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Lars Lambrecht

Philosophy against  
National Socialism:  
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# Philosophy against National Socialism: Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers.

“The few cannot be too few” – On the “spirit of uninhibited  
humanity” – material from a research programme<sup>\*</sup>

Lars Lambrecht

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<sup>\*</sup> This research programme was developed in cooperation with Dr. Prof. Franca Papa (Bari University), and Dr. Elena Fiorletta, (Rome).

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## Philosophy against National Socialism: Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers.

“The few cannot be too few” – On the “spirit of uninhibited humanity” – material from a research programme\*

The following discussion is the product of a far more extensive research project that explores the development of philosophy, in particular in Germany, between the two World Wars of the 20th century. This so-called inter-war philosophy was characterised by the attempt to understand the broader philosophical consequences of the First World War – the end of Europe, as Arendt called it. The research programme pursues two interlinked and mutually dependent lines of inquiry. The primary focus of the programme lies in exploring the relationship of philosophy to politics. Its second line of inquiry addresses the fact that practically all of the major post-World War II political scientists, both in Germany and abroad, are the intellectual ‘descendants’ of these inter-war philosophers. This phenomenon, which is both historically and biographically surprising, cannot be addressed in any detail here. The present inquiry is based on the ‘strong hypothesis’ that the ‘shock’ of the First World War (as described by W. Benjamin) exercised a defining influence on inter-war philosophy. The present study will address one specific issue within this broad field of inquiry (which encompasses the relationship of philosophy to politics and, in particular, the political alignment of the philosopher), namely the two questions of whether the Holocaust/Shoah was the ‘consequence’ of the shock of the First World War, or what it meant not to be, or have become, a Nazi philosopher. The study<sup>1</sup> is an attempt to unearth the traces of a philosophy that refused to align itself with the ideology of National Socialism. The study draws on historiological and philological methods of inquiry and interpretation to examine predominantly (intellectual) biographical and historical material relating to Arendt and Jaspers, including: published correspondence, autobiographical statements and publications of biographical relevance by both authors, and material in which the authors discuss or otherwise explore their contemporary history. Particular mention must be made here of Hans Saner’s pertinent and sensitive study of this material and the works and lives of Arendt and Jaspers: *Erinnern und Vergessen. Essays zur Geschichte des Denkens* (2004).

One further hypothesis which cannot be explored here pertains to the question of the necessity for philosophers to adopt a political position. A review of the history of European philosophy, from the case of Socrates to the twentieth century, reveals numerous critical voices. An equally large number of philosophers, however, rendered their services to their respective rulers – the latter group may even be in the majority. In that sense it is hardly inconceivable that a philosopher might subscribe to Nazi ideology and its political party. But

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\* This research programme was developed in cooperation with Dr. Prof. Franca Papa (Bari University), and Dr. Elena Fiorletta, (Rome).

<sup>1</sup> In this context mention must be made of the following studies: Lambrecht/Schildt 1983, Schürgers 1989; Bolz 1989, Kodalle, 1996, Philosophie im Deutschen Faschismus 1987, Haug 1989, Heinz/ Gretić 2006, Bormuth/Bülow 2008.

this raises the question as to how and why some philosophers did not become Nazi philosophers. It would be simplistic to suggest that these philosophers were merely apolitical, and abstained from involving in the politics of power, as this, since Socrates' day, threatened to end with the cup of hemlock. Otfried Höffe (cf. Höffe 2006), for example, suggests that Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt were both formerly apolitical thinkers who did not develop an interest in politics until quite late. This hypothesis is only correct, however, if we are willing to confine our concept of politics and the political to the realm of everyday political events, i.e. politics as the practices of institutions, parties and their representatives, etc. But the situation is indeed far more complex than this perspective would allow. Even those who view themselves as 'apolitical' must be considered 'political' in a more global sense of the term – consider, for example, Thomas Mann's *Reflections of an Unpolitical Man* from 1918. Moreover, there are numerous examples in the history of philosophy illustrating the fact that politics does not avoid the philosopher merely because the philosopher avoids politics. If, in other words, a philosopher refuses to go to the king, then the king may, if needs be, come to him. Or, as Arendt critically remarked to Jaspers, "[it is] because there is no non-political safeguard against politics" (HA-KJ, 85). Not only is the political a constitutive element of philosophy (compare the positions of Arendt 1990 and Jaspers 1963a; and see Lambrecht 1993a and Schramm 2002 in relation to Heidegger), Jaspers' and Arendt's interest in the political clearly predated the rise of fascism. The research and reflection outlined in the present study is divided into three steps:

1. The Nazi era and the 'philosophical spirit of the political', or what could the philosophers have known?
2. The contemporary necessity of an antifascist position. The question of the "few" (Arendt), or what should be remembered?
3. The "spirit of uninhibited humanity" (Jaspers), or coming to terms with the past: the matter of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (the struggle to come to terms with the past).

### *1. On the 'philosophical spirit of the political' during the Nazi era*

Arendt's position can be easily outlined with reference to a handful of documents. In an interview Gunter Gaus asked Arendt: "Do you recall a specific event that marked your turn to the political?" To which she replied: "I would say February 27, 1933, the burning of the Reichstag, and the illegal arrests that followed during the same night. [...] What happened then was monstrous, [...] this was an immediate shock for me, and from that moment on I felt responsible." (1996, 48; cf. Young-Bruehl 1991, 174).

What could the philosophers have known? The following examples will illustrate the extent of their knowledge: Arendt and her husband were aware that prisoners were tortured at the Gestapo prison in Berlin (cf. 1996, 40ff), they knew that leading socialists had been detained in Hamburg and they constantly

analysed national socialism's political structure (ibid. 37) in the course of their ongoing debates with both communist party diehards (ibid. 36) and narrow-minded professional Zionists (ibid. 45). Arendt "refused to abandon the Jewish question as the focal point of [her] historical and political thinking." (HA-KJ, 67) In response to Gerhard Scholem's slanderous claims Arendt stated that she "[had] never pretended to be anything else or to be in any other way than I am. [...] I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable facts of my life" (1996, 29f, 50ff). Arendt's position is perhaps best summarized in the marvellous acceptance speech she held on receiving the Lessing Prize, "one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack" (1989a, 34). In her interview with Gaus, Arendt explains further: "If one is attacked as a Jew, one must defend oneself as a Jew. Not as a German, not as a world-citizen, not as an upholder of the Rights of Man [...] belonging to Judaism had become my own problem, and my own problem was political. Purely political!" (1996, 57). If her insight into the rationale and machinations of the Nazi regime was, even for a politically literate exile, relatively normal up to this point, Arendt explains that the decisive moment "was [...] not the year 1933, at least not for me. But the day that we learned about Auschwitz": 1943: "It was really as if an abyss had opened." Auschwitz lay outside the conceptual boundaries of politics in which "amends could somehow be made for everything else. But not for this." (ibid. 59)

Jaspers' politicisation, unlike that of Arendt, is less well-documented. In view of the paucity of evidence, Jaspers' claim that he came to politics through his early readings of Max Weber seems pertinent. He claims that he "began to write about politics as early as the twenties, for example in *The Spiritual Condition of the Age* (1931). But the key factor was the Nazi era." (SchW, 35). Jaspers later recalled: "When I wrote it [*The Spiritual Condition*] I knew something about fascism, very little about Nazism, whose madness I still believed was impossible in Germany" (1963, 85). During the Nazi dictatorship, Jaspers came to the following conclusion: "No great philosophy is without political thought [...] It seemed to me that only after I became deeply stirred by politics did my philosophy become fully conscious [...] Since then I inquire of each philosopher concerning his political thinking and action" (ibid. 97f).

Jaspers involuntary "inner emigration" is, considering his orientation towards classical German philosophy, no doubt precarious. But if one stops to consider the daily struggle for survival that Jaspers and his Jewish wife faced under the Nazi regime, his decision was clearly neither lightly taken, nor was it without consequences. Jaspers concluded: "The only way to survive is to be inconspicuous" (SchW, 35). This stance led to his subsequent admission that, "Guilty passivity[...] That we are alive is our guilt!" (ibid. 37). This motif was shared by a number of other sensitive and despairing thinkers in the immediate aftermath of 1945, including Primo Levi in *If This is a Man* (The extent of his concerns is more than evident in his correspondence with Heidegger). In addition to the political perils of the time and his fear of exile, Jaspers'



frequently mentioned illness also served to compound his sense of living in a state of isolation and abandonment together with his wife: “We must endure the sense of being quietly abandoned” (ibid. 146). Jaspers had no faith whatsoever in a collective ‘front of humanity’ and was only willing to trust individuals (ibid. 149). He feared the “loneliness of the foreign language” that he expected to face should he choose to go into exile (ibid. 152). In a metaphorical sense this description applies to Jaspers’ situation throughout the Nazi era. It is, essentially, a mark of his philosophical thinking. Jaspers’ distrust of the masses – an attitude that was widespread among non-left-wing intellectuals in the Weimar Republic – is the flip side of this position. This outlook is reflected in Jaspers’ first letter to Arendt following the liberation, written in October 1945. Jaspers wrote that while there “[are still some] young people, those few burning with zeal – but the masses are always stolid, and adhere to whatever platitudes are current” (HA-KJ, 58). Arendt replies to her former teacher defiantly and with all the confidence that her experiences of resistance had instilled in her: “Of course, it does depend on the few; but the few cannot be too few. We experienced throughout those years how the few became ever fewer” (ibid. 59). To which Jaspers responded: “In our words I sense [...] the spirit of uninhibited humanity” (ibid. 61). This exchange leads us directly to the question of the structures and period of remembering.

## 2. *The problem of antifascism – what should be remembered?*

There are two key aspects to this subject: remembering and forgetting (the suppression of memory) in a general sense (i.e., the significance of this subject for both Arendt’s and Jaspers’ theoretical writings) and remembering/forgetting in a more particular sense, namely Arendt’s (cf. Lambrecht 1999) and Jaspers’ notions of history. The latter is a subject in itself, and therefore cannot be addressed here in any great detail.

The present paper will focus on the fundamental significance of remembrance in the works of Arendt and Jaspers: while mention is made of the *Erinnerungstheorem* in Jaspers’ *Von der Wahrheit*, it does not figure as prominently in Jaspers’ thinking as it does in Arendt’s works. Mention should be made, however, of Jaspers’ notes on *Einsamkeit*, written from memory and published in 1988 by Hans Saner in the *Österreichischen Jahrbuch*: 1. the general aura of the philosopher (this figures in Arendt’s thinking as the solitary nature of philosophical thinking; see also Heidegger as a negative contrast); 2. the solitude of Jaspers’ isolation during the Nazi era (cf. Hügli/Kaegi/Wiehl 2004). Jaspers’ antifascist position was of a very specific nature, in which remembrance and judgement lie side by side: “We, the survivors, did not seek death. When our Jewish friends were taken away, we did not go into the streets and shout until we had been exterminated as well. We preferred to stay alive for a weak though correct reason that our death could not possibly help. That we are alive is our guilt.” (HS, 32)

In his essay *Überleben mit einer Jüdin* [Surviving with a Jewess], Hans Saner describes Jaspers' antifascist position succinctly: "He didn't want to risk provoking his own demise, as it wouldn't have been merely his demise. Jaspers didn't save anyone's life with his reasoned caution, except perhaps his own and that of his wife; [...] During that period he extended complete solidarity only to probably the one person whom he completely trusted, his Jewish wife. This is quite evident in a statement by Jaspers that was printed in the Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung (25.1.1946): "Following the Nazi era we are more careful than ever to avoid creating false heroes. I am not a hero, nor do I wish to be seen as one." (Saner 2004, 129f). This style of antifascism is often referred to in scholarly works as a state of "inner emigration". It could, arguably, be more accurately described as the 'presence of the absent individual' (thus reflecting the 'simultaneity of the non-simultaneous' in the modern global society). Three products of Jaspers' work during the Nazi era testify to both his will to remember and to his antifascist position: *Von der Wahrheit (Philosophische Logik, 1. Band)* [On Truth (Philosophical Logic, Vol. 1)] in particular; then, from a more systematic perspective, his philosophy of history *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* [On the Origin and Aim of History]. The third 'product' to emerge from Jaspers' solitary thinking amidst the terror that surrounded him is his unfinished world history of philosophy: *Philosophie und Welt* (PuW und WGP).

Remembrance carries two connotations in Arendt's thinking: 1. in reference to the 'classical' philosophical traditions of European Antiquity (this aspect is not relevant here); 2. with regard to Judaic tradition (cf. Lambrecht 1999). Arendt's interest in remembrance lies in its fundamental nature. As the following passage from *The Human Condition* illustrates, Arendt is interested in the "'products' of action and speech, which together constitute the fabric of human relationships and affairs. [...] Their reality depends entirely upon human plurality, upon the constant presence of others who can see and hear and therefore testify to their existence. [...] Without remembrance and without the reification which remembrance needs for its own fulfilment and which makes it, indeed, as the Greeks held, the mother of all arts, the living activities of action, speech, and thought would lose their reality at the end of each process and disappear *as though they never had been.*" (1960, 87f).

Arendt's reasoning in this passage from *The Human Condition* is indebted to Judaic traditions of remembrance both historically, culturally and systematically. Remembrance is an imperative concept in Judaic tradition and the exhortation *Zachor: Remember!* (Yerushalmi 1996) can be seen as a synonym for Judaic tradition, i.e. the commemoration of the origin of the covenant between the Israelites and Yahweh in their one common bond (minyan), and of their law as the founding principle. This imperative principle is a central aspect of daily prayer and psalm reading, in particular of the so-called lament for the dead, the Kaddish. The cultural core of this prayer is the commemoration of the names of the deceased before the congregation of the *schul* or the synagogue – it is an act

of commemoration in memory of the one who gives the individual its name (Remember (*Zachor*), it is I who gives everything its name, thus you too). In the edition of the Jewish journal *Aufbau* from 19 June 1942 Arendt wrote the following with regard to the murder of European Jews: “‘No mass will be sung, no kaddish will be said’ These dead do not leave behind any written testaments and scarcely even their names: we cannot pay them our last respects, we cannot console their widows and orphans” (1989b, 142). Arendt wrote these lines before she learned of the horrors of Auschwitz. It later emerged that ‘Auschwitz’ sought to erase the very *memory* of its Jewish victims – instead of their civilian names the victims were given tattooed numbers, and the bureaucratic lists detailing the identities of the victims were destined to be destroyed “as if they had never existed” – hence the practise of reciting the names of the dead at commemorative sites (*Erinnerungsräumen*) on memorial days as an act of resistance to the suppression of memory and identity. In the funding application for her study of the concentration camps, Arendt described the outcome as ‘absolute senselessness’, *die vollendete Sinnlosigkeit* (ibid. 7ff).

Summary: “This should never [or: not] have been allowed to happen” (1996, 59f, Jaspers also went on to adopt this position in 1967, cf. SchW, 164). For Arendt this insight signified a break with the old European tradition and the concepts of its philosophy in order to even attempt to comprehend the Shoah. Arendt translated the notion of *keine Tradition* into “thinking without a handrail”, a renewal of the spirit of *sapere aude* that was not affiliated to other schools of thought or organisations, stripped of historical constructs of cause and effect, and devoid of mechanical reductionism. Arendt concluded that, given the paucity of uncompromised concepts, we are powerless to provide an explanation, and demanded a ‘new start’, a ‘new beginning’ (cf. the wide-ranging studies of Marchart 2005, Saner 2004).

### 3. “*The spirit of uninhibited humanity*”: coming to terms with the past for the future – or a preliminary summary

Arendt’s interest (as expressed in her acceptance speech for the Lessing Prize) lies in the question of “how much reality must be retained, even in a world become inhuman, if humanity is not to be reduced to an empty phrase or phantom.” (1989a, 38) Her “answer” to this question is admittedly extremely complex; she writes: “for those engaged in the quest for meaning and understanding, what is frightening in the rise of totalitarianism is not that it is something new, but that it has brought to light the ruin of our categories of thought and standards of judgement” (1994, 122). In her essay *Verstehen und Politik* Arendt concludes that the resolution of this complex may lie in the “less frightening perspective in the form of its reflection on man, whose being is the beginning [...] If [but also, she concludes] the essence of all, and in particular of political, action is to make a new beginning, then understanding becomes the other side of action, namely that form of cognition, [...] by which acting men...

eventually can come to terms with what irrevocably happened and be reconciled with what unavoidably exists” (ibid. 125f). While this proposal seems somewhat surprising considering the radicalism of much of her thinking, it testifies to her commitment to a Christian-Judaic dialogue – a legacy, perhaps, of her early readings of St. Augustine.

Vis-à-vis the subject of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: while Jaspers is known for his rejection of the notion of collective guilt, this did not hinder him from leaving the fledgling West German republic for a post in Basel in protest at the republic’s approach to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. While Jaspers privately rejected the calls for him to join the “front of humanity”, he reached the following conclusion in his exploration of how to approach the question of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (unfortunately these suggestions cannot be discussed in any detail here). His position is best summarized in a statement he made regarding a third (and incomplete) project which he worked on throughout and in the aftermath of the Nazi era (and in that respect it too could be seen as a document of remembrance and commemoration): “The work on the world history of philosophy, with which I am at present occupied, intensified the consciousness which, since my occupation with Chinese philosophy in the ‘thirties, had become self-evident, but which formulated itself only later: We are on the road from the evening twilight of European philosophy through the dusk of our times to the dawn of world philosophy.” (1963, 115) The “spirit of humanity” that Jaspers invoked – cosmopolitanism – is identical with his “appeal to openness of understanding, to communication” (Wiehl/Kaegi 1999, 9). As a “public struggle of the spirit” the ‘spirit of humanity’ is no longer a space of memory – it is a space of political thinking that we must struggle to attain (AZM, 310f). But Jaspers’ ability to learn is far more impressive than any document could possibly be. This exceptional quality is clearly evident in Jaspers’ acknowledgement of his debt to Hannah Arendt – the former student who had become his equal, perhaps even his superior, in political-philosophical thinking: “her philosophical and human solidarity remains among the most beautiful experiences of those years [after 1945]. [...] her inner independence made her a world citizen [...] Better than I had ever been able before, I learned from her to see this world of the greatest attempts at political freedom [the USA] and, on the other hand, the structures of totalitarianism” (ibid. 94). Jaspers’ recognition of the lawless nature of fascism can perhaps best be summed up in a final comment from Primo Levi (in: *The Drowned and the Saved*) who demanded that we remember: “it happened, therefore it can happen again. This is the core of what we have to say... it can happen...!”\*

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\* Übersetzung v. Stephen Roche, Hamburg. Für die englischsprachigen Übersetzungen wurden mehrheitlich die deutschen Originaltexte als Belege angeführt.

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