, historical consciousness and science. Freedom of thought, which sets the stage for the spirit of Europe, is the highest principle. Like Kant, Jaspers argues for the necessity of not lapsing into arbitrariness without having asserted one's own conviction and truth. At the same time, the terms and conditions of freedom are tied to the eternal flux of history. Jaspers is also careful to note that European history is full of contradictions. Some of them relate to concrete developments. Periods of order have been interrupted by revolutions. Church and state have alternated as the main organizing principle. Catholicism and Protestantism have pulled in different directions. Science has stood against faith, the real world (materialism) against transcendence (idealism). Contradiction cannot be avoided: the preservation of political freedom requires limits and rules, which are fragile and vulnerable; the truth is diverse and changing; science is finite; both liberty and the European enterprise will always fall short of perfection (Ref. 6, pp. 15–28).

The Threat of Nuclear Technology

Although Jaspers uses the word nihilism much less frequently in his later writings, he advances the same critique of culture and the idea of progress. He regards the atomic bomb as the ultimate expression of nihilism. In *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* (1958) he elaborates his view of nuclear technology as a threat to the world. He sees the bomb as an outcome of the technological age and pursues his critique of civilisation. That which distinguishes the bomb from weapons of the past is the drastic impact of its possible use. Given the unprecedented scale of its capabilities, the bomb enables a kind of violence never witnessed before. If war was once a way of resolving conflicting interests, it now has the potential to exterminate life on earth.[7] Murder and genocide have always been part of the human condition. But never before has the whole enterprise been in danger.

Thus, Jaspers argues that political conflicts should be viewed in terms of the forces that bind social institutions together. People's way of thinking needs to adjust to the new reality. Now that existence itself is at stake, philosophers and public official cannot be the sole arbiters of the direction society takes. The need for a new ethos that transcends political considerations is indisputable (Ref. 7, pp. 21–31, 48).

While Jaspers is deeply engaged in philosophical reasoning, he does not see it as an obstacle to discussing concrete developments, such as the 1946 Baruch Plan that launched international negotiations and eventually led to the IAEA and the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which most countries signed. The plan envisaged an international agency to control uranium deposits and the generation of atomic energy. The agency would be authorized to inspect production processes onsite. Jaspers believes that rational thought has the power to avert the threat of extinction. In the spirit of Kant, he distinguishes between two ways of thinking: human understanding is responsible for the mechanical approach of the technological age that gave birth to the atomic bomb. Reason, which goes beyond simple understanding, is a fundamental, independent way of thinking that is capable of making judicious decisions and that thereby nurtures the seeds of salvation (Ref. 7, pp. 33, 39–48).

Jaspers proposes 'principles of peace', which renounce violence as a means of resolving conflict in the nuclear age. He envisages a world in which laws and agreements are honoured, all nations waive their sovereignty and veto rights in international bodies, majority decisions are complied with, information channels and public debate are honest and truthful, and human rights are broadly respected. In other words, he places his faith in 'soft' democratic values (Ref. 7, pp. 40–46). But Jaspers says that these principles are not enough. The more fundamental challenge involves the necessity to 'change ourselves, our characters, our moral-political wills.' The ethic he suggests is based on trans-political motives and, more generally, on the adoption of a moral attitude. Everybody must work towards such changes by creating peace in their own lives and by passing it along to others. A political ethic of peaceful communication is needed. Such an ethic requires the courage to accept human limitations and to let go of faith in technological progress (Ref. 7, pp. 50, 53, 281f, 485).

Contemporary Relevance: The Case of Nuclear Technology

Jaspers' concept of nihilism contains an inherent tension. It is both an existential view of life and a danger that must inspire profound concern. He starts off with an anthropological view of nihilism as integral to the human condition. But he also links nihilism to his critique of contemporary civilization, an attitude brought to fruition by modernity and reaching its zenith in the politics of National Socialism and advanced weaponry.

Responsibility is the proper response to nihilism, a means of coping and living with boundary situations. Responsibility is not spelled out in Jaspers' criticism of National Socialism and the nuclear bomb. It is, however, fundamental to his demand for reason, a new ethos of peace, and a world order based on laws and agreements.

In the era of environmental degradation, climate change, pollution and the depletion of natural resources, Jaspers' critique of nihilism is as relevant as ever. Public policy with respect to specific issues can learn from his approach. With some updating, his analysis of nuclear technology still stands.

A few thoughts on the matter follow.

The widespread awareness of the immense capacity for destruction possessed by nuclear weapons is at odds with the dream of peaceful nuclear energy, complicating the entire issue. The dream has given birth to fantasies of almost unlimited access to energy. But nuclear power has also spawned nightmares of radiation leakage and the attendant horrors. Reactors have released radioactivity, suffered major accidents and experienced meltdowns. The empirical risk of a major meltdown after Fukushima is roughly 1% of all civilian and commercial reactors. Risks and accidents seem to be inherent to the generation of nuclear energy. Based on the definition of the US government, 99 major accidents have occurred since 1952. A further danger, often described as the Achilles heel of nuclear production, is nuclear waste. The volume is significant and growing. Large quantities have been generated since the dawn of the US–Soviet arms race and the emergence of commercial nuclear energy production in the late 1950s. No country has yet found a long-term solution to the problem of nuclear waste. The concept of nihilism provides some insight into the problem. Short-term economic thinking and a worldview that lacks empathy with the plight of future generations have driven demand.

References

1. T. Mann (1983, 1918) *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag), pp. 102f.
2. M. Heidegger (1986, 1961) *Nietzsche: Europäischer Nihilismus*, Gesamtausgabe Bd. 48 (Frankfurt am Main: Klosterman), pp. 2–16.
3. K. Jaspers (1922, 1919) *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Berlin: Julius Springer), pp. 216ff.
4. K. Jaspers (1931) *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin: Sammlung Göschen), pp. 5ff, 14.
5. K. Jaspers (1947) *Der philosophische Glaube* (München: R. Piper & Co), p. 103.
6. K. Jaspers (1947) *Europa der Gegenwart* (Wien: Amandus-Edition), pp. 38ff.
7. K. Jaspers (1958) *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft der Menschheit* (München: R. Piper & Co), pp. 82f.

About the Author

Mats Andrén is professor in The History of Ideas and Science at Gothenburg University and is affiliated to the Centre of European Research at Gothenburg University (CERGU http://www.cergu.gu.se//). His earlier research was on in the history of economic ideas, on the ideologies of students, on Central European identities and on local citizenship. He has recently published *Nuclear Waste management and Legitimacy: Nihilism and Responsibility* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012). At present he is engaged on research on the idea of Europe.