

# **Karl Jaspers' Philosophical Faith in the Face of the Problem of Nihilism**

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*"Weißt du, was die Wahrheit ist?", fragt die ideale Geliebte. "Du bist verloren. So oder so. Du willst es nicht anders." "Die Wahrheit", sagt Mia, "sieht man immer nur aus dem Augenwinkel. Kaum dreht man den Kopf, hat sie sich in eine Lüge verwandelt."<sup>1</sup>*

*"Ungemein viele Menschen fühlen sich heute in bedauerlichem Gegensatz stehen zu ungemein viel anderen Menschen. Es ist ein Grundzug der Kultur, dass der Mensch dem außerhalb seines eigenen Kreises lebenden Menschen aufs tiefste misstraut, also das nicht nur ein Germane einen Juden, sondern auch ein Fußballspieler einen Klavierspieler für ein unbegreifliches und minderwertiges Wesen hält. Schließlich besteht ja das Ding nur durch seine Grenzen und damit durch einen gewissermaßen feindseligen Akt gegen seine Umgebung; ohne den Papst hätte es keinen Luther gegeben und ohne die Heiden keinen Papst, darum ist es nicht von der Hand zu weisen, dass die tiefste Anlehnung des Menschen an seinen Mitmenschen in dessen Ablehnung besteht."<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> ZEH, J., *Corpus Delicti*, 176.

<sup>2</sup> MUSIL, R., *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 26.



*Karl Jaspers in his work chamber in Basel, 1964. (© Stefan Moses)*

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Unser philosophisches Denken geht durch diesen Nihilismus, der vielmehr die Befreiung zum eigentlichen Sein ist. (...) Der Sturz aus den Festigkeiten, die doch trügerisch waren, wird Schwebenkönnen – was Abgrund schien, wird Raum der Freiheit – das scheinbare Nichts verwandelt sich in das, woraus das eigentliche Sein zu uns spricht.”<sup>3</sup>*

"Has every modern transcendence come under suspicion of ultimately being nothing more than a self-transcending detour of one's own thinking?", Donald Loose remarked in a brief essay on nihilism and transcendence.<sup>4</sup> "And isn't the space where this detour takes place empty?"<sup>5</sup> For Loose, as for many others, it is characteristic of our time that a philosophical reflection of transcendence can only engage in it with suspicion. "In modern philosophy, transcendence has become a demand for a way out of the imprisonment of the immanence of thought. The tragedy is that from now on every possible way out is at the same time under the suspicion of self-deception, the transcendental illusion, the 'bewitchment' of thinking by itself."<sup>6</sup> Since the announcement of the Death of God by Nietzsche's madman, the philosopher can no longer treat the *Hinterwelt* in a way that is self-evident and unproblematic. Like almost all of that which once belonged to the world and represented something real, the European mind treats the mystery of being as if it belongs in a museum. You can look at it, perhaps allow yourself some brief entertainment in marvellous thoughts, but be sure not to actually touch it. Once the boundaries between immanent existence and transcendence have been drawn, a typically modern undertaking, all we are left with is the sensible, whereas the supersensible becomes synonymous with the illusionary.

This predicament does not have to be inherently problematic, at least from a religious point of view, as it perhaps knows of other roads that philosophy does not allow itself to take. For philosophy, however, it has often been understood in terms of a disaster, addressed with the ambiguous notion of *nihilism*, in which not only transcendence is compromised but philosophy itself is at once implicated. Among scholars, the term nihilism is used to describe several, not entirely related steps in the history of metaphysics and to organize them in such a

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<sup>3</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> LOOSE, D., WAANDERS, S. (eds.), *Nihilisme en transcendentie*, 12. (My own translation).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

way that they allow a better understanding of the failure of metaphysics. This is particularly true of post-Nietzschean philosophy, in which a holistic understanding of the notion of nihilism is often adopted to argue for the impossibility of both philosophy and transcendence.

In this thesis I investigate the relationship between nihilism, philosophy and transcendence as it came about in the philosophy of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). This 20th century German thinker took great interest in the concern of the captivity of the immanence of thought and formulated creative answers to the question of transcendence after the alleged death of God. For Jaspers, the problem of nihilism was perennial to philosophy, and in the course of his life he devoted many pages to an attempt of *overcoming* it. Jaspers defined the nature and value of philosophy through its confrontation with nihilism.

Jaspers has often been compared with his colleague Martin Heidegger. The two are often labelled the fathers of German existentialism, in spite of them wanting to have nothing to do with either existentialism or each other's philosophical thinking.<sup>7</sup> If Heidegger with great influence pushed the Nietzsche-reception as well as the course of continental philosophy in a determinate direction, Jaspers was largely overlooked.<sup>8</sup> Jaspers, however, proposed an existentially orientated revision of metaphysics that is just as remarkable, originally redrawing the lines between philosophy, science and faith. In doing so, Jaspers offered a credible, honest and humane account of *overcoming* nihilism. Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, a seminal scholar on Nietzsche and the problem of nihilism, for example welcomed Jaspers' account of nihilism as one of the most wide-ranging.<sup>9</sup> For Müller-Lauter, Jaspers' main contribution to the literature on nihilism was his argumentation that the "*offene Glaubenslosigkeit*" of nihilism is a form of anti-philosophy, not philosophy itself, in the face of which *philosophical faith* in the reality of transcendence has to affirm itself.<sup>10</sup> Philosophy, for Jaspers, has always been about nothing rather than something, that is to say: it addresses the mystery of Being rather than its suppression in knowledge. As such it represents a continuous elucidation of our existence. Jaspers did not really believe nihilism could be *overcome* in definite terms, but that in continuous confrontation its destructive operation might at least be deactivated. For him, philosophy has to go *through* nihilism. Jaspers proposed an ingenious argument that separates nihilism from philosophy, existence from immanence and truth from knowledge.

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<sup>7</sup> SANER, H., *Karl Jaspers*, 145; JANSOONE, A., *Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and the End of Traditional Philosophy*.

<sup>8</sup> JANSOONE, A., *Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger and the End of Traditional Philosophy*.

<sup>9</sup> MÜLLER-LAUTER, W., 'Nihilismus', 851.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 852.

Jaspers called his philosophical project *Periechontology*, stemming from the Greek words *periechein*, and *logos*, pertaining to the logic or study of the *Encompassing*. Periechontology as such cannot be regarded as ontology or metaphysics in a strict sense, as Being cannot be comprehended in such a way without becoming nihilist. On the contrary, Jaspers' philosophy examines the way in which the mystery of being manifests itself, and tries to revalue Being as this Encompassing, breaking open every comfortable form of certainty or knowledge. Periechontology is an existential way of practicing metaphysics in a broad sense. It views philosophy as a so-called *Grenzerfahrung* and attempts at allowing the unknowable to enter in thought without reducing it to nihilism. This undertaking clears new original room for faith within philosophy, as well as a notion of human freedom and self-transcendence, and lastly holds ethical implications. The overcoming of nihilism that lies in its reach, is not the same as its disappearing, but its losing its threatening and dislocating force. The human, as a self-transcending and creative force, confronts nihilism from a deeper insight and grounds itself in the Encompassing, as it represents a living truth. "*Das scheinbare Nichts verwandelt sich in das, woraus das eigentliche Sein zu uns spricht.*" The passage to what Jaspers calls *philosophical faith* was in his view already laid out by Nietzsche and need not be frightening at all.

An exhaustive overview of Jaspers' philosophy cannot be delivered within the span of this thesis. The problem of nihilism, however, appears in a considerate number of Jaspers' books and often takes centre stage. A sole focus on the problem of nihilism and its relation to transcendence might come across as a somewhat unusual and highly fragmented approach to Jaspers' philosophy, given the vastness and interconnectedness of his many writings. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to explore the horizon of his critique of nihilism on its own, since its originality and creative potential remain largely overlooked.

Many invaluable contributions have been written on the philosophy of Jaspers. One naturally thinks of Hans Saner's and Susan Krikbright's excellent philosophical biographies, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's and Chris Thornhill's accounts of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom and political philosophy, or Franz-Peter Burkard's, and Alan Olson's helpful introductions to his entire philosophical project. Nor can one overlook the contributions of Leonard Ehrlich and Armin Wildermuth on Jaspers' notion of philosophical faith, or Mark Andr en's and Klaus Rosenthal's interpretations of Jaspers' philosophical answer to the problem of nihilism, or Richard Howey's timeless examination of Jaspers' interpretation of Nietzsche. These authors

will prove to be indispensable for the current thesis in its attempt to represent Jaspers' answer to nihilism in an understandable and meaningful way.

In the first chapter, we aim at better understanding the notion of nihilism. The history of the concept signals a widespread collection of stances and movements. To find at least some common denominators in the history of the concept will help us better understand its attractive force and threat to philosophy. In this respect, it is also important to lift our analysis of the notion of nihilism beyond Jaspers' own interpretation of it. Only when we map the problem of nihilism and philosophical debates on the matter in their broader scope can we evaluate to what extent Jaspers' own understanding of nihilism and his attempt at overcoming it can be meaningful. For this analysis of the problem of nihilism I draw heavily from the works of others, most notably Paul Van Tongeren's and Brian Leiter's studies of Nietzsche's oeuvre on morality, cultural criticism and European nihilism. In the English- and German-speaking world, seminal scholarly contributions on the conceptual history of nihilism have been made by Michael Allen Gillespie, Manfred Riedel and Wolfgang Müller-Lauter. The historical and conceptual lines most authors pursue when defining nihilism remain largely parallel. Differences most notably occur according to the adopted point of venture. The place of Nietzsche within the tradition of nihilism, for example, remains a topic of controversy. Bulent Diken, for instance, wrote an influential book on nihilism from a sociological perspective, reading its destructive potential for society primarily through a Nietzschean lens, whereas Gillespie goes as far as to argue that Nietzsche had simply "misunderstood" nihilism and that this occasion has "mised nearly all succeeding thought about nihilism."<sup>11</sup>

In the second chapter, we investigate Jaspers' own interpretation of the problem of nihilism. Before turning to the central argument concerning Jaspers' philosophical faith, we first take a closer look into the spirit of his philosophy. Next, we examine his interpretation of the philosophy of Nietzsche specifically and the different ways in which he saw the problem of nihilism manifested in the human condition. In the final chapter, we develop his argument of nihilism as the anti-philosophy that enables philosophy to affirm its own value.

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<sup>11</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, vii.



## I. THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM

*"Der Mensch unterscheidet sich vom Rechner durch die Fähigkeit zur Schlamperei, durch seine Begabung, ein Problem zu übergehen, wenn er instinktiv erkennt, dass er es mit der Unendlichkeit aufzunehmen hätte. Während der Computer abstürzt, schüttelt der Mensch den Kopf, lacht oder weint und geht weiter seines Weges. Mal wieder ein Problem, das man am saubersten löst, indem man es vergisst. Ich lasse offen, wer ich bin. Ich bitte um Verständnis und entschuldige mich für entstandene Unannehmlichkeiten."<sup>12</sup>*

### *Introduction*

What is nihilism and why should it concern us? In *Encyclopaedia Britannica* we find that nihilism is a certain *stance* or rather a “variety of philosophical and aesthetic stances” that deny “the existence of genuine moral truths or values, reject the possibility of knowledge or communication, and assert the ultimate meaninglessness or purposelessness of life or of the universe.”<sup>13</sup> In common understanding, a nihilist is one who denies that the world could ever possess or be oriented towards any meaning. How disturbing or true this insight ought to be, in our modern society is individually decided upon, as the negation of any objective meaning, the so-called Death of God, generates both dread and new found freedom in the opportunity to create subjective meaning instead. From this angle, our political system is in a way nihilist, as liberal democracy promotes tolerance, individualism and pluralism. On the other hand, our modern lives certainly have become less fragile and more bearable than our Medieval counterparts, and the individual pursuit of happiness has become a political issue at all. Perhaps God has indeed become “too extreme” of a hypothesis, as Nietzsche wrote.<sup>14</sup> Understood in this way, nihilism does not seem to present such a threat, and can instead be shrugged off easily. As a character in Juli Zeh’s novel *Spieltrieb* notices, confronted with such strange issues as the meaning of life, the human mind has the peculiar talent of *negligence*, a talent “*ein Problem zu übergehen, wenn er instinktiv erkennt, dass er es mit der Unendlichkeit aufzunehmen hätte.*”

Nihilism represents more than a Camunian personal referendum either for or against life. It is one of the most detrimental concepts in the history of philosophy. However, at the

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<sup>12</sup> ZEH, J. *Spieltrieb*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Nihilism’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 13 March 2020. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/nihilism>). Last consulted on 23 June 2020.

<sup>14</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Posthumous Fragments*, 1887: 5[71].

same time it went equally unnoticed and misunderstood.<sup>15</sup> Nihilism, rather than containing a certain philosophical *belief*, represents an uncontrollable dialectic that steers the philosophical craft itself. Accordingly, philosophy can never rid itself of nihilism, but comes about in continuous confrontation with it. Nihilism, over the course of the history of philosophy, has transformed into an all-consuming swamp in which philosophy sank further and further away. During this same time, the meaning as well as the threat of nihilism has never been straightforward and has only become more obscure and paradoxical, almost to the point of irrelevance. As Nitzan Lebovic summarizes, the unravelling of the concept of nihilism to date “demonstrates that the concept is situated in the crowded crossroad between nothingness, the undermining of authority, the negation of the I, the inherent ambivalence of meaning, the suspension of time, the Death of God, and the end of metaphysics.”<sup>16</sup> If this is so, then where does one start?

### *I. Nihilism Before Nietzsche*

The explicit use of the term nihilism emerges in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but this usage starkly relates to earlier evolutions in the history of philosophy, most notably the emergence of modern philosophy. As a notion nihilism only became culturally important in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>17</sup> The term was first used in France in the political context of the French Revolution, while in Germany the first use of the term appeared in theoretical discussions on transcendental idealism. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in both linguistic realms, the use and connotations of the term became more widespread and culturally important, its meaning more diverse, yet always in a certain way related to the notions of negation, violence and valorisation.<sup>18</sup> Both traditions were determinate in Nietzsche’s understanding of the word.<sup>19</sup> As Riedel remarks, on the one side the meaning of nihilism stems from the Latin word *nihil* and the substitution of the particle of negation into a noun or conceptual word on its own, in which nothing comes to the fore as something.<sup>20</sup> In this way nihilism is used by Nietzsche when he describes metaphysics as nihilist: that which it promises and the concepts it uses are illusory. However, historically the conceptual meaning of the word nihilism was really defined by Medieval Latin notions related to the word *nihil*, which

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<sup>15</sup> DIKEN, B., *Nihilism*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> LBOVIC, N., ‘The history of nihilism and the limits of political critique’, 2.

<sup>17</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 37.

<sup>18</sup> RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 372.

<sup>19</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 371.

paved the way to the words *nihilist* or *nihilism*, such as *nichilianista* (one who believes in nothing) and more importantly *annihilare* (to annihilate).<sup>21</sup> Engrained in the notion of nihilism rests an ambiguous conceptual relatedness between illusion, destruction, and a dialectical understanding of identity.

For Gillespie, the story of nihilism is that of the consequences that befell philosophical thinking at the dawn of the Medieval period, as a result of the hubristic *magnification of man*.<sup>22</sup> Medieval philosophy can broadly be understood as the attempt at reconciling Platonic thought and Scripture. Here, metaphysics was primarily a question of finding a clear path to the Absolute and a way to better understand God's Plan and the nature of good and evil through an investigation of reason.<sup>23</sup> Gillespie argues that the eventful history of nihilism was not the result of the so-called Death of God. On the contrary, he localizes it in the rise of a new concept of *divine omnipotence* and a similar concept of human power that emerged in the late Middle Ages and "increasingly characterized" modern thinking.<sup>24</sup> Nihilism, for Gillespie, is rooted in the birth of modernity and a series of influential changes that followed. Against the backdrop of nominalism and the omnipotent *deus absconditus* of late-medieval philosophy emerged a human assertion of itself as omnipotent and godlike will, subverting both reason and nature.<sup>25</sup> The eventful history of nihilism really took flight with Descartes and his transformation of thought into will, was then influenced heavily by Kant's transcendental idealism and Fichte's notion of an Absolute I and reached its peak in the "explicit nihilism" of the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

### 1.1. Cartesian Nihilism

If Scholasticism supposed the essential rationality of God and the cosmos and the possibility of understanding God's intentions, Ockham's nominalist turn argued that any essentialism contradicts the divine nature of God because it subordinates God to reason.<sup>27</sup> Ockham intended to reaffirm that the way to God went through faith and Scripture alone, but the effect of his intervention was a crisis of both reason and revelation.<sup>28</sup> Riedel and Gillespie argue that this

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>22</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xi-xxiv.

<sup>23</sup> MAURER, A., *Medieval Philosophy*, 85ff.

<sup>24</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, vii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

rupture of the world in two separate orders, one rational and one transrational, generated a certain sense of freedom, but that it turned into angst rather quickly, as can be illustrated in the early Modern thought of Hobbes and Descartes. For Thomas Hobbes, the crisis in Christian thought led to the realisation that if God is truly almighty and unknowable, the search for a grand scheme sustaining the world is futile. Rather do connections have to be derived from nature itself by means of empirical investigation.<sup>29</sup> If this line of thought gradually enabled natural science to liberate itself from religion and gave way to empiricism, it also meant a gradual loss of trust in precisely the rational order of Being, as a transrational God was ruling the universe at will.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, the human will came to take up a terrifying centre-stage role in the search for truth and stability, as it became the touchstone for any truth claim itself. Nihilism, centuries later, within anarchist circles drawing from Hegel's philosophy of spirit, was understood as the realization of freedom out of the annihilation of the preceding order. The same notion, *annihilatio*, Riedel notes, is at this point already wielded by Hobbes, adopting it in turn from the Scholastics.<sup>31</sup> Creation and annihilation coincide in the fabric of science and in this way resemble Divine Creation. "*Die Naturwissenschaft schafft eine neue Welt, die sich aus Zahlen, Figuren und der Bewegung von Körpern zusammensetzt.*"<sup>32</sup> The human mind commences its *own* creation after it reduced Creation itself to the nothingness out of which it had originated.<sup>33</sup> "*'Annihilatio' meint nicht bloß die Zerstörung, Umwandlung oder Auflösung eines Gegebenen in Teile, sondern dessen Verschwinden*", Riedel writes.<sup>34</sup> Hobbes later translated this nominalist-constructivist concept of science into his political philosophy, where the idea of destruction or negation gives way to revolution.<sup>35</sup>

For Descartes, philosophy could no longer be the science of Being as such, as the alleged direct line to Being of antiquity was cut off. The question of the nature and limits of knowledge became predominant instead. Human reason had to build ramparts against the contingency of happenstance and the seeming arbitrariness of the divine.<sup>36</sup> The relation to Being thus became a technical matter. If reality could no longer evidently be known, if it could be known at all, what Descartes instead pursued in models and method was the creation of an order that *works* and gives a sense of orientation.<sup>37</sup> Not certainty, but doubt came to determine the attempts of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 3ff.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>31</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 375.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>33</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 41.

<sup>34</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 375.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>36</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xv.

<sup>37</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 42.

scientific thought. Sought after was a bastion against groundless chaos and *malin génie*, as theoretically one could not presuppose the reality, stability and intentions of the divine.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, however, Descartes isolated the self from reality, leaving an unbridgeable gap between the *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

With the determination of man as *res cogitans* or *thinking thing*, Descartes, for many authors was the one who pushed philosophy over the brink towards nihilism, which Lucas Fain presents as the “radicalization of Cartesian decisionism.”<sup>39</sup> The fundamental principle of thought became a self-confirming act of the will, on the basis of its own infinity.<sup>40</sup> In philosophy, thought not only emancipated itself from the authority of religion, but in order to orientate itself it had to take Gods place and so the operation of the will legitimised and centralised itself.<sup>41</sup> Modern philosophy was founded on a crisis in the true sense of the word, Fain argues: “a *krisis*, a decision, a power of distinguishing, separating, judging, or selecting.”<sup>42</sup> Descartes’ *cogito* could only reach understanding through a negation of the world outside it and through the rejection of any preceding authority.<sup>43</sup> As Paul Van Tongeren observes, Nietzsche aimed at this insight when he called Descartes “the grandfather of the revolution” in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*.<sup>44</sup>

## 1.2. Kantian Nihilism

The meaning of the self-confirmative will was obscured in the rationalist following of Descartes as well as their empiricist antipodes, resulting in the crisis of rationalist metaphysics and the rise of modern culture in the wake of Kant’s transcendental idealism. Kants Copernican Revolution in philosophy towards transcendental idealism marked the transition of the *prehistory* to the explicit history of nihilism.<sup>45</sup> In the ground-breaking *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant tried to own up to the antinomies that had driven modern metaphysics into hopeless disarray. Once *prima philosophia*, metaphysics had unfortunately stranded in an endless collection of theoretical systems explaining away reality, but gaining their validity

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<sup>38</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> FAIN, L., ‘Heidegger’s Cartesian Nihilism’, 559.

<sup>40</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> FAIN, L., ‘Heidegger’s Cartesian Nihilism’, 558.

<sup>43</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, V:113; VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 42.

<sup>45</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 44.

solely on the grounds of internal coherence and the primacy of reason, without any connection to empirical data.<sup>46</sup>

Kant's antinomies represent the insoluble dilemmas philosophy is confronted with. Take, for example, one of the theoretical discussions on Leibniz's famous question why there is something rather than nothing.<sup>47</sup> Does the world know an origin, or has it simply always been? This antinomy, for Kant, depends on how we interpret the notion of a beginning. On the one hand, we can solely imagine the entire line of subordinate conditional causations if we can pinpoint its origin, but we can never actually *identify* an unconditional cause behind all these conditional causes beyond the infinite regress.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the antinomy presents us with a dilemma as it is a symmetrical problem: no distinction can make one side any more plausible than the other. It seems we are simply not in the position to decide.

To solve the problem of the antinomies and the crisis of metaphysics, Kant made a distinction between the phenomenon and the noumenon. The phenomenon is that which can be worked with in Cartesian science, drawing from empirical reality. The noumenon, the *Ding an Sich*, cannot be touched by reason. The problem of the idea of eternity arises on the basis of a misconception or *transzendente Schein*, Kant argued.<sup>49</sup> A third stance is open to us, if our ideas are only used to regulate our sense experiences in a formal way.<sup>50</sup> To obtain knowledge of these ideas themselves would be nonsensical, as thought forces its own patterns of understanding onto the impressions it receives.<sup>51</sup> Kant's transcendental idealism entails an investigation into the nature and scope of human cognition itself. However, Kant did not simply suspend the noumenon, nor did he deny the possibility of its reality. But whether or not we affirm the reality of something, does not make it real. Existence itself, for Kant, belongs to the categories of cognition and does not add something meaningful to that which it describes, since it is solely based in our application of concepts. We cannot conclude that something is real because it is thinkable.

Kant's transcendental idealism is widely considered an important step towards nihilism, as it teaches that there can be no meaningful reality for us without the involvement of our own cognition.<sup>52</sup> This is not to say, however, that for Kant knowledge cannot be real. In a sense, the

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<sup>46</sup> DE VRIESE, H., VAN EEKERT, G., VANHEESWIJCK, G. & VERRYCKEN, K., *De koningin onttroond. De opkomst van de moderne cultuur en het einde van de metafysica*, 17ff.

<sup>47</sup> LEIBNIZ, G. W., 'Principes de la nature et de la grâce fondés en raison', 727 [7].

<sup>48</sup> KANT, I, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A: 307-308.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, A: 293.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, A: 297.

<sup>51</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

technological understanding of Being here becomes liberated from any constraints. The ways of science are enough for us to find order in reality, and reason can rely on itself for its own orientation, it can be its own *judge*.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, reason is in a way decapitated. At this point, however, Guido Vanheeswijck argues that Kant represents an important change in attitude towards philosophy, which Schopenhauer would later adopt from Kant and others from him.<sup>54</sup> The problematization of the cognitive link to Being itself forced the hopes of retrieving metaphysical truths into a retreat, but also explicitly thematized the metaphysical *questioning* in a new way.

Vanheeswijck contrasts the notion of a problematised metaphysical need to that of a legitimate metaphysical desire. For Aristotle, Vanheeswijck argues, the bond between the recognition of a metaphysical desire and the belief in the possibility of ontological metaphysics was inextricable. “After all, there was the conviction that the metaphysical desire corresponded to a reality and that this desire did not remain unsatisfied.”<sup>55</sup> However, the central position of metaphysical desire gradually disappeared under pressure of nominalism, the coming of age of the natural sciences and the European wars of religion.<sup>56</sup> Metaphysical desire returned to philosophy as a problematic and unsatisfiable want. Kant was among the first to really thematize the fundamental problem it posed to philosophy, as well as the promise it granted, as for Kant the metaphysical need presented itself to reason as a necessity.<sup>57</sup> The criticism of their treatment did not at all mean that the classic subjects of metaphysics were also finally eliminated. On the contrary, in posing metaphysical questions, Kant detected an inevitable and ineradicable quality of human nature.<sup>58</sup> The question, for Kant, was how we could meet this tendency in a responsible way.

Kant proposed a subtle, practical solution as he did see an opportunity for a legitimate use of reason in a speculative, that is metaphysical sense, precisely by appealing to the metaphysical need and emphasizing the inextricable link between the two. Without the awareness of the latter metaphysical questions could not even occur.<sup>59</sup> In the essay *Was heist: sich im Denken orientieren*, published one year before the second publication of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Kant engaged in the subject for the first time. In the text, Kant understood the notion of *orientation* in a very literal sense, which is also characteristic of the problem of

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<sup>53</sup> KANT, I, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A: xii.

<sup>54</sup> VANHEESWIJCK, G., *Over de metafysische behoefte in de mens*, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. (my own translation).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-42

<sup>58</sup> KANT, I, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A: vii.

<sup>59</sup> VANHEESWIJCK, G., *Over de metafysische behoefte in de mens*, 34.

nihilism: “*Sich orientieren heißt, in der eigentlichen Bedeutung des Worts: aus einer gegebenen Weltgegend (in deren vier wir den Horizont einteilen) die übrigen, namentlich den Aufgang zu finden.*”<sup>60</sup> The subject pursues this orientation on the basis of a feeling of navigation via the distinction of left and right.<sup>61</sup> The same may go for thinking, which Kant here defines as an attempted orientation in a logical realm, guided by a subjective principle, the so-called metaphysical need.<sup>62</sup> While he diagnosed the bankruptcy of metaphysics as the unlawful extension of mental concepts to matters that are unknowable in principle, Kant now brings in a subjective principle to point out the legitimacy of the questions metaphysics poses.<sup>63</sup> Although it seems contradictory, Kant argued that it is not at all arbitrary of reason to form a judgment about matters that transcend itself, but that a real “*Gefühl des der Vernunft eigenen Bedürfnisses*” forces it.<sup>64</sup> In the absence of an objective answer, Kant saw a *subjective justification* to adopt a postulate on practical grounds. Only a kind of agnosticism can reason allow itself, not even atheism, as a kind of faith at the edge of knowledge. Kant called this *reinen Vernunftglaube*, which cannot possibly transform into knowledge and can only occur there where the inadequacy of any evidence is fully recognized.<sup>65</sup>

Riedel points out that Kant's contemporary Daniel Jenisch in 1796 already labelled his thought as “transcendental-idealistic nihilism.”<sup>66</sup> However, the nihilistic potential of Kantian idealism is only really addressed by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in 1799, in a critique of a publication by Gottlieb Fichte.<sup>67</sup> In Fichte's rehabilitation of Kant's idealism, reality loses every independency of thought and dissolves into the creative and supportive act of the absolute ‘I’.<sup>68</sup> Even the noumenal realm stems from the same thinking subject that constitutes the phenomenal realm.<sup>69</sup> The absolution of the self is illustrative of its interaction with reality, as it can never avoid itself in knowing, and thus always grounds that which does not belong to it in itself.

For Fichte, all things perceived are in fact construed, and contain nothing in and of themselves. This observation holds for *every* form of reality, including that of the divine.<sup>70</sup> The I comes to know itself as an Absolute, but cannot identify or realize its own essence, because it

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<sup>60</sup> KANT, I, *Was heist: sich im Denken orientieren*, [5].

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, [6].

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> VANHEESWIJCK, G., *Over de metafysische behoefte in de mens*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> KANT, I, *Was heist: sich im Denken orientieren*, [9].

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, [18].

<sup>66</sup> RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 380.

<sup>67</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 44.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



is constrained by the phenomenal world it inhabits. Its freedom cannot be reconciled with its finitude. The I thus seeks to console itself by imposing an order onto reality in which its own position makes sense and from which it can derive a hierarchy of concepts.<sup>71</sup> Theoretical reason, however, is doomed to failure, as any such order of concepts must be finite and thus contradicts the infinite essence of the absolute I, which is never satisfied.<sup>72</sup> Fichte's own turn to practical reason, then, radicalised Kant's *middle ground* solution in the abolishment of the non-I in favour of the absolute freedom of the I.<sup>73</sup> As a result of this, Fichte's idealism could no longer recognize any truth beyond cognition, radicalizing what was prepared by Cartesian metaphysics and exposed by Kant. As it lacked any (objective) standards against which to measure itself, it smothered any possible answer in endless subjectivity.<sup>74</sup> This absolute I encompasses every particular or empirical instance of the manifestation of the I. If there can indeed be no reality apart from the experience of the I, then anything supported within thought loses its ground as well. There can never be anything outside of thought itself, but the I cannot ground itself nor the principles it turns to for its own orientation in itself. The principles it proposes represent nothing in the sense that they receive their authority solely on the basis of the I's godlike act of its will.<sup>75</sup>

Even the notion of transcendence now became untenable. This atheist connotation attached itself more permanently to modern thought, in spite of its deeply religious origin in nominalism. Precisely the destruction of transcendence led Jacobi to denounce Fichte's thinking as nihilist.<sup>76</sup> "*Vernichtend lernte ich erschaffen*", Jacobi wrote of this structural combination of thinking as willing and conceiving this totality of the I's affirmation as the negation of what lies beyond, finding its ground nowhere but in its own acts of will.<sup>77</sup> The controversy stemming from Fichte's writings and Jacobi's usage of the term nihilism ignited the history of the notion of nihilism, now retroactively used to identify certain philosophical and societal structures and processes, and caused a considerable disruption in the intellectual circles of the time, which Goethe compared to an explosion.<sup>78</sup>

Nihilism, for Jacobi, signified the consistent use of the nominalist standpoint of critique of human cognition.<sup>79</sup> On one side, this means that when Kant's critical idealism limited the

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<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xvi.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>75</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 45.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Jacobi in an open letter to Fichte. Cited in: RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 382.

<sup>78</sup> JONKERS, P., 'The Death-Defying Leap from Nihilism to Transcendence.' 31.

<sup>79</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 380.

scope of understanding to the realm of appearances, what is known leans closer toward illusion than it does to reality.<sup>80</sup> On the other side, the destructive negation is an active one, as cognition is based explicitly on the reduction of the abundant multiplicity of the world in concepts, thus eradicating it in thought. “*Der Mensch erkennt nur, indem er begreift, und er begreift nur, (...) indem er Gestalt zu Sache, Sache zu Nichts macht*”, Jacobi wrote.<sup>81</sup> If the philosophical craft is similar to this notion of understanding, then it is unable to withstand the latter’s inclination to nihilism, Jacobi argued.<sup>82</sup>

### 1.3. The Nihilist Pathos

Until now, nihilism has primarily come to the fore as a theoretical problem, albeit a most fundamental one, disturbing the possibility of ever coming to grips with reality. But the perception of reality is not only mediated by thought as a will in a theoretical sense, the act of the will appears to be driven by obscure forces.<sup>83</sup> The pathos that is generated by the aporia of thought may take hold of it entirely.<sup>84</sup> The realization of the inescapability of nihilism can lead to dread, a sense of emptiness and philosophical pessimism.<sup>85</sup> These experiences became mainstream in the philosophical movement of Romanticism, and especially in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer. The Romantic retreat into pathos and nature thematised a countercultural resistance to Enlightenment thought and its promised voluntarism, as well as its faith in reason.<sup>86</sup> Schopenhauer’s pessimism can be regarded as a radicalization of the insight that nothing can be grounded anywhere but in mere will and that the magnification of this will results in an insurmountable problem. The human mind may simply refuse any particular meaning once it has seen enough of it and has become bored by it, so to say. For Schopenhauer, there is only a meaningless *Wille zur Leben*, a blind force, an irrational demonic power driving itself forward, only delaying its own inevitable end.<sup>87</sup> The most effective solution to it immediately at hand is to deny its aspirations rather than to try to still its hunger.<sup>88</sup> For Schopenhauer, the will represented the Absolute or Being itself, as the one principle ruling

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> JACOBI, F. H., *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung*, 332, 350. Cited in: RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 380.

<sup>82</sup> JONKERS, P., ‘The Death-Defying Leap from Nihilism to Transcendence.’, 41.

<sup>83</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 47.

<sup>84</sup> RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 383.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 384.

<sup>86</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 50.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>88</sup> RIEDEL, M., ‘Nihilismus’, 399.

existence. For him, life is meaningless and tragic, salvation is only possible if our will can be ignored, a meditative attempt which he compared to the Buddhist path to Nirvana.<sup>89</sup>

After the introduction of Hegel's philosophy of history, the metaphysical use of nihilism, as well as its aesthetical outcome, was connected to a diverse field of religious and political theories of nihilism that captured the revolutionary *Zeitgeist* of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>90</sup> The use of nihilism in revolutionary context was intensified through Russian literature, most notably in the writings of Turgenev and Dostoevsky, and it gradually became a catchphrase within anarchist and Marxist thought influenced by Hegelian dialectics.<sup>91</sup> Here, the nihilist primarily came to the fore as the one who believes in nothing and is able to free his thought from any authority dictating it how to think, be it political or metaphysical.<sup>92</sup> If the concept started with a negative connotation, to condemn these anarchists from the ruling system's point of view of wanting mere destruction of what is valuable, it was re-evaluated and turned on its head by these same anarchists.<sup>93</sup> In the Hegelian view, every negation is a moment in the process of history, which justifies destruction and revolution.<sup>94</sup> Revolutionary nihilism was not accompanied by a pathos of melancholic emptiness, but gradually took on the meaning of the struggle in which freedom realizes itself.<sup>95</sup> Nihilism represented the endless creativity that one discovers in thought once it is set free. "Without principles", or without the belief in the established order, one of Turgenev's characters answers the nihilist: "there can be progress, but never rest."<sup>96</sup>

Importantly, nihilism was used here in an affirmative sense.<sup>97</sup> It stood for the voluntary creation of a desired reality out of nothing and to reckon with the existing one. Its ambiguous nature also became more visible, however. The revolutionary uses the destructive power of nihilism against the established order to break and devalue its values, while at the same time he leans on its creative power to create new ones. With the disappearance of divine authority, politics loses its ground in morality and becomes an interplay of mere violence and counter-violence. Here, nihilism took on the meaning that everything was permitted, since no reasonable

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<sup>89</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, 186-197; RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 399.

<sup>90</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 387.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 52.

<sup>94</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 390-391, 397.

<sup>95</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 51-52.

<sup>96</sup> TURGENEV, I., *Vaders en zonen*, 28ff. Cited in: VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 53. (My own translation).

<sup>97</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 51.

argument could bring the spirit of progress and the dialectics of history to a halt. But neither could the revolutionary propose values or goals that transcended the realm of political violence.

Paul Van Tongeren points out that Nietzsche read the Russian writers of this *positive* or creative nihilism as well as the French authors addressing the problem of *decadence* as nihilist. The latter was used to describe the *disease* of powerlessness vis-à-vis the vast and unorganisable chaos that went hand in hand with demographic and technological change.<sup>98</sup> This multiplicity entailed both power and weakness, as it created possibility as well as uncertainty and unrest. Important for Nietzsche, Van Tongeren argues, was that in both literary traditions nihilism did no longer express a condemnation. Instead, it became a *diagnosis* “of a condition that on the one hand was fascinating for its critic, recognizing it within himself on the other.”<sup>99</sup> The idea of a devaluation of values, for Riedel, came to determine modern culture theoretically as alienation from and undoing of reality itself, and as pathos it alienated man from himself.<sup>100</sup> In the Modern philosophical consciousness, the upheaval of Enlightenment resulted in political and social revolutions and the revolution of industry and technology gave way to the idea of a fleeting old world and a longing for new orientation, both in theoretical as in practical sense.<sup>101</sup> The term nihilism here took on a key role between pessimism and anarchism, metaphysics and politics.<sup>102</sup> The term indicated the violence and disrupting force involved in this process, and at the same time represented an ambiguous dialectic of self-determination.

## *2. Nietzsche's Nihilism*

In Nietzsche's writings, the existing metaphysical-religious, revolutionary and aesthetical interpretations of nihilism coincide in a *theory* of nihilism.<sup>103</sup> Nietzsche started to thematise nihilism itself and as a whole, using it to understand the ways of European thought and its history. European culture did not cause the eruption of nihilism, nihilism caused and determined European culture and its historic unfolding was inevitable. Nihilism, here, is no longer a technical term to address that thinking cannot *know*, or a certain political stance of negation, but becomes the symptom as well as the underlying condition of European morality and culture. Central to what Nietzsche understood as nihilism is the metaphysical and psycho-physiological

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 57. (My own translation).

<sup>100</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 395.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

structure of thought, the operation of violence and the tragic view that life is meaningless suffering. Nietzsche's notion of nihilism evolved gradually in the wake of his critique of European culture. The explicit use of the term is broadly limited to *Zur Genealogie der Moral* and *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* and numerous unpublished fragments. We will limit our account here largely to some of the key concepts Nietzsche developed in these works and fragments, most notably his understanding of the moral community, the operation of the ascetic ideal and the will to truth.

## 2.1. The Will to Power

Nietzsche portrayed the Christian moral values governing the Europe of his time as hollowed out and life-denying perversion of the life-affirming values governing nature.<sup>104</sup> Nietzsche famously argued that the weak *invented* morals which were in turn internalised by the strong, such as shame, compassion or remorse, and as a result the strong started to regulate themselves and to deny their potential. In *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Nietzsche laid out this idea of a “revolt of the slaves” in morality, beginning with the principle of resentment becoming creative and generating its own values. “*Während alle vornehme Moral aus einem triumphierenden Ja sagen zu sich selber herauswächst, sagt die Sklaven-Moral von vornherein Nein zu einem ‘Außerhalb’, zu einem ‘Anders’, zu einem ‘Nicht-selbst’ und dies Nein ist ihre schöpferische Tat.*”<sup>105</sup> The moral community, for Nietzsche, is created on the back of the violent exclusion of what lies beyond itself, since its existence is threatening the discursive power of the slave-moral and the purge against this *beyond* is also its *raison d'être* in a dialectical fashion.<sup>106</sup> It can only identify itself negatively, by identifying what it is not, and it can only affirm and value itself by condemning what it is not. It is weak, not in a quantitative but qualitative sense, as it is “that which is separated from what it can do.”<sup>107</sup> It cannot exert its will to power. The weak can also triumph, as it did after its “spiteful waiting” for a different world in which it could be good and others evil.<sup>108</sup>

Nietzsche made these observations in the context of the moral value system of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but structurally and irrespective of specific motivations, he applied this approach to the formation of a moral community in general. This logic of exclusion that is

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<sup>104</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 194.

<sup>105</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, I: 10.

<sup>106</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 202.

<sup>107</sup> DIKEN, B., *Nihilism*, 16.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

central to Nietzsche's claims, shows that morality cannot be detached from politics. On the contrary, central to Nietzsche's account of moral authority is the link between violence and the force of the will underpinning moral obligations that are deemed normatively valid only afterwards. The "aristocrat's" system of values Nietzsche hailed, does not signify a moral or normative superiority, but merely a socially descriptive kind. The advancement of the will and happiness of the free, strong and creative are *good* in the sense that the qualities that come with the weak or "slavish" are simply undesirable.<sup>109</sup> It is easy to spot a mere social-Darwinist exclusionism in Nietzsche's *Genealogie*, but the point he makes is that, once the question of the values of our values is posed, it is not clear how to orientate ourselves morally anymore. This discourse does not promote a strict historical accuracy of any "transition" from pre-moral nobility to slave morality, or any glorification of the amoral aristocrat, but rather the problematization of the fundamental operation of any normative system.<sup>110</sup>

The language adopted by morals, Nietzsche argued, is that of a mere descriptive political economy.<sup>111</sup> The concept of *Schuld*, translatable as either guilt or debt, stems from economic-legal notions. For Nietzsche, debt resembles the idea that something can and should be repaid, whereas guilt gives way to a form of retribution through punishment precisely due to the inability to repay the debt. The concept of guilt, then, is "conceived as a debt that is essentially unredeemable" and operates "within the logic of compensation that establishes equivalence between creditor and debtor."<sup>112</sup> A fundamental miscast is represented by this transition. Debt is entirely not a question that morality and punishment can address. Punishment as compensation does not actually compensate, since the harm it seeks to nullify cannot be undone.<sup>113</sup> Rather, it redirects energy toward the wrongdoer wherein the *discharge* and a kind of *pleasure* of the act of violence replaces proper restitution.<sup>114</sup> Thus, mere human cruelty not only represents an important part of retributive punishment, but might as well be central to it, as well as the underlying manifestation of power dictating the hierarchy of values.<sup>115</sup> As Emden summarizes, for Nietzsche, the retributive notion of punishment necessarily commences with "excess" and "pleasure of cruelty" which "only subsequently gives rise to the moral law."<sup>116</sup> The pleasure and cruelty of punishment might be limited over time by the institution

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<sup>109</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, I: 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 11.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> MABILLE, L., 'Nietzsche, Violence and Justice: Towards a Rehabilitation of Dike', 44.

<sup>113</sup> EMDEN, C. J., 'Cruelty and the Common Good: Nietzsche's Anthropology of Violence', 17.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 229-232.

<sup>116</sup> EMDEN, C. J., 'Cruelty and the Common Good: Nietzsche's Anthropology of Violence', 18.

of the state, but the fundamental boundary between revenge and punishment can never be clear.<sup>117</sup> The presence of legitimized force makes it possible to organize and stabilize a community. The moralization of this system, for Nietzsche, is based on the internalization of the values it imposes. Come to it metaphysically, it cannot ground them, it can only understand them via a dialectical orientation of itself. The order is not grounded in either pure or objectively identifiable ideals, but is solely based in resentment, as it is fundamentally man-made. The order thanks its origin to violence and as the annihilation of what is foreign to it. The moral dimension accredited to the system is obsolete and the violence it commands is inherently ambivalent.<sup>118</sup>

The process of moralization from internalized cruelty to full-blown guilt does not rest solely on the operation of violence. As May puts it, for Nietzsche, “guilt is an experience of reprehensible failure (not necessarily intentional) to respect ethical obligations which one recognizes as justified.”<sup>119</sup> The wrongdoer’s transgression reflects “a fundamental defect of character or personhood.”<sup>120</sup> The absence of a guilty conscience, then, could be observed when the wrongdoer feels as if something has gone unexpectedly wrong.<sup>121</sup> The idea of debt is replaced by that of guilt because the wrongdoer comes to suspect that he has agency on one side and “could have acted otherwise”, and accepts the moral charge of the failure of character.<sup>122</sup> This ambivalent operation of violence and human cruelty governs the very Christian values of humility, compassion and love. “*Dieser Mensch des schlechten Gewissens*”, Nietzsche wrote, “*hat sich der religiösen Voraussetzung bemächtigt, um seine Selbstarterung bis zu ihrer schauerlichsten Härte und schärfe zu treiben. Eine Schuld gegen Gott: dieser Gedanke wird ihm zum Folterwerkzeug.*”<sup>123</sup> The moralization of debt to guilt as the internalization of cruelty makes this “man of bad conscience” instrumentalize the concept of debt to God as a “guilt before God” to intensify his ability to “torture” himself.<sup>124</sup> Here, Nietzsche introduces the key role of the priest-like figures in this process. In Christianity the idea of debt was transformed into something that can never be discharged, but which represents the very nature of Being, which infects “*den untersten Grund der Dinge mit dem Problem von Strafe und Schuld (...), um sich aus diesem Labyrinth von ‘fixen Ideen’ ein für allemal den*

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>119</sup> MAY, S., *Nietzsche’s Ethics and his ‘War on Morality’*, 77.

<sup>120</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 237.

<sup>121</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, II: 15.

<sup>122</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 237, 239.

<sup>123</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, II: 22.

<sup>124</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 240.

*Ausweg abzuschneiden.*<sup>125</sup> Through religion, morality became metaphysical and an ultimate bond between godly authority and a guilty meaning of the world and of the self was forged on the basis of resentment, while, in reality, this structure could only ever be immanent idolatry, guided by a will to power. The internalization of instinctive cruelty, or its “turning against itself”, in any case, for Nietzsche resembles a result of being forced into civilization.<sup>126</sup> The operation of internalized cruelty and political violence disguised as higher morality is closely related to what Nietzsche denounces as a *will to nothingness*, which forms an important part of his theory of nihilism.<sup>127</sup> For the connection of Nietzsche’s take on violence and the infringement of the moral and the political on the one side, and nihilism on the other, an understanding of Nietzsche’s *asketische Ideale* is crucial.

## 2.2. The Ascetic Ideal

Ascetic ideals, generally, are present in norms or ideas that can exist only as both the denial of the self and of the not-self, and are valorized through resentment and perversion. They resemble this perversion, for Nietzsche, on a physiological level, for instance in the valorization of self-denial of satisfaction and desire, of which humility and scarcity are examples.<sup>128</sup> More importantly, they are also omnipresent on the level of the metaphysical, which as a result cannot really exist as anything other than mere fabrication. Nietzsche argued that ascetism balances on two forms of nihilism. In the face of existence as suffering and the unbearable nature of meaningless suffering, leading to “suicidal nihilism”, the ascetic ideal grants the person meaning for its suffering.<sup>129</sup> As such, it “seduces humanity back to life”, as Leiter puts it. “It maximizes their feeling of power within the constraints of their existential situation.”<sup>130</sup> Notably, not the suffering *in se*, for man is undesirable, in Nietzsche’s view. He wills it all the time, even *seeks* it. “*Die Sinnlosigkeit des Leidens, nicht das Leiden, war der Fluch, der bisher über der Menschheit ausgebreitet lag - und das asketische Ideal bot ihr einen Sinn!*”<sup>131</sup> Secondly, the ascetic ideal also becomes nihilist in the sense that it denies reality, and for this invents higher ideals.

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<sup>125</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, II: 22.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 20.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, III: 1.

<sup>128</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 246.

<sup>129</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III: 28.

<sup>130</sup> LEITER, B., *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Nietzsche on Morality*, 256.

<sup>131</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III: 28.



Nihilism, for Nietzsche, however, goes deeper and is a loaded and ambiguous concept. Nietzsche identified several different and possibly contradictory forms of nihilism, but the *Christian morality-hypothesis* is the most detrimental.<sup>132</sup> In the tragic understanding of the ancient Greeks, namely that existence is suffering in the face of fate and that this suffering cannot in any way be rendered meaningful, Nietzsche saw a *heroic* form of nihilism, that was *prior* to and perverted by the Christian morality-hypothesis.<sup>133</sup> But, as early as in the tragic plays of Euripides, the last of the great playwrights, and most notably since the entry of Platonic thought, this tragic understanding of reality was veiled by reason. Suffering was granted a logical explanation and moral justification; a meaning, based on resentful “ascetic” thought.<sup>134</sup> In the unpublished Lenzer Heide fragment, one of the most important texts regarding Nietzsche’s idea of a European nihilism, Nietzsche described how the Christian morality-hypothesis functions as an antidote or rampart against life.<sup>135</sup> The Christian morality-hypothesis manifests itself in the three main branches of European culture, that is morality, science and religion, with the will to truth and power as an overarching principle. It resembles religious and moral values accompanied by the belief in a *Hinterwelt* (hypothesis) which functions as a condition for the (meaningful) existence of the current world.<sup>136</sup> As was already pointed out, for Nietzsche nothing else than the denial of reality is expressed here, installed to make life bearable. The search for truth in ascetic ideals is an expression of a “will to nothingness”, a negation of reality founded on fabrication.<sup>137</sup> Here, to call this will nihilist is to say that it consists of a negation of the world in which we live and takes refuge in a world in which we would want to live, but which does not exist. The crux of the matter is that the unmasking of this nihilism is caused by the will to truth turning against itself, as it realises it can never attain its desired goal. The danger is that nihilism, in its subversion, immediately returns in a more intensified form. In distrusting our former ideals, we might repeat our worship of them, that is to say that our valuation keeps its ascetic character.<sup>138</sup> Again, we deny reality in the name of higher ideals, this time not because we measure reality to ideals, but because reality does not live up to these ideals, and this leaves us dissatisfied with reality, as we deem it to be not enough for us. Nihilism hits hardest in a psychological state of desperation in which all is in vain: “*Ein Nihilist ist der Mensch, welcher von der Welt, wie sie ist, urteilt, sie sollte nicht sein und von*

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<sup>132</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 96-97.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Posthumous Fragments*, 1887: 5[71].

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III.: 28.

<sup>138</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 100.

*der Welt, wie sie sein sollte, urteilt, sie existiert nicht*”, Nietzsche wrote in another key fragment: “*Demnach hat Dasein (handeln, leiden, wollen, fühlen) keinen Sinn.*”<sup>139</sup> Nihilism is still attached to that which it denies.<sup>140</sup> “*Damit ist der Nihilismus da*”, Nietzsche wrote in a third unpublished fragment, linking pessimism to nihilism: “*Man hat die richtenden Werthe übrig behalten – und nichts weiter!*”<sup>141</sup> The ascetic ideal closes the door to suicidal nihilism, opens the possibility of a metaphysically and morally meaningful world, allowing an underlying will to power to seize hold and represent a higher order giving itself meaning.<sup>142</sup> However, the order of the divine is intimately man-made and is nothing more than immanent self-delusion.

This realisation leads back to a worse form of nihilism, in which the subject realises he cannot *not* evaluate, and seeks to find new idols and metaphysical foundations for a moral world.<sup>143</sup> Since the external reference of the moral order was stripped away, the order itself can also no longer be maintained, but is revealed as mere political violence. In this nihilist condition, the idea of truth – and accordingly that of justice – is up for re-evaluation.<sup>144</sup> This, for Nietzsche, is the perilous challenge of nihilism.<sup>145</sup> The criticism Nietzsche pointed at the philosophical, cultural or societal shapes of metaphysics, morality and religion, necessarily backfires both on the *giver* as the *reader* of the critique.<sup>146</sup> At this point, thinking becomes *existential*.<sup>147</sup> The will to truth sees through the illusions thought has created. But the supreme illusion was truth itself, and the will to truth necessarily comes to undermine itself.<sup>148</sup> It is within the thinker himself that “*jener Wille zur Wahrheit sich selbst als Problem zum Bewußtsein gekommen wäre.*”<sup>149</sup> This is the true tragedy, as at this point the thinker becomes the battleground on which the will to truth commences the struggle against its own presuppositions, that is the illusions and lies it needs in order to survive life, but which it also needs to think at all.<sup>150</sup> It can no longer tell the difference between its own sentiment and the truth itself, and discovers its own subjective reasons for a certain valorization operative at the heart of everything it believed had objective value. Nothing matters more than the outcome of this struggle: “*Die letzte Frage um die Bedingung des Lebens ist hier gestellt, und der erste Versuch wird hier gemacht, mit dem*

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<sup>139</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Posthumous Fragments*, 1887: 9 [60].

<sup>140</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 100.

<sup>141</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Posthumous Fragments*, 1887: 9 [107].

<sup>142</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 102-103.

<sup>143</sup> MABILLE, L., ‘Nietzsche, Violence and Justice: Towards a Rehabilitation of Dike’, 46.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III: 27.

<sup>146</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 198.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 119ff.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 101ff.

<sup>149</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III: 27.

<sup>150</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 198.

*Experiment auf diese Frage zu antworten*”, Nietzsche wrote in *Die frohliche Wissenschaft*. “*Inwieweit verträgt die Wahrheit die Einverleibung? – das ist die Frage, das ist das Experiment.*”<sup>151</sup> As Paul Van Tongeren summarizes, the thinker “can no longer naively seek the truth, but can neither keep undermining every pretended truth; He can only be both at the same time in their problematic combination: he can only *be* the problem itself.”<sup>152</sup> Out of this can only follow a terrible alternative, because both possibilities end up meaning the same. On the one side, Buddhism, Christianity, pessimism, and even the critique of pessimism, Van Tongeren notes, lead to the condemnation of the factual human in the name of a certain ideal, which Nietzsche deems nihilist. Thus one should not condemn oneself, but the ideals that lead one to a certain condemnation. But here, again, we have to orientate ourselves according to a certain ideal, which is truthfulness, to even make such a critique of ideals possible.<sup>153</sup>

### *3. The Problem of Philosophy*

The influence of Nietzsche on the practice of philosophy after him was considerate. “One cannot circumvent Nietzsche without remaining captive by outdated questions”, Gerard Visser observes.<sup>154</sup> The contemporary experience of nihilism might be regarded as a kind of post-apocalypse, as the *end after the end*, as Blanchot does.<sup>155</sup> Metaphysics is ending *endlessly*, as its impossibility is clear, but still there remains thought going through all the pains of thinking. “The apocalypse, which is passed through, or passed over, is that of the disaster.” But “when the disaster comes upon us it does not come.”<sup>156</sup> Here, the disaster is unbearable because it is precisely that which “ruins everything, while leaving everything intact.”<sup>157</sup> Nihilism signifies a loss of authority and orientation, either in the magnification or diminution of man, but also a dialectical structure of thought that it cannot escape without undoing itself. Thought inevitably has to ground itself in ideas and thus mere will. Philosophy opposes this nihilism in truthfulness, but in turn it gets trapped in endless disarray and self-annihilation. In all sorts of beliefs and their critique there exists a kind of nihilism.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, III: 110.

<sup>152</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 199. (My own translation).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>154</sup> VISSER, G. *In gesprek met Nietzsche*, 143. (My own translation).

<sup>155</sup> CUNNINGHAM, C., *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 239-240.

<sup>156</sup> BLANCHOT, M., *Writing the Disaster*, 1. Cited in: CUNNINGHAM, C., *Genealogy of Nihilism*, 240.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 37.

Cunningham localizes the problem of nihilism in the “aporia of finitude” that emerges in thought, which on its own can never prove its significance or its own substance.<sup>159</sup> Heidegger has illustrated this problem, which he labeled the ontotheological structure of thought, at length.<sup>160</sup> Not only does thought require a certain foundational concept in order to orientate itself towards all the others and to test their significance in a hierarchy. It needs to localize this principle outside of itself, to evade the infinite regress involved in proving thought *thinks*, that is to say: that it actually can identify the structure of reality and is more than mere *flatus vocis*.<sup>161</sup> In reality, it cannot discover any ground anywhere, and the line between thinking and believing becomes a fine one.

Time and again, thought has already given an answer before it made room for the official answer. The operation of metaphysics not only has always focussed more on the answer, but more importantly, Visser notes, on the requirements an answer has to meet.<sup>162</sup> Any answer can only acquire meaning within the setting it is framed in, thus the question is subdued to the preferences of our judgement. But what exactly are those, and what is their value? What is the value of truth itself, why is it sought? Nietzsche identified truth seeking as a symptom of a nihilist will to power. In claiming that everything stems from this mysterious will, Nietzsche can be accused of the very nihilism he addresses. This kind of criticism against Nietzsche is understandable, although it is not entirely fair. Rather, Nietzsche sought a metaphorical language to simply address the problem of nihilism in thought. Nietzsche discerned different styles of thought, and if philosophy has always identified itself more with the style of intellect, Nietzsche breaks open all of its locks to restore the styles of pathos. “Nietzsche does not fight the distorting effects of language by trying to develop a language that perfectly represents reality”, Van Tongeren writes.<sup>163</sup> Instead, Nietzsche tried to avoid a language of “dead concepts” and adopted a kind of “living images” and stark metaphoricity to confront the solidifying tendency of language and thought.<sup>164</sup> The challenge that Nietzsche identified, for the first time accounted for so uncompromisingly, lies precisely in this paradoxical way of determining oneself on the one side while relativizing every attempt to do so on the other, or being a perpetual meeting of questions.<sup>165</sup> Likewise, Nietzsche was not blind to the self-referentiality of the critique, even at his own attempts at overcoming nihilism through the life-

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<sup>159</sup> CUNNINGHAM, C., *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xii.

<sup>160</sup> See, for example: HEIDEGGER, M., *Was ist Metaphysik?*

<sup>161</sup> CUNNINGHAM, C., *Genealogy of Nihilism*, xiii, 237.

<sup>162</sup> VISSER, G., *In gesprek met Nietzsche*, 146.

<sup>163</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Reinterpreting Modern Culture*, 73.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Het Europese nihilisme*, 121.

affirming *Übermensch*.<sup>166</sup> In *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche reflected on how the truth withdraws itself incessantly and has no final goal or solid basis. “*Warum wir sie wählten, diese tolle Aufgabe?*”, Nietzsche asks: “*Oder anders gefragt: ‘warum überhaupt Erkenntnis?’ – Jedermann wird uns darnach fragen*”, he goes on: “*Und wir, solchermaßen gedrängt, wir, die wir uns hunderte Male selbst schon ebenso gefragt haben, wir fanden und finden keine bessere Antwort...*”<sup>167</sup>

How to overcome nihilism cannot simply be a matter of reaching the real truth by generating new values that oppose or neutralize old ones. For Diken, Nietzsche’s proposal is rather of a practical nature, concerning the principle according to which values are produced. “In postulating rationality as the supreme principle of the world, [Socrates] destabilized the ground on which values are created, that is, life.”<sup>168</sup> Anti-nihilism, then, is about a deconstruction and re-valuation of dominant existing values.<sup>169</sup> However, doing so would also inevitably cause a relapse into nihilism. “And crucially this ‘deconstruction’ involves violence, the annihilation of existing nihilist dogmas, as well. In other words, anti-nihilism itself must, in a certain sense, become nihilistic: the ‘hammer’ is needed to destroy nihilistic ‘idols’.”<sup>170</sup> But after this destructive work, what is left is only aporia.<sup>171</sup>

Nietzsche’s nihilism, thus, is of a radically different nature than atheism, relativism or scepticism. Atheism remains captive within the nihilist tendency of thought by assuming knowledge based on its own decision and pathos. Relativism may mistrust the human capability to think reality, but it proposes its own truth in return and also stays within an ontological discourse.<sup>172</sup> Nietzsche tried to *displace* this discourse, “bringing into question the kind of activity philosophy is.”<sup>173</sup> The nihilist critique of metaphysics, for Nietzsche, is not motivated by the conviction of a deeper truth, as was the case with other preceding forms of nihilism, most notably anarchism. Nihilism cannot refer to any content of thought, but rather is a structural problem that seems inescapable. Nietzsche, Rampley notes, argues that philosophy is a discursive practice, rather than a neutral enterprise of ‘truth-seeking’ and that philosophers have failed to recognise this.<sup>174</sup> Philosophically, Nietzsche’s theory of nihilism does not break free

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<sup>166</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Reinterpreting Modern Culture*, 145, 165ff.

<sup>167</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, VII: 230.

<sup>168</sup> DIKEN, B., *Nihilism*, 14.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> VAN TONGEREN, P., *Reinterpreting Modern Culture*, 147.

<sup>172</sup> RAMPLEY, M., *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity*, 13; KOŁAKOWSKI, L., *Metaphysical Horror*, 2-9.

<sup>173</sup> RAMPLEY, M., *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity*, 14.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

from nihilism, nor does he overcome metaphysics. “It is as a philologist that he interprets the work of philosophers, and as a cultural critic that he judges their worth.”<sup>175</sup>

According to Gillespie, Nietzsche’s interpretation of nihilism is a reversal of the concept “as it was originally understood”, that is, as the magnification of the will in the face of a hidden God, and Nietzsche’s own solution intensifies the problem addressed by it.<sup>176</sup> Nietzsche, however, thoroughly realised this, and the latter became an eminent concern of his and a central aspect of his understanding of nihilism, as we have seen. The craft of philosophy roots in the Socratic culture of marvel and truth-seeking. Socrates was the archetypal figure for Western philosophy, one “with whom all European philosophers identify, even if they reject all his ideas”, as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski imaginatively wrote.<sup>177</sup> “*Weckt ihn auf, ruft der Philosoph im Pathos der Wahrheit*”, Nietzsche writes: “*Doch er selbst versinkt, während er den Schlafenden zu rütteln glaubt, in einen noch tieferen magischen Schlummer.*”<sup>178</sup>

The medieval, Juli Zeh wrote, perhaps is not an epoch in the history of the West at all, but rather the name of human nature.<sup>179</sup> Likewise, nihilism might not be an epoch in the history of philosophy, but a name of thought. Even today there are witches being burned by whatever advanced political system, and now as ever, nihilism plagues the human mind. To conclude on the notion of nihilism, we arrive at a structure of thought that has become manifest in philosophy and seemingly annulled its every hope of retrieving the Absolute over the course of its history, or at least understanding its own practice as something meaningful rather than hopeless. At the same time, nihilism comes to the fore in a less metaphysical, more anthropological way as a timeless companion of the human spirit, as the pathos of destruction that can drive men into committing the most horrendous of atrocities. Such devastation befalls a child who irreversibly broke his favorite toy and refuses every attempt by his parents to console him. Instead, he takes it as an insult that he is to be consoled at all and he intensifies his protest against this new reality at every attempt to calm him.

The question that remains is how to meet this fatalistic view of philosophy. Jaspers, for one, issued a sense of caution when it comes to understanding nihilism. He regarded nihilism as a force incessantly *disrupting* but at once enabling the prospect of true philosophy, rather than bringing it to a definite end. For him, it could conversely be argued that philosophy needs

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> GILLESPIE, M. A., *Nihilism Before Nietzsche*, xii.

<sup>177</sup> KOŁAKOWSKI, L., *Metaphysical Horror*, 1.

<sup>178</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Werke in drei Bänden. Band 3*, 270.

<sup>179</sup> ZEH, J., *Corpus Delicti*, 235.

*I. The Problem of Nihilism*

nihilism for its very existence. Nihilism, for him, was the name for anti-philosophy. Like exceptions and rules, matter and anti-matter, the relation between both is that of a non-relation: they can only communicate by disrupting each other, but cannot truly witness themselves if it were not for the demarcations that reveal the differences between both, but which thus also signal their affinity and dependency.

## **II. KARL JASPERS' PHILOSOPHICAL FAITH IN THE FACE OF NIHILISM**

*“Überall führen die Ungeschlossenheit der Welt und das Scheitern jeden geschlossenen Weltbildes, das Versagen des Planens in der Welt, der menschlichen Entwürfe und Verwirklichungen, die Unvollendbarkeit des Menschseins selber an die Grenze: vor dem Abgrund wird das Nichts oder Gott erfahren.”<sup>180</sup>*

### *Introduction*

In Jaspers' own time, the threat that many associate with nihilism could be felt very intimately. Indeed, as Mark Andréen remarks, it is not at all hard to imagine the world spiralling out of control and reaching an *end*, or even to imagine a yearning for the world to end after the experience of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the impending threat of nuclear conflict.<sup>181</sup> In Jaspers' early use of the term, during the short-lived and tumultuous span of the Weimar Republic, the term had hit the mainstream vocabulary of cultural criticism.<sup>182</sup> The reception of Nietzsche's philosophy was exponentially growing, as was its influence on the societal discourse of the time, while at the same time nihilist theories in German idealist thought and anarchist discourse were abundantly present in the revolutionary intellectual climate after the First World War.<sup>183</sup> Central to these discussions was the idea of a dissolution of cultural values and an accompanying sense of alienation, rapid atomization and mechanization.<sup>184</sup> The societal discourse was pervaded with criticism of degeneration and the destructive aspects of technological change, to which steadily Nietzsche's notion of European nihilism was applied.<sup>185</sup> It was in this context of disarray and frail political structures that Jaspers started addressing the problem of nihilism and how to overcome it. On the one side, his notion of nihilism is situated in a critique of contemporary society, its origins in modern culture and its offspring in the politics of fascism and later also of mass destruction during the Cold War. On the other, Jaspers understood nihilism as a perennial aspect of the human condition and separated it in a philosophical-anthropological fashion from its historic manifestations.

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<sup>180</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 30.

<sup>181</sup> ANDRÉEN, M., 'Nihilism and Responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers', 213.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> RIEDEL, M., 'Nihilismus', 409; ANDRÉEN, M., 'Nihilism and Responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers', 209.

<sup>185</sup> ANDRÉEN, M., 'Nihilism and Responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers', 210.



Jaspers' started developing his notion of nihilism from the onset of his philosophical activity in the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919) and later *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (1931), in which he attempted an examination of his contemporary culture.<sup>186</sup> Here, nihilism primarily came to the fore in sociological and political considerations. In his main philosophical works, the three-volumed *Philosophie* (1932) and *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), Jaspers investigated nihilism more thoroughly, beyond its specific cultural or sociological manifestations. In *Der philosophische Glaube* (1948) and *der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (1962), Jaspers gave his final verdict on the problem of nihilism and how to overcome it. Naturally, Jaspers' writings on Nietzsche also took on a central role in his evaluation of nihilism. In the current chapter, we focus on Jaspers' metaphysical and anthropological interpretation of nihilism, rather than the sociological account of his early writings. Before we do this, however, we take a brief but comprehensive look at Jaspers' project of periechontology, which is necessary to understand Jaspers' critique of nihilism.

### *1. An outline of Jaspers' Periechontological Approach*

Central to Jaspers interpretation of the problem of nihilism was his account of *Grenzsituationen*.<sup>187</sup> This idea of a boundary situation and accordingly a fundamental dichotomy between subject and object, characterizes Jaspers' project of an existentially informed metaphysics. Philosophy, for Jaspers, is a vivid and committal enterprise, caught between its spiritual source in the marvellous aporia of existence, and its cognitive goal in insight, wisdom and communication.<sup>188</sup> On the one side, Jaspers engaged in it through a transcendental study of the methods and categories of consciousness, leaning heavily on the philosophy of Kant. On the other, he examined the meaning, logic and the pathos of truth on the threshold between existentialist phenomenology, hermeneutics and philosophical anthropology. Jaspers sought to reanimate metaphysics in the sense that it, to him, had lost its roots in life.<sup>189</sup> For Jaspers, real philosophy took place outside of the halls of academy, as an existential movement of thought, instantaneously turning inwardly in search of its source and a deeper understanding, and turning towards others as part of a boundless communicative act in

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<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>188</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 37.

<sup>189</sup> WILDERMUTH, A., 'Thinking from the Origin: Critical and Personal Remarks on Jaspers' Philosophy of Philosophizing', 164.

which freedom is allowed to realize itself.<sup>190</sup> An investigation of the impetus of philosophy could then show that it has not ended at all, but that it has to come to terms with the troubled nature of existence itself, symbolized in the multifaceted problem of nihilism. Thought cannot arrive at any truth in the form of knowledge and cannot identify any reference for its own orientation in the world as it can trust neither its own ideas, nor its ideals.

In the *Philosophie*, informed by Hegelian dialectics, phenomenology and Kantian idealism, Jaspers sought to identify the structure and forms of human consciousness.<sup>191</sup> In short, each of the three volumes elaborates on a particular manifestation of Being and an according attitude of consciousness, such as orientation in cognition and scientific (objectifiable) knowledge, existence, as existential self-reflection and transcendence in the symbolic language of metaphysics.<sup>192</sup> Through dialectical confrontation, consciousness can go through these different modalities of existence. The point is not that transcendence awaits at the end of this progression of consciousness through itself, but that consciousness is always that which Jaspers calls transcendence-thinking and that transcendence is an integral part of existence.

In *Von der Wahrheit*, Jaspers continued this effort to identify the deeper sources of experience, existence and truth, as well as the nature of our relation to transcendence, and introduced his notion of the Encompassing (*das Umgreifende*).<sup>193</sup> Here, Jaspers asked what notion of truth can meaningfully add something to our historical existence which can always only relate to anything, including itself, in a dialectical, existential and unabsolved manner. Jaspers argued that the manifestations in which we find or create the world are modes of the Encompassing and that transcendence *precedes* existence, so to say. Every attempt at knowing metaphysically consists of a double dichotomy, one between subject and the object, and one between every determinate object and its relation to the rest of our world.<sup>194</sup> We can work with the world and form concepts, but when we try to *know* reality within these concepts, we are mistreating it. Being itself can as a whole be neither object nor subject, but has to be the Encompassing that reveals itself in the dichotomy.<sup>195</sup> Most importantly, the way in which we position ourselves with regard to this dichotomy and the boundary situation it represents, determines our conception of both *meaning* and *truth*.<sup>196</sup> Being as such cannot be objectified,

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<sup>190</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 45ff.

<sup>191</sup> OLSON, A., *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, 10ff.

<sup>192</sup> THORNHILL, C., MIRON, R., 'Karl Jaspers', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/jaspers/>). Last consulted on 30 Juli 2020.

<sup>193</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 152.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 235ff.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 158ff.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 960-965, 974-978.

which also indicates it cannot be known. In a philosophical *Grundoperation*, we need to shake off the shackles keeping us tied to the alleged Being we find in objects.<sup>197</sup>

A close follower of his philosophy, Jaspers superseded Kant's notion of *Vernunftglaube*, as he argued that consciousness can have genuine experience of transcendence, not in a direct way, but through the elucidation of its own antinomies.<sup>198</sup> Consciousness can realize that immanence is not absolute, but rather a partial manifestation of the Encompassing.<sup>199</sup> However, consciousness cannot arrive at any positive knowledge of transcendence, but can only evoke glimpses of it through *ciphers*, or semblances which we create to refer to what is unthinkable and inexpressible.<sup>200</sup> Ciphers can be found everywhere, for example in religious rites, expressions of art or metaphysical symbols such as the Encompassing itself. These ciphers represent a sense of failure or foundering (*Scheitern*) through which traces of transcendence intrude consciousness, since we can apply names to the Encompassing as much as we like, we can never grasp it.<sup>201</sup> If we use our mental capacity in this direction, however, we can better understand the value of mysticism and philosophy, Jaspers argued, instead of shying away from transcendence in the postulate of the absoluteness of immanence.<sup>202</sup>

The possibility of interpreting the world in a mysterious language of undecipherable code, the undertaking which we may call metaphysics, is, however unsuccessful, a way to elucidate Being precisely by means of being unsuccessful.<sup>203</sup> Being transcends the division into subject and object in which it appears in thought.<sup>204</sup> The Idea of the Encompassing arises precisely from the Kantian statement that the world is only an idea.<sup>205</sup> The Encompassing is not an ontological object, but is non-objectifiable and represents the multiplicity of Being, which we can touch in different ways in concepts, but which we can never fundamentally understand.<sup>206</sup> Immanence, then, is only part of reality, if we take Jaspers' notion of the Encompassing seriously. A part of existence is always transcendent in this sense.<sup>207</sup> In the same way, truth can be plural, since it refers to an origin, not a truth value in a proposition.<sup>208</sup> "Man

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<sup>197</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 29.

<sup>198</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 244-250.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-106.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 1022, 1030, 1036.

<sup>201</sup> THORNHILL, C., MIRON, R., 'Karl Jaspers', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2020. (<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/jaspers/>). Last consulted on 30 Juli 2020.

<sup>202</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 29.

<sup>203</sup> OLSON, A., *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, 33; JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 30.

<sup>204</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 47.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 83.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 680ff, 704.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 751.

seeks to assure himself of the transcendent ground of all reality grasped by the determination of thought”, Ehrlich summarizes. “Such assurance is itself a matter of thought because nothing is real for man unless it is mirrored in thought. But thought, as an act of determination, is inappropriate for the assurance of the indeterminate ground of determinate being which, as this ground, transcends determination.”<sup>209</sup> Thus the suspension of our judgement, the relativity of our valorisation through an act of the will, does not render us empty-handed at all. There is still Being beyond our characterization of it. That something does not lie within our grasp, does not mean it cannot exist.

Jaspers does not propose relativism, nor is his an attempt to solve the existing tension in our relation to Being in a higher synthesis. This is the fundamental insight we gain from the dichotomy: we can question the world as we perceive it and thus go beyond it, but at the same time we cannot leave the world.<sup>210</sup> Any attempt to identify the Encompassing within thought makes it an object and is illusory, thus the tension remains. According to Jaspers, we can approach transcendence at this point *through* the elucidation of the dialectical nature of our cognition, not by nullifying it.<sup>211</sup> Through our dialectic relation to Being, we can experience the Encompassing, not by means of reason alone, but through our own existential experience of the marvellous mystery of Being.

## 2. Jaspers' Interpretation of Nihilism

In this chapter, we put all the necessary bricks in place that together form Jaspers' understanding of nihilism. First, we delve into Jaspers' writings on Nietzsche himself, and more specifically Jaspers' original interpretation of the figure of Jesus in Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist*. After this, we zoom out to Jaspers' interpretation of the problem of nihilism on the whole and his attempt to interpret it in the face of a philosophical anthropology of love. Once this is done, we have made the necessary preparations to meaningfully engage in Jaspers' argumentation of how nihilism, which represents a kind of anti-philosophy, finally is to be *overcome*.

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<sup>209</sup> EHRLICH, L., *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, 4.

<sup>210</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 30.

<sup>211</sup> BURKARD, F. P., *Karl Jaspers. Einführung in sein Denken*, 23.

## 2.1. Nietzsche, Jesus and Christianity

In his main work on Nietzsche, Jaspers aimed to demonstrate how any attempt to understand or to utilize Nietzsche's oeuvre beyond its own ominous paradoxes was simply to mistreat him. Any too strong a focus on Nietzsche's exaltations of conflict, the will to power, the *Übermensch* or the slave moral, or any attempt to allegedly identify Nietzsche's final verdict on an issue, Jaspers confronted with numerous citations arguing from different angles or flat-out rejecting ideas Nietzsche furiously proclaimed elsewhere. According to Jaspers, any attempt at identifying the final message of Nietzsche's philosophy is terribly misinformed when it comes to what the problem of nihilism really symbolizes and which Nietzsche had indeed laid bare in its full scope. Nietzsche, for Jaspers, could best be seen as the wounded modern mind searching in every direction for a solution to its own condition. "*Nietzsche wird zur Krise Europas, die sich in ihm zu menschlicher Gestalt verdichtet.*"<sup>212</sup>

In the monography on Nietzsche, Jaspers primarily argued that Nietzsche's philosophy is fundamentally unfinished, if only because of his nervous breakdown in 1889, before he could complete his project of the transvaluation.<sup>213</sup> But it is also entirely built on contradiction and paradox and thus it is unfinished business in its very spirit. Most of all, Jaspers stressed the boundless creative potential of Nietzsche's philosophy and its appeal that thought has to become existential.<sup>214</sup> In truthfulness itself lies the inclination to nihilism, Jaspers quoted Nietzsche as early as in the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.<sup>215</sup> Nietzsche's notion of the problem nihilism poses, for Jaspers, but equally the opportunity it proposes, lies to a large degree in the refusal to acknowledge the limits of every viewpoint.<sup>216</sup>

Jaspers sought to understand Nietzsche's philosophy in depth and by including everything he had ever written, while simultaneously seeking to formulate an answer to the threat he felt it posed and, finally, without claiming that his account was *the* Nietzsche.<sup>217</sup> Nothing else than the acceptance of the challenge to go beyond Nietzsche's nihilism and to understand its *modus operandi* within and beyond Nietzsche's own mind was Jaspers' main impetus.<sup>218</sup> Once the genie of nihilism is let out of the bottle, it cannot be put back in. Indeed, Jaspers argued that Nietzsche himself had tried many times to find higher ground vis-à-vis the

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<sup>212</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche. Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens*, 13.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, 91ff.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 440ff.

<sup>215</sup> JASPERS, K., *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, 289.

<sup>216</sup> PICKENS, D., 'Wishes of the Heart', 11.

<sup>217</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche. Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens*, 9ff.

<sup>218</sup> YOUNG-BRUEHL, E., *Freedom and Karl Jaspers' Philosophy*, 98-99.

dialectical appearance of everything, but could not find a way to stop or command the motions of nihilism.<sup>219</sup> In *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, Jaspers wrote that Nietzsche was not any specific type of thinker, but rather the exception to all thinkers. As the “*Opfer des Zeitalters*”, he fulfilled something for this era that would be disastrous if many others would have tried to repeat it.<sup>220</sup> Nietzsche abandoned every safe haven and dared to confront the groundlessness of nihilism itself.<sup>221</sup> Nietzsche visited every corner of the modern mind, so to say.<sup>222</sup> He was a follower of Wagner and Schopenhauer, became the explosive nihilist and later the pathetic prophet, and all the while he refuted all of these stances and wanted to overcome them, Jaspers argued.<sup>223</sup> In what way he intended to do so in the end, then, we cannot possibly know.<sup>224</sup> But the dislocating force of nihilism on the mind and on the soul is the perilous challenge the readers of Nietzsche themselves will have to face.

In the smaller book on Nietzsche's relation with Christianity, which Jaspers had written in the wake of his monography but only published after the war in 1946, Jaspers argued that a possibly fruitful attempt at overcoming nihilism could already be spotted in Nietzsche's actual understanding of Christianity. The book, if mentioned at all, in scholarly literature is mainly reviewed in the shadow of the monography and its own richness is often overlooked. The main argument Jaspers made in it, is threefold: (i) Nietzsche's struggle against Christianity came forth out of the Christian in himself, (ii) Nietzsche held a peculiar stance on the figure of Jesus, separating it from Christianity, which could be interpreted as Nietzsche's (iii) attempt to investigate what it would mean to reject all contradictions.

Not only did Nietzsche seek to shake off any Christian residue, he wanted to overcome and surpass it towards something *over-Christian*.<sup>225</sup> His thinking sprung from the Christian tradition, which is aware of its own many tensions between practice and pretence, Jaspers argued. For this task, Nietzsche used precisely the powers that Christianity itself had produced.<sup>226</sup> Out of the centuries long strife with the pressure of the church sprung a “*prachtvolle Spannung des Geistes*”, Jaspers cited from Nietzsche's *Nachlass*: “*mit einem so gespannten Bogen kann man nunmehr nach den fernsten Zielen schießen.*”<sup>227</sup> The task to overcome the form in which morality operated, was always indebted to this same morality, as

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<sup>219</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, 82.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-82.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

it was this morality in its will to truth that turned against itself. This perilous task for the free spirit to fulfil the last consequence of European nihilism, for Nietzsche, was of world historical meaning. Without compromise, Nietzsche positioned himself at the centre of this culmination point of a prehistory that covered three Millenia, and which entailed the gravest danger and greatest possibility for humanity.<sup>228</sup>

Nietzsche's relation to Christianity in this process was not that of a personal emancipative struggle, as Nietzsche had nothing to shake off. Instead, he had internalized the Christian motives and values without their specific Christian contents.<sup>229</sup> The conviction that the utmost potential of truthfulness should be unconditionally demanded of morality characterized him, but the Christian values and matters themselves had no real meaning for him. In it he saw anthropological truths expressed in symbols instead, among which above all the basic truths of the human heart.<sup>230</sup> Jaspers underpins this argument with many citations and personal information from different stadia of Nietzsche's life.

To illustrate how Nietzsche's thought remained to a large degree of Christian nature, Jaspers, for example, pointed towards his notions of history and science. A historical inquiry of Christianity would present it as the unfinished and multi-interpretative process it really is, based on falsifiable hypotheses, a scholarly strategy which Nietzsche's genealogy actively opposed.<sup>231</sup> According to Jaspers, Nietzsche reasoned in an eschatological, so to say, or at least historicist way.<sup>232</sup> His schema of historical thought presupposed the possibility of knowing the course of history in its entirety, the spirit of our own age and which sentiments or ideas are or aren't in accordance with it.<sup>233</sup> Sounds familiar, said Jaspers: creation, original sin, appearance of the son of God, end of the world, new beginning.<sup>234</sup> On the contrary, however, a complete picture of world history is not possible, since we are always only within the whole, not of it, nor above it. Secondly, every knowledge of a certain age can never be more than a mere construction, and it reaches its end when it comes across another world view that does not lie in accordance with it but contains important truths of its own.<sup>235</sup> With regard to his view of science, Nietzsche took the notion of God out of the equation in metaphysics, but held on to it in science. He interpreted science in the form that it assumed under the belief in the Creator:

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-49.

the world has no reason in itself.<sup>236</sup> Nietzsche's contempt for God and the notion of the Absolute, while holding on to a unifying idea of history and science, is paradoxical and nihilist, Jaspers argued.<sup>237</sup>

Compared to Jesus, Christianity, for Nietzsche, was fundamentally anti-Christian. Jesus, for him, was not the source of Christianity at all, but a means that it had appropriated for its own purposes.<sup>238</sup> The pathos of resentment of the weak and its own will to power and ability to become creative, was the source of Christianity. It simply absorbed the figure of Jesus which was alien to its own motives.<sup>239</sup> Jesus' way of life did not stem from resentment, nor did it represent impotence, but was rather a lived manifestation of love beyond any ascetic impetus.<sup>240</sup> Precisely for this reason, the appropriation of the example and truth of Jesus was the most radical of lies from the start.<sup>241</sup> Christianity, for Nietzsche, used everything it came across that contained truth to absorb it in a falsifying and hypocrite interpretation.<sup>242</sup> In fact, Jesus had on the whole nothing to do with the history of Christianity.<sup>243</sup> Nietzsche argued that Jesus was a psychological type who propagated, or rather: lived a *new* way of life, elevating love above law, not a new faith, from “‘*der tiefe Instinkt*’ *dafür, ‘wie man leben müsse, um sich im Himmel, um sich Ewig zu fühlen*’”.<sup>244</sup> On the one side, Nietzsche found the same decadence in Jesus' way of life as he found in Christianity, as the negation of the tragic truth in favour of *higher* ideals and a contempt for reality as such by someone for whom tragic reality becomes unbearable.<sup>245</sup> Nietzsche's anti-Christian resistance at many occasions went as far as the figure of Jesus itself.<sup>246</sup> On the other side, however, he at times indicated respect for Jesus on the very same grounds, most notably his truthfulness. Jesus brought a way of life into practice, which only after him became a belief.<sup>247</sup> Jesus did not adhere to nor did he oppose any doctrine, but he rather *lived* and did so in a state of bliss, untroubled by any bad consciousness. Jesus' posture of non-resistance was so radical that he did not resist his own execution. Jesus did not preach any truth but rather incorporated his *truth*.<sup>248</sup> In fact, Nietzsche argued, it is impossible to imitate

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<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>237</sup> ROSENTHAL, K., 'Das Problem des Nihilismus im Denken von Karl Jaspers', 426.

<sup>238</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, 25.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-29.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18; NIETZSCHE, F., *Der Antichrist*, [33].

<sup>245</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, 22.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>247</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Der Antichrist*, [32].

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*



the example of Jesus. With regard to an authentic life, the thought of trying to imitate it, entirely misses its point. In *Der Antichrist*, Nietzsche wrote: “*Im Grunde gab es nur einen Christen, und der starb am Kreuz.*”<sup>249</sup>

For Nietzsche's Jesus, notions like *love*, *truth* and *light* signalled the deepest intimacy, whereas at the same time these notions represented mere signs and semblances, as did the notions of reality or nature.<sup>250</sup> Jesus thus lived from a deeper insight that was not communicable, through which he managed to affirm both Heaven and Earth, but not by opposing the one to the other, or by using the one to provide the other meaning.<sup>251</sup> “*Dieser Glaube formuliert sich nicht – er lebt, er wehrt sich gegen Formeln.*”<sup>252</sup> For Jesus, there were no longer any contradictions, and thus neither any notion of guilt: “*Die Sünde, jedwedem Distanz-Verhältnis zwischen Gott und Mensch ist abgeschafft.*”<sup>253</sup>

It is difficult to identify the historical figure of Jesus from the gospels, as Jaspers himself has tried elsewhere.<sup>254</sup> The depiction of Jesus as radically unmoved, non-violent and tolerant, or the attempt to separate his way of life from his dogmatic prophecy of the Apocalypse, is at least controversial, if not entirely unbelievable.<sup>255</sup> However, the possibility vis-à-vis nihilism that is introduced by this interpretation of Jesus and the way he is separated from Christianity, is valuable as an exercise of thought. It is an argument that can indeed be read in Nietzsche's writings, be it somewhat indirectly, and which can be promising with regard to the deadlock of nihilism.<sup>256</sup>

Jaspers argued that Nietzsche at times sought this overcoming of contradiction that he ascribed to Jesus for himself. Nietzsche did not develop this idea directly, but opened an endless field of possibility at the edge of Christianity and the dismissal of every finite stance.<sup>257</sup> “*Nietzsche war alles – nicht durch Realisierung in der Welt, sondern im leidenschaftlich versuchenden Erfahren seiner Seele. Er wusste es, dass er in jedem Winkel der moderne Seele gesessen hat.*”<sup>258</sup> The same held for his interpretation of Jesus, and this is important since Nietzsche's struggle with the figure of Jesus lies at the very edge of his own Christianity. Precisely by pressing Christianity to its limits, Nietzsche actively pursued the most radical

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<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, [39].

<sup>250</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, 17.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Der Antichrist*, [32].

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, [33].

<sup>254</sup> JASPERS, K., *Die maßgebende Menschen. Sokrates, Buddha, Konfuzius, Jesus.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-179.

<sup>256</sup> JASPERS, K., *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, 70-71.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

consequences of nihilism in the hope of also introducing its own overcoming. The final polarity of Nietzsche's thought, thus, was that of contradiction itself, Jaspers argued.<sup>259</sup>

If we follow Nietzsche wherever he takes us, without stopping at any one combative position, we are unable to leave the perpetual maelstrom of the movement of thought, Jaspers argued.<sup>260</sup> At the heart of Nietzschean philosophy cannot lie any certain truth, but rather the boundless movement of thought itself: *“das heißt ein Denken, das ganz und gar nicht abschließt, sondern den Raum frei macht, keinen Boden bereitet, sondern nur ein unbekanntes Zukünftiges ermöglicht.”*<sup>261</sup> At this point, Jaspers saw Nietzsche as a prophet of the malaise of the modern age, but he also argued that a tendency was present in Nietzsche that was similar to his own philosophical position: *“Die Widersprüche lassen uns nicht zur Ruhe kommen, weil gerade durch sie in ihnen selbst die Wahrheit sich ankündigt, die als solche nirgends selbst da ist.”*<sup>262</sup> Most importantly, he argued that Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole showed a way of thinking that sought to overcome the seemingly all-controlling tendency of the dialectic of nihilism.<sup>263</sup> Nietzsche appears to say everything at once, even self-opposing and self-contradictory views.<sup>264</sup> How should we relate to a thinker, Jaspers asked, that does not leave us with any fixed or teachable truth at all, but whose insight into the problem of nihilism still touches us deeply.<sup>265</sup> When we try to understand Nietzsche, *“wir werden zu Teilnehmern eines Prozesses, ohne selbst wirklich zu diesem Prozess zu werden.”*<sup>266</sup> Our understanding tries to empathize and to reason with this thinking, but by doing so it reaches the very limits of itself and it is tortured incessantly.<sup>267</sup> We are tasked with enduring and consciously accepting the ambiguity and agility of a thinking that does not allow us to capture it in knowledge.<sup>268</sup> *“[Nietzsche] will uns, indem er uns ins Nichts stellt, gerade dadurch die Weite unseres Raumes schaffen; indem er uns der Bodenlosigkeit ansichtig macht, gerade dadurch die Möglichkeit schaffen, unseren echten Grund zu erfassen aus dem wir kommen.”*<sup>269</sup>

It is now clear what becomes possible if Nietzsche's nihilism is interpreted in this way. The philosophical truth of Nietzsche's philosophy is indeed an existential one, which lies

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<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.* (Jaspers' own emphasis).

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 80

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

beyond *rationalist alternatives* or *non-committal, aesthetical world views*, and cannot be solved *once and for all* or merely *witnessed*, but has to be *lived* and *endured*.<sup>270</sup> In it, Jaspers views his own interpretation of transcendence as the Encompassing. “*Nietzsche und mit ihm der moderne Mensch lebt nicht mehr in Beziehung auf das Eine, das Gott ist, sondern stürzt, gebunden an den Leitfaden christlicher Einheit der Menschheitsgeschichte, in das transcendenzlose Eine, das diese Welt und die Geschichte der Menschheit sei.*”<sup>271</sup> However: “[*der moderne Mensch*] muss wissend mit Nietzsche erfahren, dass es diese Weltimmanenz als Eine gar nicht gibt”, and with it every notion of a knowable whole has to be surrendered.<sup>272</sup> The passage through the abyss of nihilism becomes necessary for an authentic way of life and the notion of an Encompassing that we discover in it, requires our courage and our endurance: “*Im Logos selbst erwächst der Drang, sich ständig zum Scheitern zu bringen, aber nicht, um sich preiszugeben, sondern um sich in neuer, erweiterter, erfüllterer Gestalt zurückzugewinnen, und diesen Process in eine unerfüllbare Unendlichkeit fortzusetzen.*”<sup>273</sup>

## 2.2. A Philosophical Anthropology of Nihilism

In *Von der Wahrheit*, nihilism comes to the fore in the context of an elaboration of the border situation, which can either lead the thinker to the abyss of nothingness or the Encompassing. However, the border situation and the individual and societal attempts of crossing it is not *the* problem of nihilism.<sup>274</sup> Nihilism, for Jaspers, might originate in this human condition, but it is an ambiguous and threatening force of its own. The problem it poses does not come at us in one clear form, and cannot be dealt with easily. It poses an external problem to us, in the absence of objective meaning, but originates also internally out of the ways in which we are capable to think on the one hand and feel on the other. In the first instance, Jaspers proposed an understanding of transcendence that can at least partly offer an alternative to it. In the second case, due to our own human nature, the nihilist pathos has to be overcome time and again in a personal inward movement of spiritual orientation.

This difficult relationship we have to the Encompassing through our own failure on the one hand and the problematic metaphysical structure of thought on the other is central to Jaspers' anthropology of nihilism. If our failure is a casualty of our relation to transcendence,

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 42. (My own emphasis).

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. (My own emphasis).

<sup>274</sup> ANDRÉN, M., ‘Nihilism and Responsibility in the writings of Karl Jaspers’, 211.

than this situation can easily lead to passivity, as well as an identification of reality with destruction itself.<sup>275</sup> Here, we become victim to nihilism in the sense that every sacrifice we make in the search for Being is held to be in vain and we cannot endure the permanent openness and unsteadiness we experience, but seek the comfort of certainty. Jaspers characterises this pathos as uneasiness, but it can also lead to hatred, contempt (*Verachtung*) and aggression.<sup>276</sup> As an urge to destroy (*Vernichtungsdrang*) it might turn against everything, including itself, based on a connection between lust for cruelty, contempt, insecurity and compassion.<sup>277</sup> This *will to nothingness*, if we may say, might develop a reasoning of its own, of which its bearer is at the mercy. “*Die Nichtigkeit will zerstören, will Leid und Zerstörung wenigstens sehen, will Abenteuer und Krieg als solche, drängt in den Tod und will mit dem eigenen Sterben alles Lebendige mitreißen in ihr Nichts.*”<sup>278</sup> The experience of nothingness can become unbearable and explode beyond any control, leaving nothing untouched. Just as easily, however, it can transform in what Jaspers called *erfüllten Negativität*, a self-absolutizing tendency which results in a reality of its own making to find refuge in.<sup>279</sup> “*Diese führt durch Nein zum Ja, durch Vernichtung zur Wiedergeburt, durch Sterben zum Leben, durch Leiden zu einer Selbstverwandlung, durch das Nichts zum Sein.*”<sup>280</sup> Consciousness seeks something familiar and stable, which it can hold to be Being itself (*das eigentliche Sein*), and in which it can find comfort, irrespective of its own nature.<sup>281</sup> “*Etwas soll in allem Ruin überdauern, etwas soll unantastbar sein*”, even if this sense of stability is sought in transience, decay or active destruction itself.<sup>282</sup> On the brink between the experience of being and nothingness, Jaspers argued, restlessness or the urge to revolt (*empörung*) and an urge to find rest (*Ruhe*) are not so far apart, and it might be an endless pursuit of heroism or conflict itself that provides a sense of meaning or solace.<sup>283</sup> We can take false reassurance in illusions, or we might lapse so far in the tendency to oppose existing norms in order to be free, that we can no longer accept any norm.

“*Der wirkliche, nicht nur gedachte Nihilismus hat viele Gestalten. Er ist mit den Affekten des Hasses, der Verachtung, der Aggressivität verbunden.*”<sup>284</sup> Since this nihilism cannot generate its own positive orientation, but can only orientate itself by placing the particle

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<sup>275</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 887.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 890.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 890.

of negation before that which it opposes, doing away with it all, it is doomed from the onset. “Der ‘Abtrünnige’, der eine Welt verließ, der er von Geburt an angehört hatte, den Grund der ihn tragenden Überlieferung, verneint sie nun, weil er gar nicht eigentlich dabei gewesen war.”<sup>285</sup> Whatever ideology or world view he now opposes, in order to oppose it, he has to repeat its pattern: “Er hatte nur an der fixierten Abstraktionen der Dogmen, an den blinden Voraussetzungen teilgehabt. In seiner neuen Verfassung stellt er seine faktische alte nur mit anderen Inhalten her, nun den Nihilismus offenbarend, dem er von Anfang an verfallen war.”<sup>286</sup> Nihilism, here, becomes a struggle for self-justification, which quickly realizes it cannot actually realize what it desires.<sup>287</sup>

In *Der philosophische Glaube*, Jaspers added new manifestations of the pathos of nihilism, reviewing them from bad to worse, in order to understand the reach of its threat to thought. It seems, Jaspers argued, that any form of nihilism can only live of impulses of vitality. Thus nihilism subverts itself from the onset, because if it lives merely of these impulses it cancels out itself and becomes a vitalist belief. Confronted with the experience of nothingness, it becomes the name for the theoretical justification of the experience that all is in vain.<sup>288</sup> This nihilism traps itself as it needs to ground itself somewhere to be able to express itself, that is, in the will to truth. It can only negate truth values of any kind if it has a criterion to measure them to, but in doing so also has to turn against itself, spiralling into endless disarray: “Der radikale Nihilismus verfährt daher im Denken so, dass er zunächst an selbstverständlich anerkannten Maßstäben verwirft, um dann alles in einem einzigen Wirbel sich gegenseitigen Verneinens verschwinden zu lassen.”<sup>289</sup> This nihilism quickly becomes the victim of its own alleged sublime critical ability. It might claim that there is no God, merely because it presupposes that any evidence can only be valid if it consists of a rational proof of finite things by finite means.<sup>290</sup> In other words, this nihilism is still positivist, as it mistakes the “*platte Erfahrbarkeit*” of existence for Being itself. It cannot state that there is nothing at all, since there indeed is a *world*, but it holds that everything which *is in* or *of* the world is at the same time *nothing* or *devoid of anything meaningful* (*Nichtig*). Vis-à-vis the mystery of Being, this nihilism turns its head down to earth and only accepts empirical realities, and then denounces them since they cannot still its own hunger. Its main and fatal presupposition, thus, is the

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<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 891.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 104.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

absoluteness of bare life (*bloßen Leben*).<sup>291</sup> It misunderstands the *existential* way in which we relate to Being and its expectations are senseless. How can it condemn something it cannot really grasp in mere empirical terms? For example, it cannot even identify something as happiness (*Glück*) properly, since happiness cannot be determined in any definite appearance, and proves to be very fragile, volatile but also resilient in every form or occasion it appears in. It might abandon us one moment and reappear the next, beyond our control. A positivist arrangement with reality, Jaspers concluded, inevitably falls short on its own terms.<sup>292</sup> It has no criteria left to determine what is real at all. To the extent in which nihilism abides by its rules, it itself becomes hollow and disingenuous.

However, this nihilism is also still superficial. A real problem occurs when all presuppositions, unproven and unprovable as they come, disappear. “*Die Negationen bleiben dann erhalten, aber dazu wird auch noch das bei den Negationen jeweils vorausgesetzte Wahrheitsminimum negiert. Dann ist der Wirbel da, in dem kein Halt ist, außer der je gegenwärtigen sinnfremden Vitalität in ihrer gedankenlosen Unmittelbarkeit.*”<sup>293</sup> This groundless, unreflective immediacy leaves man with nothing but the happenstance of nature, since there can also no longer be any receiving end of the vitality and shock of nihilism. There is not one authority left through the annihilation or rejection of which it can know itself, or to which it can present its dismay. It has nothing left but its own desperate madness.<sup>294</sup> “*Wohin bewegen wir uns? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend?*”, Nietzsche’s madman asked the bystanders to his breakdown: “*Und rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Gibt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts?*”<sup>295</sup>

Jaspers characterized nihilism as philosophy out of *hatred*. Hatred, here, is not understood in a psychological way, but rather as a discursive operation of thought of rejection, annihilation, unbelonging, distrust and contempt. However: “*im tiefsten Hasse, im Nihilismus der Hassphilosophie steckt noch ein Positives. Die Leidenschaft selbst ist verkehrte Liebe.*”<sup>296</sup> Hatred, on its own, is untenable as it cannot create, but only reject. More importantly, it is never lost entirely, but can always suddenly turn back.<sup>297</sup> The whole of the pathos of the philosopher can be defined on the axis of love and hatred, Jaspers argued.<sup>298</sup> Hatred can consume thought

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<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, [125].

<sup>296</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 1021.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

and apply philosophy as a means for its destructive will to nothingness. However, love knows a deeper and more sustainable origin than hatred. If hatred is fundamentally polemical, love is not, if hatred can only exclude, love represents a radical openness and interest.<sup>299</sup> Love awakens a desire and demands certain actions of us, the fulfilment of which would not result in the restoration of a state of indifference, but the deepest agreement with Being: “*nichts zu belachen, nichts zu beweinen, sondern es zu erkennen.*”<sup>300</sup> Like hatred, love can only exist through a tension which it seeks to put to rest. However, like hatred, it can never find this state of rest, as it is foreign to its own nature. The fulfilment of love lies precisely in allowing and nurturing desire itself, which gives its object its splendour in the first place.<sup>301</sup> “*Wer liebt, sieht das Sein des Anderen, das er als Sein aus dem Ursprung grundlos und unbedingt bejaht: er will, dass es sei.*”<sup>302</sup> This notion of love is the key, Jaspers argued, to understanding the Encompassing. It reveals to us the insight that the Encompassing survives every nihilist attempt at annihilating it and that we relate to it through our own radical openness to Being in consciousness: “*Aus der tiefsten umgreifenden Liebe würden die Liebe und der Hass suspendiert, um die ruhige Objektivität der Gerechtigkeit zu gewinnen, die nur noch reine Liebe ohne Gegensatz, ohne Hass wäre. Es wäre die uneingeschränkte Offenheit, das Geltenlassen, das Sehen- und Hörenkönnen, dem alles Sein sich zeigt.*”<sup>303</sup>

If in the previous part it was stated that a possible way to deactivate the pathos of nihilism lies in Nietzsche's characterisation of the figure of Jesus, living on the threshold *between Heaven and Earth*, it means precisely this. Without trying to suspend the tension characterizing existence, this way of life affirms its own value without condemning something else, as it finds its value in the radical openness toward Being and discovers an endless possibility within itself, connecting what is historical and existential to what is the eternal truth of the Encompassing. This feeling is captured in love.<sup>304</sup> However, this love can still relapse into hatred, as it remains something that is existential. “*Jaspers kommt es darauf an die Spannung aufrechtzuerhalten, ohne einen der beiden Pole absolut zu setzen und den anderen aufzugeben, ohne aber auch beide in einem Dritten aufzulösen*”, Franz-Peter Burkard observes.<sup>305</sup> This is why Jaspers calls his kind of thinking a kind of *floating*: “*Dieser Eigenart*

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<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 1020.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 1021.

<sup>301</sup> BURKARD, F. P., *Karl Jaspers. Einführung in sein Denken*, 84.

<sup>302</sup> JASPERS, K., *Philosophie II*, 277.

<sup>303</sup> JASPERS, K., *Von der Wahrheit*, 1021.

<sup>304</sup> BURKARD, F. P., *Karl Jaspers. Einführung in sein Denken*, 86.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

widerstrebt die vereinfachende Tendenz unseres Verstandes, der sich der Spannung entledigen will."<sup>306</sup>

### 3. Nihilism and Anti-Philosophy

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the head and the heart are intimately related, which only adds to the problem of nihilism, but perhaps also offers a solution to it. We have seen how Jaspers' interpretation of Nietzsche's relation to Christianity and his own philosophical anthropology of love might function as part of a deactivation of nihilism. But the heart can easily choke the head when all its blood flows back onto itself, as the saying goes. In the final part of this thesis we return once more to the problem of nihilism and analyse how its overcoming finally takes shape in Jaspers' theory of philosophical faith. Not only did Jaspers discursively present nihilism as philosophizing out of hatred, he also characterized it as philosophical unbelief. Philosophical unbelief represents a kind of anti-philosophy, via which the value of philosophy can be demonstrated.

#### 3.1. Philosophical Unbelief

Jaspers devoted a large part of *Der philosophische Glaube* to the problem of nihilism as part of what he called *Unphilosophie*, or *philosophische Unglaube*, which we will also refer to here as anti-philosophy. For Jaspers, a certain spiritual focus (*Glaubensurprung*) is required for any authentic and existential philosophizing, drawing from its openness toward the Encompassing.<sup>307</sup> However, genuine philosophy is often confronted with a kind of thinking in which its source in the Encompassing is surrendered or obscured, as is the case in nihilism.<sup>308</sup> Instances of Jaspers' *Unphilosophie* take themselves to be genuine philosophy, and might even be acknowledged as such by others, and in this capacity they threaten any real philosophizing. This is not a trivial matter for Jaspers. The reality of influential forms of anti-philosophy give way to a perennial standoff in which philosophical faith has to affirm and realize itself time and again, and in which it can lose itself in an instance.

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>307</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 90.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*



*Unphilosophie* is a way of knowing that turns philosophy into its own opposite by trying to rid it of its uncertainty and openness: “*Unglaube nennen wir jede Haltung, welche in der vermeintlich absoluten Immanenz steht unter Leugnung der Transzendenz.*”<sup>309</sup> It represents “*ein grundsätzliches Irren in einer völligen Negation, die doch in durchschaubaren Ersatzbildungen positiv zu sein scheint.*”<sup>310</sup> Any philosophical unbelief can only keep up appearances with regard to the troubled nature of its own presuppositions. It only *acknowledges* immanence, but it cannot help notions of transcendence reappearing in it. The question it should ask is: what exactly is immanence? “*Der Unglaube sagt: Das Dasein, - die Realität, - die Welt.*” But existence (*Dasein*) is only *verschwindende Gegenwärtigkeit*, reality escapes us precisely when we try to grasp it and the world is merely an idea that is never complete or manageable. “*Der Unglaube ist nie beim Sein, aber er kann nicht umhin, einen Sensesatz zuzulassen in Inhalten des Aberglaubens.*”<sup>311</sup> Thus it can only be “overcome” in a way of thinking that comes to terms with itself as a border situation.

Jaspers' first examples of anti-philosophy, *Dämonologie* and *Menschenvergötterung*, are perhaps evident, but their characterization adds to a better understanding of the threat to philosophy that anti-philosophy represents at its core. *Daämonologie* is a mindset that spots a complex structure of competing *gods* or *powers* in the nature of reality, in the sense that it condenses concepts to viable entities to which it can relate itself or ascribe events. On the one side, it believes that it can have a closer affinity with a certain kind of divine instance, interpreting any human inclination, such as hatred or bad luck, as part of a mythical order of the cosmos. For example: a belief in Fate. On the other, it can also be found in demonic expressions which relate to that which is simply incomprehensible, that which lies “*an der Grenze der Geschehens.*”<sup>312</sup> This incomprehensible force hides within but also beyond the control of my will and thought and cannot be observed, yet it is represented as something operative and real. Here the demonic no longer comprises any clear worldview or belief of sorts, but is merely a metaphorical way of addressing the uncanny.

The question, with regard to the demonic, is to what extent we can ever de-mythologize ourselves, and what this means. In an explicitly anti-religious, anti-transcendent worldview, in which the will seeks to understand itself on the basis of immanent means, the door to demonic world views is easily reopened. In a psychological approach, Jaspers' argues that the subject

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<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 90-91.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

still seeks stability and an origin for certain powers it finds within itself but cannot grasp. An idea, be it secularized, can still be fearful, as if it lives a life of its own. Jaspers argues that contemporary forms of *Dämonologie* are paradoxically even more unbelievable and foreign to the existential reality they know their origin in, than those of ancient times.<sup>313</sup> “*Wo dämonologische Anschauung ursprünglich war, da war sie wie der Mythos die geschichtliche Gestalt existenziell erfahrener Wirklichkeit.*”<sup>314</sup> The sensed presence of demonic forces in previous times, generated a dialectical self-identity, in which the subject affirms itself through either confrontation or dedication.<sup>315</sup> The worship of fertility through rites and temples can grant us a sense of familiarity to nature, whereas a tragic view can make us feel as if we have no real choice and are at the mercy of Fate. However, these attitudes are not necessarily superstitious, but merely ways to relate ourselves to that which supersedes us.

In our own time, the demonic appears in the disturbing irregularities in our own very attempt to control reality: “*Die ‘Dämonie der Technik’ ist das aus der Verwirklichung technischer Daseinsbewältigung wie etwas Selbständiges überwältigend Zurückwirkende.*”<sup>316</sup> The demonic originates in the experience of a border situation, and as we have discarded transcendence, it materializes in overwhelming ideas. Jaspers appreciated the value of the disruption that philosophers like Marx, Freud and Nietzsche have brought about.<sup>317</sup> However, he refuted any attempt at explaining the lack of control and autonomy in the world, or the limited reach of enlightened reason, in terms of obscure forces in our unconscious or in our will. Man can never be explained as *pars pro toto*, however convincingly overwhelming any one particular point of reference might seem, and is instead always *toto pro pars*, in the sense that transcendence simply precedes any objectification and always also eludes it as the incomprehensible Encompassing.<sup>318</sup> “*Dämonologie entwirft ein Zwischensein, das weder empirische Realität noch transzendente Wirklichkeit ist.*”<sup>319</sup> Jaspers’ main concern with *Dämonologie*, here, is that any such philosophical attempt renders humanity unnecessarily *unfree*, because it needs to discharge its unrest from a lack of understanding in some kind of force. It binds itself to either an overly tragic worldview, an aesthetic one or one driven by the belief in the irrational. This complaint can be heard loudest vis-à-vis positivist thinking. “*Der Mensch wird verloren. Innerhalb der dämonologischen Weltanschauung ist Freiheit nur noch*

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<sup>313</sup> NI, L., ‘Das Begriff des Dämonischen bei Karl Jaspers’, 351.

<sup>314</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 93.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>317</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 441.

<sup>318</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 51ff.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

*die Hinnahme des Schicksals, das den Menschen ergreift.*"<sup>320</sup> Humanity, here, can be little more than the immanent disposition "*unter gewissen Bedingungen sich menschenfreundlich zu verhalten*", but it can never account for anything deeper.<sup>321</sup> Life becomes volatile and unaccounted for, as it is reduced to uncontrollable forces and immerses itself in mere nature. Whereas humanity is precisely the blunt possibility to supersede its mere biology and enter a moral realm.

At the other end of philosophical unbelief lies *Menschenvergötterung*. The deification of influential figures and massification of their cults of worship has always provided a sense of the sacred and a sense of stability in the world, from Ghandi to film stars.<sup>322</sup> Most successful, however, have been tyrants in their personification of an alleged meeting of the political and the divine. He who does not voluntarily binds himself to its law, is forced and paradoxically in this process, the tyrant as "*ein Werkzeug des Bösen zur Züchtigung des Bösen*" becomes the object of deification.<sup>323</sup> Idolisation and idolatry, Jaspers argues, are perhaps ineradicable and are central to the structures of great religions. In our own *spiritually wary* and *tired* period of time, this deification is reflected in a blind worship of grand persona and charlatans alike, whose authority becomes unquestionable.<sup>324</sup> Why this is important, is because *Menschenvergötterung* seeks absolute obedience beyond relative law or institutions, as well as a tangible proximity to this absolute.<sup>325</sup> If God did speak in the world, this calling would be irresistible.<sup>326</sup> This is not the case, Jaspers argues, our worldly abyss tasks us with the heavy burden of accepting that transcendence cannot be present in the same way other things in the world are: "*Menschenvergötterung entwürdigt den Menschen, indem sie es ihm leicht machen.*"<sup>327</sup>

Defining and uniting both forms of philosophical unbelief is their orientation toward the profound unrest of nihilism, as *Dämonologie* and *Menschenvergötterung* are only attempts to shy away from its terrifying, unbearable yet seductive force. We do not know what to do with our experiences of border situations and the dire state of our existence. Because reality transcends us, we look for certainties by means of philosophical methods, which, however, are unable to deliver. Nihilism itself, then, is the name for the *offene Glaubenslosigkeit* that lies underneath these attempts and dares to look itself in the eye.<sup>328</sup> "*Er wagt es, aufzutreten ohne*

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<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*

*Verkleidung. Alle Glaubensinhalte sind ihm hinfällig geworden, alle Auslegungen der Welt und des Seins hat er als Täuschung entlarvt.*<sup>329</sup> As such, it is a perennial companion to humanity as it finds itself in the world. Unbearable as it is, in postures such as *Dämonologie* or *Menschenvergötterung*, the experience of nihilism retrieves a kind of steadiness.<sup>330</sup> In the desolation of Nothingness, Jaspers writes, life, even if it is not lived in active desperation, becomes hopeless. Thus it hides its own want under the cloak of some higher cause or necessary order of Being.<sup>331</sup> However, these tendencies of unbelief, Jaspers argues, offer their own overcoming.

In the case of the demonic view, Jaspers sees a reflection of the *language of ciphers* revealing a glimpse of transcendence in the world. Mythological thought holds perennial truths that cannot be purified or translated into de-mythologized concepts, but without which life is impoverished.<sup>332</sup> How to relate to them properly, that is the question of our time. In the case of deification, Jaspers argues that man is indeed everything he has in the world.<sup>333</sup> Any *overcoming* of nihilism needs to engage in the problem of idealism. Lastly, the truth in the *offene Glaubenslosigkeit* of nihilism cannot be refuted. At the edges of our reality, it is hard to fend off desperation and unrest, and at this point, any faith cannot deny that it is always also a *wager*.<sup>334</sup> Genuine nihilism is irrefutable, just as faith is indemonstrable.<sup>335</sup> “*Es liegt etwas Empörendes im hochmütigen Verachten des Nihilismus*”, Jaspers concludes: “*Wer angesichts der entsetzlichen Sinnlosigkeiten und Ungerechtigkeiten diese nicht in ihrer vollen Realität vergegenwärtigt, sondern in einer fast automatischen Selbstverständlichkeit über sie hinweg geht durch Reden von Gott, kann uns unwahrhaftiger erscheinen als der Nihilist selber.*”<sup>336</sup> One could better ask why we haven't all become nihilists, Jaspers asks wittingly, rather than to try to dispute or ignore (*übersehen*) its reality.<sup>337</sup>

*Unphilosophie* and traditional philosophy know many parallels, most notably in their tendency to objectify reality. As any knowledge has only a limited significance and any evidence presupposes a given finitude, truth claims about the totality of the world are nonsensical.<sup>338</sup> This verdict disqualifies any ontological thinking. We cannot set forth a theory

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<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> KOLAKOWSKI, L., *Jezus. Een apologetisch en sceptisch essay*, 61ff.

<sup>333</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 108.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

of Being in its totality as it by default requires truth claims which in reality relate to particular things within Being, not Being itself. Ontology is always trapped in immanence: “*Gegen diese Verkehrung philosophischer Erhellung zum Seinwissen steht das wahre Philosophieren.*”<sup>339</sup> This true philosophizing does not abandon “*den Raum des Umgreifenden*” in favour of a false sense of certainty. In the next and last part of this thesis, we examine Jaspers' argument for a philosophical faith.

### 3.2. Philosophical Faith

With regard to the question of how we ought to live, Jaspers writes at the beginning of *Der philosophische Glaube*, two main and stubborn answers keep resurfacing. Either we compel ourselves to live by the belief in a revelation of any kind, since this could allegedly save us from the pathos of nihilism. Or, we live strictly by the guidance of reason and the sciences. In the former strategy, philosophy is tolerated, but not taken seriously. In the latter, it loses every right, as everything that is not science, becomes illusion.<sup>340</sup> Both alternatives, revelation against nihilism and science against illusion, are rallying cries that rip man apart in contradictions, as both try to explain reality by means of too short a reach.<sup>341</sup> Philosophical faith, Jaspers' own alternative, can manage to overcome nihilism by deactivating it and by affirming itself in the process without doing so at the expense of what may lie beyond.

To illustrate how philosophical faith relates to truth, Jaspers draws a comparison between Giordano Bruno and Galileo Galilei, two illustrious figures at the forefront of the intellectual struggle of the free spirit against the dogmatic yoke of anti-philosophy. The one *believed*, the other *knew*. Both were demanded by the inquisition to retract their theses. Bruno was willing to distance himself from all but those that mattered most to him, and became a martyr for his truth, whereas Galilei easily recanted his claim that the Earth moved around the sun: *eppur si muove!* “And yet it moves”, he said. Galilei's truth would still exist without him either believing or actively defending it. It would be slightly out of proportion, Jaspers argued, to want to die for a provable truth: “*Das ist der Unterschied: Wahrheit, die durch Widderruf leidet, und Wahrheit, deren Widderruf sie nicht antastet.*”<sup>342</sup> The one is not generally valid, but existential and historical, yet unconditional to its believer. The other exists even without the

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<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 109.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

knower, is unhistorical and conditional to certain propositions and methods of knowledge of finite things.<sup>343</sup>

Now, what to think of Bruno? His position of faith and devotion is not irrational or arbitrary at all.<sup>344</sup> Faith refers to both an act and a content, as its subjective and objective sides coincide. Faith does have an object, but this is no objective truth that determines this faith irrespective of its subjective act, nor is it so that its act or subjective truth is not determined by its object, but rather creates it.<sup>345</sup> *“Der Glaube ist Eins in dem, was wir trennen als Subjekt und Objekt, als Glaube aus dem und als Glaube an den wir glauben.”*<sup>346</sup> In the dichotomy between both subject and object, and in experiential and cognitive forms consciousness is bound to, we become aware of a reality which itself is neither the object in front of us as we conceive it, nor the subject we are ourselves.<sup>347</sup> This attitude of faith allows us to meaningfully position ourselves toward this dichotomy: *“Wenn Glaube weder nur Inhalt noch nur ein Akt des Subjekts ist, sondern seine Wurzel hat in dem, was die Erscheinungshaftigkeit trägt, dann ist er zu vergewärtigen nur mit dem, was weder Objekt noch Subjekt, sondern beides in Einem, das in der Spaltung von Subjekt und Objekt Erscheinende ist.”*<sup>348</sup> Philosophical faith, then, is a way to elucidate this Encompassing and to realize or evocate it in consciousness, but not in a direct way. Instead, it is a way of reaching an *existential* truth in the relation to the Encompassing: *“Das Gedankenwerk ist immer das Halbe, das zur Wahrheit der Ergänzung dessen verlangt, der es nicht nur als Gedanken denkt, sondern es damit geschichtlich in der eigenen Existenz werden lässt.”*<sup>349</sup> Thus the philosopher can free himself from the pull of his own finite thoughts, as he is always more than he thinks he is.<sup>350</sup> Likewise, transcendence cannot realize itself on its own, but requires consciousness to become aware of it, and in its stance toward transcendence existence itself becomes aware that it is itself part of the Encompassing and that it really is free.<sup>351</sup> As if the universe has to wake up through our eyes to realize it exists, one could say.

After all, faith always originates where knowing ends, but not thinking, nor reality itself. Philosophy is a form of faith in the sense that it only appears at the edge of possible knowledge, only thrives in the act of not-knowing and as such represents a specific yet *open-ended*

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<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.* (My own emphasis).

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

application of thought. “*Daher kann keine Philosophie als Gedankenbilde sich sinnvoll in sich schließen. (...) Er gewinnt keine Ruhe in einem Bestand. Er bleibt das Wagnis radikaler Offenheit.*”<sup>352</sup> Unbelief actively aims at self-satisfaction through the determination of the undeterminable. Faith actively pursues the opposite: it affirms itself in a perpetual state of unrest.<sup>353</sup> The world in its totality is never reachable, but always remains mere idea, represented in the conjunction of beings and Being. We can reach beings, but never Being itself. However, we can catch a glimpse of Being through the groundlessness of beings, and through the polarities that characterize Being as the Encompassing. The world, says Jaspers, simply points beyond itself.<sup>354</sup> Faith is the name for our attempt to keep ourselves *open* and to orient ourselves amidst these polarities.<sup>355</sup> Caught in the prison of how we perceive the world, we can break through its walls, without being able to actually step outside, to use one of Jaspers’ many illustrations.<sup>356</sup>

As Safranski put it, an attitude can be addressed as faith “if in life and in the totality of being and in spite of all knowledge of it, it spots an eventually unsolvable secret and an inexhaustible richness, but sometimes also an abyss.”<sup>357</sup> In this way, Safranski argues, the faith of religion reveals the true creative forces humans possess and with which they try to formulate a *reaction* to the marvellous intrusion of Being in consciousness, of which they are also part.<sup>358</sup> Of course, then, religion is manmade, as it signifies a symbolic language to address that which eludes our understanding. And of course, religion also stems from weakness, as it is situated there where there can exist angst, but no certainty to silence it. However, it also stems from courage, as it keeps its own existence opened toward the abyss in an attempt to endure rather than forget the idea that it has no control, but is always surrendered to something that precedes it, without, however, abandoning reason for superstition. Man, for Safranski, is “a being to which it belongs that it does not belong to itself. For this ability to transcend itself, there exist endless forms of expression. But assumingly, this transcending is always connected to the astonishment that there is being rather than nothingness.”<sup>359</sup>

True philosophizing simply cannot disregard transcendence, Jaspers argued. Anyone who philosophizes must also hold himself accountable.<sup>360</sup> This includes the question of

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<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16. (My own emphasis).

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-19.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>357</sup> LOOSE, D., WAANDERS, S. (eds.), *Nihilisme en transcendentie*, 31. (My own translation).

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32. (My own translation).

<sup>360</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 33.

transcendence. One can stay well within the boundaries of objectively determined knowledge, but this can never be labelled philosophy, nor could true philosophy be that which we hold to be an academic discipline.<sup>361</sup> The basic maxime of the philosopher is thus: “*Sich beugen vor dem Unbegreiflichen im Vertrauen, daß es über, nicht unter der Begreiflichkeit liege*”, that is: that it is of a higher and not of a lower value than that which is intelligible.<sup>362</sup> Precisely in the purest form of enlightenment, which Jaspers defined as the demand of thought for itself to scrutinize and justify its own thoughts, faith is inevitable.<sup>363</sup> “The philosophy of cipher, the radical recognition of man’s ultimate realizations as a reading of a script whose code transcends his grasp, is Jaspers’ deliberate enactment of enlightenment at the highest plane”, Ehrlich writes. “He characterizes this enlightenment as the ‘irresistible responsible movement of reason’.”<sup>364</sup>

As Cesana points out, Jaspers did value scientific knowledge greatly, and precisely by locating scientific and religious thinking could the place of philosophy be retrieved.<sup>365</sup> “Jaspers demands an extension of the concept of rationality: The philosophical reason begins when the scientific rationality cannot get ahead anymore.”<sup>366</sup> The same goes for faith, which is also of great value as it is that in which we ground “everything we are serious about.”<sup>367</sup> Existentially rooted as thought is, in its philosophical appearance, it adopts the demand for reasonable argumentation from scientific thought, but at the same time also sees its shortcomings. From religious thought it adopts the openness to the reality of transcendence as the Encompassing, an insight which should not be confused with genuine knowledge. Thought, to a certain extent, can formally map itself and reveal its own structure to itself. This structure, which originates in the fundamental dichotomy of the border situation, is dialectical, and precisely in this dialectic the Encompassing can emerge. This is the meaning of periechontology, which does little more than affirm how philosophy has always been existential, nihilism always an eternal companion to it. Philosophy, to realize itself, must first confront and then *pervade* this nihilism and in the process both our understanding of philosophy and of our existence are transformed.<sup>368</sup>

Nihilism, then, is antithetical to philosophy in the sense that it applies the toolkit of philosophical reasoning in an act that is hostile to genuine philosophy.<sup>369</sup> On the one side, it

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<sup>361</sup> WILDERMUTH, A. E., ‘Karl Jaspers and the Concept of Philosophical Faith’, 8.

<sup>362</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 40.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-72.

<sup>364</sup> EHRLICH, L., *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, 149.

<sup>365</sup> CESANA, A., ‘Jaspers’ Concept of Philosophical Faith: A New Synthesis?’, 105.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>368</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 128ff.

<sup>369</sup> HOWEY, R., *Heidegger and Jaspers on Nietzsche*, 171.



seeks to negate philosophy in favour of a stable state of truth, which it, due to its own will to truth, cannot accomplish. On the other, as pure negativity, it can only represent a passage from one state of mind to the other and has no content of its own. If it would absolutize its dialectic of negation itself into a positive message, for example that nothing can be true, it relapses into what it accuses. Nihilism, or a manifestation of it in unbelief, can function as the logical conclusion of a thinking which opposes religious revelation or metaphysical symbolism in favour of immanent finitude. But in doing so, nihilism retroactively annuls philosophy and thus its own ground with it, and replaces it with an inappropriate magnification of its own finite knowledge. Nihilism, as the absolutization of negation, has to ground itself in a baseless truth claim, the same error of thought it opposes: “(...) *in einem zu kurz langenden Zugriff das Wahre fassen zu wollen.*”<sup>370</sup> Unbelief inevitably results in Nietzsche's paradox: get rid of your ideals or get rid of yourself! Calling philosophy a form of faith is thus a discursive way of illustrating its relationship to the operation of nihilism: “*Das Bewusstwerden der Subjekt-Objekt-Spaltung als Grundtatbestand unseres denkenden Daseins und des Umgreifenden, das in ihm gegenwärtig wird, bringt uns erst die Freiheit des Philosophierens.*”<sup>371</sup> Nothing which is determined through language or objectivity and is therefore finite, can exclusively claim to be true reality.<sup>372</sup> For one who held on to the absolute character of certain things, this might lead to nihilism.<sup>373</sup> But true philosophical thinking pervades this nihilism without losing its mind.<sup>374</sup> In fact, it has to do so. Only in this insight it realizes it is truly liberated from the shackles of objectifying thought, that is: “*indem er dieses nicht etwa preisgibt, sondern bis zum Äussersten treibt.*”<sup>375</sup> This is the true commencement of philosophizing: “*Der Sturz aus den Festigkeiten, die doch trügerisch waren, wird Schwebenkönnen - was Abgrund schien, wird Raum der Freiheit - das scheinbare Nichts verwandelt sich in das, woraus das eigentliche Sein zu uns spricht.*”<sup>376</sup>

Despite philosophy itself, it has led people to nihilism.<sup>377</sup> In thought, a tendency always remains that is hesitant or resistant to the demands of philosophical thought. Like a cat, says Jaspers, we always prefer to fall back on our four feet in objectifying thought. “*Wir sträuben uns gegen das Schwindlichwerden im Philosophieren, gegen die Zumutung, auf dem Kopf*

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<sup>370</sup> EHRlich, L., *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, 150; JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 109.

<sup>371</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 31.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>377</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 24.

*stehen zu sollen.*"<sup>378</sup> But we cannot avoid this requirement, instead we have to endure it, if we do not wish to relapse into nihilism. Philosophical faith cannot grant certainty or security, nowhere lies any truth in our grasp. However, it can offer something slightly similar.<sup>379</sup> Truth, Jaspers argues, is an inexhaustible source that has flown for centuries, but which only keeps flowing as long as we keep drawing from it. Philosophy, for Jaspers, is a highly symbolic and perennial conversation through ciphers of transcendence. "*Dankbarkeit für die Möglichkeit des fortgesetzten Gesprächs mit dieser Überlieferung hat 'die Philosophie' symbolisch personifiziert.*"<sup>380</sup> Authentic philosophy is the attempt to express existence. The propositions with which it does so, and whose relative truth it debates, are but tools.<sup>381</sup> Truth itself rather refers to the spiritual source itself out of which these philosophical reflections originate and which resemble an undecodable language of ciphers.<sup>382</sup> "Thus it is possible for mutually contradictory philosophical ideas to be true at the same time", Kołakowski observes."<sup>383</sup>

We can never overcome nihilism entirely, certainly not in a direct way. What is possible, however, is to unmask its false pretences of alleged knowledge.<sup>384</sup> Nihilism rejects the value of philosophy on grounds that are alien to it. Indeed, philosophy is of no use, says Jaspers, it proclaims nothing and does not attain objective truth. But this is merely a fair description of what philosophy is indeed not, and it does not discredit its commitment to the Encompassing, nor what philosophy *does* offer.<sup>385</sup> The permanent task of philosophizing consists of an appropriation of the history of philosophy, an exercise of speculative thinking in metaphysics and a self-examining thinking in the philosophy of existence.<sup>386</sup> In it, man finds his freedom and independence, but he will always also encounter a tension: "*Wir suchen Ruhe durch ständiges Erwecken unserer Unruhe.*"<sup>387</sup> We find rest in the discovery of what remains when everything around us evaporates, but what remains is the Encompassing, which can only be touched through struggle and foundering.<sup>388</sup>

There can be no genuine philosophy in the future if it does not confront itself with nihilism, Jaspers concludes.<sup>389</sup> Nietzsche tried to wake us by showing us the deepest and most

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<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>381</sup> KOŁAKOWSKI, L., *Why is there something rather than nothing? Questions from great philosophers*, 279.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>384</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 72.

<sup>385</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 123.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

painful of truths. More often than not, efforts to refute the terrifying message of nihilism entailed a return to our magical slumber.<sup>390</sup> Often, philosophers have sought to devise an entirely new discourse to overcome the aporia of thought. But what is new is not to be confused with what is true.<sup>391</sup> The expectation of progress in philosophy and the confusion of the original with the new, for Jaspers, is a result of philosophy mistaking itself with science. True philosophy has never been in any danger, and it certainly did not *end*. All critique of metaphysics focuses solely on the nature of our allegiance to life and our expectations of it. The experience of nihilism can instead be an invitation to reclaim the history of philosophy in its true sense: as the evocation of an eternal truth-seeking in the presence of the Encompassing and in perennial communication based on the language of ciphers. “*Nihilismus, als gedankliche Bewegung wie als geschichtliche Erfahrung, wird der Übergang zur tieferen Aneignung der geschichtlichen Überlieferung*”, Jaspers concludes. More importantly: “*Nihilismus war von früh an nicht nur der Weg zum Ursprung – der Nihilismus ist so alt wie die Philosophie –, sondern auch das Scheidewasser, in dem das Gold der Wahrheit sich bewähren musste.*”<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*; VAN TONGEREN, *Reinterpreting Modern Culture*, 128.

<sup>391</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 129.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have seen how the practice of philosophy seemingly can never escape a certain dialectic that in the course of its history was addressed as nihilism. In fact, for many, nihilism is at the heart of philosophy itself. In a frame of mind not far removed from Jaspers' own, Kołakowski wrote that "it is perhaps better for us to totter insecurely on the edge of an unknown abyss than simply to close our eyes and deny its existence."<sup>393</sup> This is Jaspers' plea, that we should not necessarily take a step back from the cliff, and certainly should not pretend not to see it, but that we should devote ourselves at least to an investigation. Transcendence, in its most basic sense, refers to that which lies beyond our grasp and encompasses us. If we truly abide to the agnostic demand of modernity, we should cede every attempt at retrieving the Absolute, and this also includes immanent finitude. To depict God as a symbol of that which eludes our understanding, however, whether cognitively or emotionally, is not foreign to *Modern* believers who redefined their religious creed into a *spiritual* principle.<sup>394</sup> Counting Jaspers among them would not be fair and far too simplistic, as for him, this is only where philosophy should commence, rather than transform into a mere formality of thought in service of post-Nietzschean theology. We are simply caught within boundary situations beyond which we cannot look.

We have engaged in the difficult and treacherous problem of nihilism, which, admittedly, is not something we can shake off or stow away easily, but which arguably is simply one of the names of human nature. Given the problem of nihilism, however, and out of hope of overcoming it, we ask philosophy to justify itself. This is not possible, says Jaspers. It cannot account for itself via something else or find its legitimacy in a usefulness of any kind. It can only rely on certain forces that are present in every person and that provoke people to philosophize.<sup>395</sup> "*Ich habe nichts zu verkündigen*", Jaspers writes near the end of *Der philosophische Glaube*: "*Es bleibt der Anspruch an den Hörer, dass dieser aus seinem eigenen Wesen prüfe, den Sätzen des Vortragenden nicht einfach folge, vielmehr sie bestenfalls nur zum Anlass nehme für eigene Vergewisserung.*"<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> KOŁAKOWSKI, L., *Metaphysical Horror*, 58.

<sup>394</sup> PROVOOST, A., *Bemінде ongelovigen. Een atheïstisch sermoen*, 6. Cited in: VANHEESWIJCK, G., *Onbemінде gelovigen*, 10; VERHACK, I., *Gegevenheid. Pleidooi voor een postseculier geloven*.

<sup>395</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 15.

<sup>396</sup> JASPERS, K., *Der philosophische Glaube*, 109.

The sling between thought as objectification and thought as the awareness of this objectification and the attempt to free itself from it, remains in perpetual movement. The search for truth, not its possession, is the essence of philosophy, regardless of how often it betrays itself by adopting any kind of dogmatism.<sup>397</sup> To philosophize is to always be on the move, and its questions remain more relevant than its answers.<sup>398</sup> But then what is the point of philosophy? Let us conclude with two possible answers that a study of Jaspers' understanding of nihilism may provide with regard to the practical use of something that has no practical use whatsoever. One is negative, one positive.

Negatively, through philosophy, we can become aware of the limits of any attempt to capture the whole of reality in finite truths or to define an entire group of people on the basis of certain principles or judgements. Every quality is but a predicate, not our essence, and we can always free ourselves from them through critical scrutiny, as we are always more than we think we are. As a movement of thought, philosophy may not possess its own truth, but that does not render it a mere destructive act. Pure negativity locks itself up in its own narrowness and eventually traps itself in a belief in the finitude of immanence, which is equally unfounded as any truth claim in the face of what is unknowable in principle. Genuine philosophy, then, functions as a reminder or a trace of transcendence, not as its proof – if only because every word associated with the word proof evidently does not belong in philosophy. Philosophy signifies the permanent openness that makes thought aware of what may lie beyond its own determinations. Nihilism, then, is a movement of thought that perhaps partly coincides with philosophy and makes use of its critical means, but which is at the same time alien to it.

Can Jaspers' understanding of philosophy as a humble way of life truly and definitely withstand Nietzsche's critique, and can we adopt it for ourselves? Arguably not, and Jaspers would perhaps shiver at the thought of having any followers. As the characterizations of the figures of Jesus and Bruno illustrate, philosophy is always an existential way of life, and not something to be propagated, but to be lived. Through philosophy, the thinker gains his independence. However, Jaspers' statements on the nature of philosophy also necessarily arise from certain ideals. Can these be anything other than the ascetic ideals of nihilism? Not only does philosophy need introspection, so does the philosopher. If not-knowing, foundering, or applying thought to do the very impossible, which is reaching transcendence, can become a virtue, then on what grounds? Is it not inevitably a meaningless and discursive attempt to make

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<sup>397</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie*, 13.

<sup>398</sup> *Ibid.*

life bearable and to deny tragedy? Not to mention that humility itself can become a demand and thus the subject of a will to power.

In any case, we have examined Jaspers' philosophical anthropology of nihilism and his argument for a philosophy guided by love. This is Jaspers' positive argument. This realization of love is not the goal of philosophy, nor a means to an end, but simply a deeply rooted attitude that is available to us and through which we can deactivate the pathos of nihilism. It is but the name for a force that dislocates the objectifying tendency of thought to identify means and ends itself. Love invites us to thrive in the here and now without expecting anything of it. It is not supported by ideals that exist on the basis of the exclusion or condemnation of what is opposite to them, it merely points toward the finite nature of hatred, and it originates independently of it. We don't invite ourselves to love because hatred is bad, but because we are attracted to the calling of something which lies deeper than any such polemic could get. More so, love does not actually require an explanation, but is perhaps even antithetical to it. If we would bother ourselves to explain at length why we should indeed love, we might betray it, and relapse into nihilism. Love is a trace of transcendence which intrudes us beyond our control or understanding, yet it feels all too familiar. It is a metaphor for the endless possibility and openness we represent. We cannot take any other route than one which is in accordance with our human nature, thus we can never be *at ease*. But love, in its highest state, is not rest at all, but desire. The mystery of love is not the abyss of nihilism, it pervades it entirely, and sets us free. Are we not only falling endlessly, and in every direction, Nietzsche's madman furiously asked.<sup>399</sup> "*Der Sturz aus den Festigkeiten, die doch trügerisch waren, wird Schwebenkönnen*", Jaspers replies: "*Was Abgrund schien, wird Raum der Freiheit.*"<sup>400</sup> Comfort pales by comparison.

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<sup>399</sup> NIETZSCHE, F., *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, [125].

<sup>400</sup> JASPERS, K., *Einführung in die Philosophie* (1989), 31.

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## ABSTRACT

Once the boundaries between immanent existence and transcendence have been drawn, a typically modern undertaking, all we are left with is the sensible, whereas the supersensible becomes synonymous with the illusionary. This predicament does not have to be inherently problematic, at least from a religious point of view. For philosophy, however, it has often been understood in terms of a disaster, addressed with the ambiguous notion of *nihilism*. This is particularly true of post-Nietzschean philosophy, in which a holistic understanding of the notion of nihilism is often adopted to argue for the impossibility of both philosophy and transcendence. In this master's thesis I investigate the relationship between nihilism, philosophy and transcendence as it came about in the philosophy of Karl Jaspers (1883–1969). This 20th century German thinker took great interest in the concern of the captivity of the immanence of thought and formulated creative answers to the question of transcendence after the alleged death of God. For Jaspers, the problem of nihilism was perennial to philosophy, and in the course of his life he devoted many pages to an attempt of *overcoming* it.

First, this thesis analyses the problem of nihilism on its own, in its pre-Nietzschean and Nietzschean manifestations, to come to terms with its alleged threat to philosophy. With regard to the vastness and richness of the notion, some topics are inevitably left out, such as the religious nihilism of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, or the extensive elaborations on nihilism in contemporary continental philosophy, for example on the divergence between the interpretations of Martin Heidegger and Emanuele Severino. Second, we turn to Jaspers' own understanding of nihilism. Jaspers defined the nature and value of philosophy through its confrontation with nihilism, which, for him, represented a kind of *anti-philosophy*. Philosophy had to go *through* nihilism to become *true philosophizing*. Jaspers proposed an ingenious argument that separates nihilism from philosophy, existence from immanence and truth from knowledge. To make this case, we primarily turn to Jaspers' *Von der Wahrheit, Der philosophische Glaube* and his books on Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy. In *Nietzsche und das Christentum*, for example, Jaspers argued that Nietzsche at times separated the figure of Jesus from Christianity. In this separation, Jaspers argued, a possible way of overcoming Nietzsche's nihilism in a philosophy that originates in love was already made possible by the fundamental distinctions of Nietzsche's own critique of Christianity, for example his dismissal of all contradictions.

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