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Jaspers' Reading of Nietzsche's *Antichrist*

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Abstract: Published in 1938, Karl Jaspers' work *Nietzsche und das Christentum* responded exactly fifty years later to Nietzsche's polemical 1888 text, *The Antichrist*. Jaspers summarizes Nietzsche's appraisal of Christ and the rise of Christianity in it, but he does not address the textual strategies that animate Nietzsche's anti-Christian polemic. Jaspers' own view of historical Christianity arguably is strongly informed by Martin Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche, which I take it to have left its traces in Jaspers' critical assessment of Nietzsche's text. As a result, Jaspers' reading, alongside Heidegger's own, has perpetuated a line of interpretation long implicit in Nietzsche scholarship. This essay offers an alternative interpretation of *The Antichrist* that differs from the Jaspersian one. I agree with Jaspers' view on Nietzsche's assessment of Jesus and the historical rise of Christianity. However, rather than following Jaspers in his Heideggerian emphasis on the world-historical nature of Christianity, I advance an alternative reading focusing on the physiological foundation of Nietzsche's position. I argue that Nietzsche's brilliant polemical effects in *The Antichrist* become more transparent by distancing oneself from Heidegger's—and Jaspers'—metaphysical reading of Nietzsche.

Keywords: Christ; Christianity; Heidegger, Martin; Platonism; resentment; *décadence*; nihilism.

Karl Jaspers' Reading of *The Antichrist*

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of how Karl Jaspers understands Friedrich Nietzsche's critique, it is imperative to examine some exemplary passages from Jaspers' reading of *The Antichrist*. The first example shows that Jaspers recognizes that Nietzsche sees Christ as someone who subsumes all theoretical opposites into a higher state of awareness. Nietzsche sees the centrality of Christ's message as one of undermining oppositions and thereby rejecting all forms of personal resistance:

"The good tidings mean that there are no more contrasts"—that is to say, all distinctions are at an end.¹

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche and Christianity*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co. 1961, p. 18. [Henceforth cited as NC]

The second example refers to Nietzsche's observation that historical Christianity is not a falling-off from the pure, original message of the Gospels, as Christian apologists and revisionists suggest, but that the Gospels already express the inner contradictions of Christianity. Thus, there can be no return to an *ur*-Christianity since the belief system of Christianity is already a misreading and betrayal of Christ's original example:

But to Nietzsche, the distortion is no mere subsequent phenomenon. It is not an apostasy, but the essential beginning. The Gospels, the whole New Testament—this is the distortion. [NC 28]

In this third example, Jaspers recognizes that Nietzsche's critique of Christianity simultaneously indicts the ancient world. Nietzsche understood the philosophies

of Socrates and Plato as well as the existence of underground cults in antiquity and the hedonism of philosophical schools such as Epicureanism to be a breeding ground for early Christianity. Nietzsche's stance toward antiquity was ambivalent at best. Rejecting Christianity meant to him being skeptical of a culture that already exhibited instinctual decay, which allowed Christianity to spread and thrive:

Christianity was thus produced by Antiquity itself; it was not something strange to Antiquity, added to it from the outside. Hence, he who is against Christianity must come to suspect Antiquity as well. [NC 32]

The fourth example shows, as Jaspers reads Nietzsche, Christianity's legacy was to plant instinctual confusion into the human soul, which, in Nietzsche's understanding, allows weak types to continuously undermine the confidence and life-affirmation of the strong.

A powerful spiritual tension rises in man; although the strong and noble may eventually submit to the Christian ideals, their souls inevitably remain in conflict with those ideals. [NC 35]

In this fifth example, one can note that while Christianity originally appealed to decadent types on the margins of society, such as slaves and subalterns, and offered them consolation, it eventually managed to infiltrate and unsettle the souls of the strong masters:

An unexpected result – though exactly what Christianity intended – was the power which Christian ideals acquired over the souls of the noble and strong. [NC 37]

On the one hand, Nietzsche welcomes these new tensions of the soul (*Spannungen des Geistes*) as they goad the strong to stake out horizons beyond good and evil that are not defined or legislated by traditional morality. What he condemns is the "slackening of the spirit" (*Abspannung des Geistes*) that contributes to the conformism and nihilism of the present:

In liberalism, in socialism, in democracy – however unchristian the poses they may strike – Nietzsche sees essentially the result of enervated Christianity. [NC 39]

These examples reveal Jaspers' insightful reading of Nietzsche, and yet, curiously, these precise renderings of individual claims arguably overlook the polemical strategies that Nietzsche employs. For the overall strategy utilized in *The Antichrist* does not reside in Nietzsche's attempt to destabilize Christians

or their message, but rather in his attempt to expose the mechanisms by which historical figures misconstrue Christ's message and thereby succeed in embedding a feeling of resentment into the beliefs of Christians.

Jaspers' Heideggerian Reading of *The Antichrist*

According to Jaspers, Nietzsche's view of Christianity was influenced by the constitution of Christianity itself, since the inner truth imperative of Christianity eventually had to be directed against itself. Jaspers stresses the world-historical significance of Nietzsche's critique by advancing the thesis that Nietzsche both embodies and actualizes this historical moment. Similar to Martin Heidegger's metaphysical interpretation of Nietzsche as being the historical overturning of Plato, Jaspers posits that Nietzsche saw himself as actualizing a decisive turning point in history. Both Heidegger and Jaspers argue that the world-historical dimension of Nietzsche's thinking represents such an historical pivot. For both, Christianity – or in Heidegger's case, Platonism – is a clearly circumscribed historical phenomenon that can be exposed and then overcome. In Jaspers' words:

Let us sum up: to Nietzsche, the fundamental experience of his own life – to turn from Christian motives into an opponent of Christianity – came to represent a *process of world history*. On the historic foundation of many centuries, the events of his own time seemed to him to have reached a point of both extreme peril and extreme opportunity for the human soul, for the truth of human values, for the very fact of being human. [NC 8]

Upon positing this claim, Jaspers then argues that Nietzsche remains captivated by the Christian belief system, and that Nietzsche believes a total knowledge of history (*Totalwissen*) is possible, which is itself a Christian notion:

The Christian knows about the whole. To him, empirical history is not an arbitrary process, not a mere change in physical reality; it is embedded in the one hyperphysical history. [NC 51]

Jaspers continues that having exposed Christianity, Nietzsche is confident that he can now direct, or redirect, the course of world history:

he asks not only about the whole, but about ways of guiding it. [NC 54]

In short, after Jaspers postulates that Nietzsche

entertains these notions and ambitions and argues that Nietzsche thinks in broad world-historical terms, Jaspers then criticizes him for holding such a view. According to Jaspers, it is empirically impossible to know what Christianity is in its core:

Christianity, too, as an immense historic phenomenon, cannot be known in its whole essence. [NC 57]

A second point in case for demonstrating Jaspers' affinity to Heidegger consists in the way how Jaspers depersonalizes Nietzsche the thinker and instead speaks of his thought system in its entirety (*das Denken Nietzsches*). Related to this interpretation is his claim that Nietzsche's thought exhibits irreconcilable contradictions:

As we go along with this experimental thinking, we must not fail because we become impatient with Nietzsche's contradictions; instead, the contradictions should impel us toward the deeper synthesis. We must not let ourselves be merely whirled about in haphazard chaos; we must search constantly for the inexorable paths along which motion occurs. [NC 103]

The basic principle at work here is that Nietzsche's thought is not transparent merely through the words used to express it but rather Nietzsche's core thinking goes beyond surface contradictions. Comparable to Heidegger, Jaspers suggests that Nietzsche's words, as well as his narrative strategies and the writing style he employs, are supplementary to his thinking. The implication is that there is a meaning behind the text that only learned scholars can excavate.

The judgment that reveals itself here—and which obfuscates the intentions of Nietzsche's text—is that Nietzsche's words, the way he uses them, should be taken as expressions of a true meaning that allegedly lies concealed behind the words. It substitutes the thought for the thinker, allegedly conveying synthetic meaning for the facticity of Nietzsche's individual positions. I differ from this interpretation of Nietzsche, for style, register, and modes of communication are not peripheral to Nietzsche's meanings; they rather suggest the kind of readers, thinkers, and actors Nietzsche wants human beings to become.

Taken by themselves, Nietzsche's words are not contradictions, but are merely perceived to be such by interpreters who overlook his polemical strategies and who project contradictions into his philosophy. I argue that assuming alternative positions in order to attack a historical figure (such as Christ) or a phenomenon (such

as Christianity) does not reveal contradictions; rather it represents a rhetorical strategy used to puncture an amorphous thought system, namely, the bundle of contradictions that Christianity itself embodies and propagates.

Main Principles in Nietzsche's *The Antichrist*

Instead of examining the polemical strategy behind Nietzsche's text, I postulate that the text has four basic tenets that all drive home Nietzsche's central thesis; namely, that Christianity has become the interpretational vehicle through which resentment values have become enshrined as the default values for mankind. These tenets are:

*Christ Presented Humankind with a Practice,
not with a Message*

Nietzsche insists that Christ did not offer a cogent message about his actual teachings, let alone a cohesive belief system. For Nietzsche, Christ's words were verbal approximations of inner states of consciousness that had little correlation with concrete reality. Christ conveyed his sense of bliss for having overcome all oppositions, and he used highly symbolic language to express that new inner spiritual richness:

The "kingdom of God" is not something that you wait for...it is an experience of the heart; it is everywhere and it is nowhere.²

The importance of Christ, however, was not in the language he used, but in the actions that sprang from his inner awareness. The message of Christ, Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes, was the practice of living like Christ—modeling a way of living:

This state projects itself into a new *practice*, the genuinely evangelical practice...Christians act, they are characterized by a *different* way of acting. [AC 30, §33]

In fact, one could still today be a true Christian by practicing a Christ-like life.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Anti-Christ: A Curse to Christianity," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 1-67, here p. 32, §34. [Henceforth cited as AC with page number and section number]

*Christ's Actions as Revealing an Overcoming
of Resentment*

The deepest truth behind Christ's lived example was his overcoming of resentment. Christ felt no resentment; for this reason alone, Nietzsche respects him and sees in him an example of a higher human type. It was above all his action in front of his executioners that exhibited his freedom from resentment; it constitutes the essence of his teaching:

This bearer of "glad tidings" died the way he lived, the way he *taught*—*not* "to redeem humanity," but instead to demonstrate how people need to live. His bequest to humanity was a *practice*: his behaviour towards the judges, towards the henchmen, the way he acted in the face of his accusers and every type of slander and derision,—his conduct on the *cross*. [AC 32, §35]

The grandeur of Christ lay in rejecting any form of resentment:

Not to defend yourself, *not* to get angry, *not* to lay blame...
But *not* to resist evil either,—to *love* it. [AC 32, §35]

*His Followers' Underlying Resentments
Created the (False) Message of Christianity*

After Nietzsche presented his two summary points—that Christ's message was the presentation of a way of living and that it expressed freedom from resentment—Nietzsche condemns Christianity for what it became: a belief system—and not a practice—that contradicted everything Christ stood for. The key point in his subsequent analysis is this: Christianity became an interpretative cloak for a foundational resentment. While Christianity did not first create resentment—recurring feelings of resentment are fundamentally human—it gave that affect respectability by allowing individuals to reconfigure their resentment instincts into a conviction of their higher moral value and worth. It allowed pitiful souls to believe that the world revolved around them and that their personal convictions accorded them a higher status:

"Salvation of the soul"—in plain language: "the world revolves around me." [AC 40, §43]

What Nietzsche condemns, then, are not the many untruths and lies Christianity sanctions, but that it managed to coalesce into a master interpretation, in which resentment values were both validated

and enshrined. With the rise of Christianity begins resentment as world-historical interpretation.

Christ was a Decadent

Despite admiring Christ's lack of resentment, Nietzsche also criticizes him in many regards, above all focusing his criticism on him as being a decadent. There are two important components regarding this insight. For one, it indicates that Christ's life and example were unique to Christ and expressed his unique physiological constitution. For Nietzsche, all philosophies reflect actual life practices and are symptomatic of a specific life lived: "they have value only as symptoms."³ Secondly, Christ's life reflected an overall decadent physiology that avoided pain and removed itself from life—in itself, a morbid form of hedonism:

a subsequent and refined development of hedonism on thoroughly morbid foundation. [AC 27, §30]

Christ's response to life emerged from an aversion to pain and heartbreak, but it is not given to everyone—in fact, not to most normally-constituted types—to live a life to such a high degree instinctually detached from the natural world. This means that Christ cannot serve as a model for those who are immersed in life and who must bear its brunt. In this case, overcoming resentment means mastering life and assuming an affirmative stance to it. The goal is not outward adherence to a belief but leading an active life free from resentment.

Whereas the first, second and fourth guiding principles deal with the historical figure of Christ as well as Nietzsche's attempt—despite a contradictory record regarding the historical origins and development of Christianity—to adequately depict Christ, the third principle unfolds Christianity's rise out of the spirit of resentment.

Critique of Jaspers' Heideggerian reading

There are, however, a few details that Jaspers gets wrong about Nietzsche. As stated earlier, Jaspers

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 153-229, here "The Problem of Socrates," p. 162, §2. [Henceforth cited as *PS* with page number and section number]

approaches Christianity as a historical phenomenon in chronological time. It is as though Christianity were a concrete, definable entity that can be unmasked and overturned, thereby ushering in a new era. That is why he criticizes Nietzsche for identifying a "will to annihilate Christianity, while at the same time overcoming nihilism by a new philosophy" (NC 95). Jaspers chides Nietzsche for reducing the complexity of Christianity to such simple terms.

Nietzsche nowhere defines Christianity in that way. The brilliance of Nietzsche's critique, and what is original about it, is that he avoids seeing Christianity as a monolithic historical entity but rather as a diffuse confluence of associations arising out of a morbid physiological bedrock. Christianity is not a historical force within a period of time, but rather an interpretational, always possible constant for a particular subset of decadent, life-denying individuals. It is the way in which these types can make sense of their instinctual confusion. What sets it apart from other forms of morbid hedonism in the ancient world—indeed, what makes it original—is that it becomes active as a complete system and targets more robust forms of life-affirmation beyond its physiological purview. It bundles similarly constituted types—"a whole movement of rejected and dejected elements of every type" (AC 50, §51)—who see themselves reflected in its paradigm, and points them toward a higher cause: overthrowing master morality. The masters of the ancient world became in this way the oppositional goad against which they could designate themselves as being the good ones.

The nihilism of the present, however, is not the progressive linear end-result of Christian history—even if the inner contradictions of Christianity meanwhile have now become manifest. It is the result of the void left by Christianity's failure to offer contemporary decadents sustained consolation for the instincts of resentment that Christianity knew how to stoke and nurture. Yet these wills now still require a master interpretation that can make sense of their instinctual confusion and the feelings of misery and inadequacy, for which Christianity had provided a self-referential framework. Above all, it gave them a distinct evil enemy against whom they could release their pent-up resentment. The nihilism of the present, therefore, are the new worldviews that fill the interpretational void left by Christianity—be it in the form of democracy, socialism, anarchism, or liberalism. These movements did not progress out of Christianity; they are alternatives

for the same subset of resentment instincts.

Jaspers then commits the same fallacy that has long impeded Nietzsche research—namely, seeing the *Übermensch* as a transition out of and beyond Christianity:

Although this entirety of history does not present itself to him as a full, rounded picture, he nevertheless views it as a whole, a march toward a potentially superior type of man. He regards history as a transitional stage for turning man into something more than man. [NC 41]

However, unmasking Christianity, its mechanics, and its foundational basis and avoiding the non-stop traps and siren calls of nihilism is already an end in itself—a true sign of strength. There is nothing beyond this. Fighting or resisting current nihilism would only be a further expression of decadence:

Philosophers and moralists are lying to themselves when they think that they are going to extricate themselves from decadence by waging war on it. Extrication is not in their power: what they choose as a remedy, as an escape, is itself only another expression of decadence. [PS 166, §11]

Rather, a higher type would internalize the historical necessity of this awareness and would have the strength to affirm the eternal return of the same:

Not just to tolerate necessity, still less to conceal it—all idealism is hypocrisy towards necessity—but to *love* it.⁴

Or, in the "Lenzer Heide" fragment Nietzsche states it thus in response to nihilism:

Who will prove themselves to be the strongest types? The measured ones, those who have no need for extreme belief systems, those who cannot only allow for a good portion of coincidence and nonsense but who can love it.⁵

Secondly, Jaspers assumes—along with

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 69-151, here "Why I am So Clever," p. 99, §10.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Der europäische Nihilismus (Lenzer Heide, 10. Juni 1887)," in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 12 Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1988, pp. 211-7, here p. 217, §15 [translation mine].

Heidegger—that Nietzsche's thinking represents a complete system. As mentioned above, Jaspers speaks not of Nietzsche as thinker, but of Nietzsche's thought. In contrast to this, I argue that it is exactly the reverse. Nietzsche proceeds from the thought to the thinker, namely to what the thinking reveals about its thinker. In fact, according to Nietzsche, the need for totality, a rounded system, is another expression of decadence. A higher type can live with uncertainty and can affirm itself despite of the uncertainty—that is its strength. In that sense, Nietzsche's critique does not point to a philosophical system replacing Christianity; it expresses his own independent stance and will and also how he uses contingent truths as an arsenal of weapons to combat worthy opponents. Summarizing one component of his art of war, Nietzsche writes:

The task is *not* to conquer all obstacles in general but instead to conquer the ones where you can apply your whole strength, suppleness, and skill with weapons,— to conquer opponents who are your *equals*.⁶

Supposed contradictions can only exist in relation to a complete system; otherwise, truths are always relative truths and extensions of specific wills to power.

Conclusion

I conclude by asking: what did Jaspers actually intend with his study? While he proves to be a sensitive reader—and seems objective, not taking sides for or against Nietzsche—it is unclear whether he endorses Nietzsche's anti-Christian critique or not, that is, whether he finds it damning for Christianity or whether he subtly intends to challenge it—and thereby to rescue Christianity from Nietzsche's heavy artillery.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, eds. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, transl. Judith Norman, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press 2005, pp. 69-151, here "Why I am So Wise," p. 82, §7.

The fact that Jaspers believes Nietzsche oversimplified his account of Christianity and Christ's teachings, and that he portrays Nietzsche as a prophet-like figure who intended to dislodge Christianity, single-handedly, from the world-historical stage, implies arguably a deeply negative verdict—both in regards to Nietzsche's critique and his intent.

The interpretation I have presented indicates that Jaspers' reading is misguided. It renders clear that Nietzsche, with his nuanced, delicate rendition of Christ, treats him with great respect and admiration—even if he concludes that Christ resembled a Buddha-like figure who, in Buddha-like fashion, renounced the world. What Nietzsche condemns, however, are those who failed to exhibit any Christ-like actions or demeanor or attempt to live a life free of resentment, as Christ himself had modeled, but instead used patchwork mischaracterizations of his life and words to delude themselves and others into thinking that their petty lives in resentment and misery were superior to those who aspired to lives of virtue, honor, and distinction:

Granting "immortality" to every Tom, Dick, and Harry has been the most enormous and most vicious attempt to assassinate *noble* humanity. [AC 40, §43]

A truthful, honest reckoning with historical Christianity and its very confusing origins should, on the other hand, enable one to detach those instincts that have been channeled toward false other-worldly values and to reclaim and reaffirm those instincts that have, in turn, been negatively valued and suppressed by Christianity—and to reassert the latter as the basis for a higher human type. Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* should clear the air and set us on that course. But a reading that mischaracterizes the man and emphasizes a mythopoetic view of both the thinker and his thought fails to do justice to the goals and intentions of this subtle text, thereby contributing to the sad, fateful legacy of misrepresenting the thinker to the detriment of his thinking.