



Revisiting Friedrich Nietzsche's "Good European" with Karl Jaspers

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to reconsider Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of the "good European" in light of Karl Jaspers' concept of world philosophy, with the purpose of examining how both thinkers contribute to understanding the changing boundaries of contemporary European culture and a community facing crisis. I argue that good Europeans seek to develop novel political categories, reshape the boundaries of political language and political life, and, in doing so, identify the conditions necessary for a better future for humanity. Nietzsche understands the free spirit not from a nationalist standpoint, but through the ideal of the good European, whose outlook challenges and seeks to overcome the nation-state. Rather than promoting Germanization, Nietzsche rejects the notion of a unified German culture, arguing instead that Germany has produced only a small number of exceptionally cultivated individuals. As philosophers of culture, both Nietzsche and Jaspers extend their concerns beyond Europe and engage with the world as a whole.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Friedrich; Jaspers, Karl; good European; culture; politics; freedom; responsibility; boundary situations; communication; world philosophy.

This essay aims to revisit Friedrich Nietzsche's "good European" alongside Karl Jaspers to elaborate an assessment of their contributions to shifting limits in contemporary European culture and community in crisis.¹ I argue that good Europeans explore the creation of new categories, delimitations, and possibilities in shaping socio-economic and cultural realities. Nietzsche conceives his self of the free spirit not as a nationalist but as a good European who is keen to abolish the nation-state.² The *gute Europäer* is a European of a "cosmopolitan taste," who, as

Nietzsche observes in *The Gay Science*, "knows the sea, adventure, and the Orient."³ Nietzsche is not essentializing and defending Germanization for, according to him, there is and was no "German culture."⁴ Rather, for Nietzsche, there have always been a few exceptionally cultivated individuals in Germany. As cultural philosophers, Nietzsche

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With A Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Random House 1974, p. 234. [Henceforth cited as GS]

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, "To Franz Overbeck in Basle, 18 May 1884" in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden*, Vol. 6, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1975, p. 507 #513.

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Ninth International Jaspers Conference, Rome, August 2024.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, transl. Reginald J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 174-5.

and Jaspers are concerned not only with Europe but with the entire world. Jaspers calls this kind of philosophy world philosophy. For Jaspers, philosophy is a practice that seeks to create both existential and political freedom, resulting from truth obtained in the loving struggle of authentic communication. Similarly, Lawrence Hatab in *"Amor Agonis: Conflict and Love in Nietzsche and Homer"* argues that Nietzsche, too, thinks taking pleasure in conflict is part of love and hence is unavoidable: The spirit of contest that characterized Greek tragedy is essential to the production of life-affirming art.⁵ For Jaspers, existing amounts to experiencing boundary situations, as he declares that

to experience boundary situations is the same as to exist.⁶

In contrast to Jaspers, Nietzsche is casting images of the future in his imagination. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he introduces art as being "a necessary correlative of, and supplement for science" and philosophy.⁷ In a note, he explains:

My direction regarding *art*: not to compose where the *limits* are! Rather to compose where the *future* of man is! There must be many images put in place according to which one can *live*.⁸

In his 1934 monograph, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of his Philosophical Activity*, Jaspers elaborated on how Nietzsche shaped his own thought and aimed to defend Nietzsche's philosophy against misunderstandings, including, above all, German National Socialist co-optation. Indeed, Jaspers references Nietzsche throughout his work.

⁵ Lawrence J. Hatab, "Amor Agonis: Conflict and Love in Nietzsche and Homer", in *Conflict and Contest in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, eds. Herman W. Siemens and James S. Pearson, London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic 2018, pp. 105-21, here p. 118.

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Zweiter Band: Existenzerhellung*, Berlin, DE: Julius Springer 1932, p. 204. My translation.

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, Or: Hellenism and Pessimism*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1967, pp. 15-144, here p. 93.

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente. Juli 1882 bis Herbst 1885, 1. Teil: Juli 1882 bis Winter 1883/84 (1-24), 4 [265]," in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 10*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1988, p. 183. My translation.

This suggests that for Jaspers, Nietzsche was more than just one of the great philosophers.

Both Nietzsche and Jaspers are German-born Europeans themselves who philosophize first and foremost within a European horizon. Yet they uphold a cosmopolitan mindset, openness, and interest in the world in its entirety. They are also both philosophers of culture. Jaspers regards Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as fundamental to the development of his existential philosophy. In *Reason and Existence*, he appreciates them for having advanced

a type of thought and humanity which was indissolubly connected with a moment of this epoch...a new total intellectual attitude for men.⁹

The decisive step they took that changed the destiny of Europe was that they took rationality and reflection to their limits and "questioned reason from the depths of Existenz" (RE 25). Kierkegaard and Nietzsche identified the crucial problems of relativism and nihilism and opened up new spaces, novel approaches, and methods for thinking about them.

In contrast to Jaspers, Nietzsche places greater emphasis on the fact that the world is linguistically mediated. Furthermore, he explores the genealogy and function of philosophical and political concepts. He introduces novel scales and evaluations because, for him, destruction makes sense only when it is followed by new legislation and creation. He privileges art over traditional knowledge systems, for art has "value-creating power" whereas science, which performs important work concerning "the self-critique of knowledge," is sterile regarding giving sense and direction to life.¹⁰ Hence, in *The Gay Science*, he conceives the science of the future as having both critical and creative functions.

Both Nietzsche and Jaspers endorse the idea of taking responsibility for oneself, others, and the world as a European trait. In *Europa der Gegenwart*, Jaspers offers a post-World War II analysis of what Europe is and articulates the political-philosophical direction

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz: Five Lectures*, transl. William Earle, New York, NY: Noonday Press 1955, pp. 24-5. [Henceforth cited as RE]

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, transl. Walter Kaufmann and Reginald J. Hollingdale, New York, NY: Vintage Books 1967, pp. 13-163, here pp. 153-5.

in which it may develop.¹¹ In the aftermath of the Second World War, Europe had been devastated not only materially but also in its spirit by having suffered through nationalism, ideological absolutism, and the loss of lived freedom. However, Jaspers is convinced that Europe can be replenished if Europeans interpret freedom, responsibility, and political community in a novel manner. For this to occur, Europe must be much more than a mere collection of rebuilt nation-states that compete with one another. This shows that, for Jaspers, Europe is clearly a geographical territory rather than a mere idea. At the same time, in his view, it is a spiritual-historical achievement. This means that since 1945, the European spirit has been at stake.

Taking Jaspers' leap of philosophical faith, as he suggests doing, allows one to believe in freedom and communication. Since, in Jaspers' view, there is no absolute knowledge, a philosophical faith is needed. It knows

the source which no reasons can prove or refute, a source that can only be unfolded.¹²

For Jaspers, philosophizing out of the origin means authentic philosophizing that proceeds from individual existences. Nietzsche and Jaspers explore the individual existence of paradigmatic individuals. To study such individuals himself and to inspire his readers' own investigation of them, and simultaneously their own self-transformation, Jaspers composed, for instance, his history of philosophy, *Die grossen Philosophen* (1959).

By focusing on the individual and the transformative thinker, Nietzsche and Jaspers keep plurality and ambiguity alive. In *The Origin and Goal of History*, Jaspers identifies, in 1949, what he calls the *Achsenzeitalter* (Axial Age) as a period of profound spiritual and intellectual transformation, roughly 800–200 BCE, with a peak around 500 BCE, in which a new form of human self-consciousness emerges independently in several civilizations.¹³ Otfried Höffe correctly points out that Jaspers regards the historical foundations of Europe as originating in the Axial Age

of Antiquity, which has heterogeneous origins and, thus, constitutes Europe's plurality from its outset.¹⁴ Ultimately, this culminates in Jaspers' argument that in order to be European, one must first become a genuine person by actualizing one's selfhood in freedom. Both Nietzsche and Jaspers view crises and failures as opportunities for reflection and change. Jaspers emphasizes that

if reason is lost, philosophy itself is being lost.¹⁵

For him, reason is closely connected to truth, honesty, and authenticity. Nietzsche, too, observes that how much truth someone can uphold is a measure of one's strength, and he insists on the importance of living in accordance with the virtue of truthfulness.

Jaspers advances the idea of *Weltphilosophie* (world philosophy), aiming for a philosophy that could speak across cultures rather than belong exclusively to a single civilization, such as the European one. He envisions a world in which different philosophical traditions, such as Greek, European, Indian, and Chinese, encounter one another and learn from one another while preserving their respective differences. Jaspers writes,

We are on the path from the twilight of European philosophy...to the dawn of world philosophy.¹⁶

In Jaspers' understanding, philosophy develops through personal, national, intra-European and cross-cultural dialogue rather than in isolation. Consequently, communication within and across a plurality of traditions is central to Jaspers' politics too. Since Jaspers draws on Nietzsche, he rejects closed philosophical systems; world philosophy remains an open process of conversation and mutual questioning rather than merely a comparative and hierarchizing endeavor.

Importantly, Nietzsche supports an intellectual aristocracy of "exceptional human beings"¹⁷ such

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *Europa der Gegenwart*, Wien, AT: Amandus, 1947. My translation. [Henceforth cited as EG]

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Harper & Row 1967, p. 120.

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Otfried Höffe, "Karl Jaspers: Ein europäischer Denker," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 74/2 (2020), 205-227, here pp. 221-2.

¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Vernunft und Widernunft in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1950, p. 50. My translation.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Rechenschaft und Ausblick: Reden und Aufsätze*, München, DE: Piper 1958, p. 391. My translation.

¹⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, transl. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Vintage 1966, p. 176. [Henceforth cited as BGE]

as Napoleon Bonaparte, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ludwig van Beethoven, Stendhal, Heinrich Heine, and Arthur Schopenhauer, not a racial supremacy. Its noble members are "masters of new means of language" (BGE 196). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche proclaims in 1886 that the good Europeans are evolving and they are the heirs of Europe. He suggests that the European future requires "an essentially supra-national and nomadic type of man" (BGE 176) who can overcome the old national divisions. The good Europeans are the "heirs of Europe's longest and most courageous self-overcoming" (GS 307), who take upon themselves the responsibility for executing the task of preparing for a common European future: "*Europe wants to become one*" (BGE 196).

Both Nietzsche and Jaspers endorse the idea that Europe needs to be both preserved and reshaped. They understand reshaping or self-overcoming as an individual's interpretative perspective, thereby preserving ambiguity, contradiction, and heterogeneity. For both Nietzsche and Jaspers, humans are the creators of values and of politics. Values and politics are thus neither God-given nor are they determined by some law of nature.

In Jaspers' view, humanism proceeds from the human being and not from cyborgs or, extrapolated into today's world, from artificial intelligence-guided robots. For Nietzsche and Jaspers, intellectual rigor means entertaining possibilities of existing in thought and then living practically according to them in order to see whether they are feasible and foster life.

Both Nietzsche and Jaspers reject theocracy, as for them philosophy becomes theology when it departs from religious premises instead of from sustained thinking and discussion. Reasoning is a dynamic process: philosophizing is an ongoing activity, a conversation, and never ends in an inflexible, dogmatic system; since it then becomes theology or an absolutist metaphysical system, respectively. One cannot overemphasize this aspect: it is one of their core tenets that humans must take responsibility for the values according to which they conduct their lives and politics, and this responsibility cannot and should not be externalized to a godhead. I find it concerning the considerable number of scholars who attempt to force these two atheistic thinkers to this day into religious corsets, driven by their own need to obey and follow rather than think for themselves in a constructive and critical manner and to lead.

Authentic dialogue with others is both a condition for and a result of genuine existential transformation. Entrenched partisanship must be overcome by drawing on reason, which allows one to see what humans have in common regardless of one's precise political position. Shared interests make European countries allies. For instance, advocating civil liberties such as free speech benefits all Europeans, provided the aim is to communicate and live together in peace. Winston Churchill advocated this vision in his speech to students on 19 September 1946 in Zurich, when he endorsed the building of "a kind of United States of Europe."¹⁸

Regarding human relationships, both Nietzsche and Jaspers praise friendship. Although I have high regard for Nietzsche's philosophy, one must admit that he devalues the feminine whilst simultaneously appropriating aspects of it for masculinity, as he demands that culture needs to become more masculine again. According to Nietzsche's own explicit admission, he wants history to be eternally masculine.¹⁹ Unsurprisingly, as an opponent of what he contemptuously calls *Weiber-Emancipation*,²⁰ Nietzsche privileges one's monologue with oneself above the dialogue with the other. The latter is Jaspers' preference. Yet both Nietzsche and Jaspers concede that both monologue and dialogue are needful in philosophizing. In contrast to Nietzsche, Jaspers is interested in existential relating and communicating without gendering it. Jaspers is fully opposed to essentializing categories, including the one of man and woman. Rather, he wants his readers to rethink and renegotiate the contents of such categories in a loving struggle.

Europe cannot afford to control, intimidate, and isolate any interest groups that contribute to the well-being of its identity and subsequently must not treat them as inferior but encourage understanding and respect, provided it wants to avoid tyranny and lack

¹⁸ The Associated Press (20 January 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_wEQ4gYujA, at 0:24.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, transl. Reginald J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1997, p. 87.

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Nachgelassene Fragmente. Frühling-Sommer 1888, 16 [82]," in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe, Vol. 13*, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1988, p. 514.

of liberty. Tolerance and upholding the Declaration of Human Rights are hence instrumental to a strong and serene Europe.

In *Heidegger and Jaspers on Nietzsche*, Lowell Howey writes that in Nietzsche's view "the individual needs the confrontation with perspectives other than his own."²¹ Otherwise humans become intellectually stunted. Both Nietzsche and Jaspers were aware of the danger of going along with political manipulation and staying silent when resisting and speaking up would be the decent path of action. Jaspers' personal experience with the German regime during WW2 caused a turnaround in him and led him to address political issues of his time, mainly in dedicated books. The absence of courage and intellectual honesty can be demonstrated in today's political reality by the lack of political will against wars of choice, assassinations of political leaders and their families, disproportionate military force in the subjugation of entire populations, and the killing of civilians without due legal process or war powers committed by order of governments.

In Nietzsche's and Jaspers' understanding of philosophy, the philosopher needs to articulate the possibilities for conduct in life, for *mögliche Existenz* (possible existence), and thus provide awakening and orientation whilst respecting individual and cultural differences.

In Jaspers' book on the atomic bomb, in *The Future of Mankind* and elsewhere, *Umkehr* is a central existential concept. It refers to *sich wandeln*,²² that is, a profound transformation or transmutation (AB 15) in respect to how a person relates to oneself, others, and existence. Nietzsche, too, thinks that humans have to create a life-affirming "second nature" within themselves by actively changing their thinking and feeling.²³ In my view, Jaspers'

insistent call for *Umkehr*—that is, a turning around or reversal—is needed more than ever before, as humans are at a *Wendepunkt*, a turning point (AB 7), with consequences even greater than in 1958, when Jaspers wrote about the nuclear threat. Following Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jaspers believes in the necessity of taking existential decisions in freedom. In his analysis, the choice consists in either reversion, life, and transcendence, or being doomed, death, and destruction. He argues that the atomic bomb made the fast and irreversible *totale Selbstvernichtung* (total self-annihilation) of all humanity possible (AB 353). And he hastens to add that to lose physical existence (*Dasein*) is already bad, but to lose "an existence worth living" (*lebenswertes Dasein*) through "the danger of totalitarian rule" that does away with freedom and human dignity is just as bad (AB 22).

Political awareness is needed so that the free world stays free; respectively, it becomes free again where it is presently unfree; it must be possible to have legitimate disagreements and nevertheless live together in peace on the grounds of shared humanity. It also needs to be relentlessly insisted that, for Europe to unite and cooperate, it is a must for Europeans to learn foreign languages, travel for education, and read books. This helps create global citizens who actively shape a common future. I agree with Churchill, who is famously cited as saying in 1947,

Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.²⁴

However, one thing is sure: Everything possible needs to be done to prevent a return to a feudalistic slave state.

For Jaspers, *Umkehr* is the existential turning point through which a person moves from merely existing to living authentically in awareness of freedom, finitude, and transcendence. Through reversion, one becomes open to what Jaspers calls transcendence. Transcendence refers to the dimension beyond objective, scientific knowledge that gives humans ultimate meaning. I agree with

and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin, DE: de Gruyter 1975, p. 290 #344.

²⁴ Winston S. Churchill, House of Commons, 11 November 1947, *Parliament Bill*, Hansard, 5th series, vol. 444, columns 206–207.

²¹ Lowell Howey, *Heidegger and Jaspers on Nietzsche: A Critical Examination of Heidegger's and Jaspers' Interpretation of Nietzsche*, The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff 1973, p. 160.

²² Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1960, pp. 49. [Henceforth cited as AB]

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, "An Hans von Bülow in Meiningen, Rapallo, Anfang Dezember 1882" in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden*, Vol. 6, eds. Giorgio Colli

Jaspers that becoming an authentic self in a self-chosen manner is indispensable for bringing about enduring political change for the better. It is important to note that self-transformation is possible only through appealing to it, but it cannot be forced. Instead of being paralyzed by despair, Jaspers taught

his readers to see crisis and failure (*Scheitern*) as opportunities for improvement. Unlike a one-time event, *Umkehr* is often understood as an ongoing process. This means a person may be repeatedly called upon to reorient oneself throughout life as new boundary situations arise.