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Remarks on Zank,  
"Monotheism and Its Discontents: *Achsenzeit* or *deus ex machina*?"

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**Abstract:** This commentary was presented at the bi-annual meeting of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America in conjunction with the 106<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, New York, December 2009.

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Michael Zank has written a splendid meditation on Karl Jaspers' *Achsenzeit* hypothesis, which, broadly speaking, he supports, with important and instructive adjustments, as a reflection on the spiritual theme of universal humanity. He questions Jaspers' periodization of the *Achsenzeit* itself; suggests replacing the linearizing of the principal versions of the "monotheisms of the book" by viewing the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim variants as "parallel phenomena" rather than as linked by filiation; distinguishes carefully between the spiritual and political aspects of the development (and abuse) of the theme, particularly with reference to the contested standing of Jerusalem as a holy city; and reflects on the prospects of recovering the spiritual import of the *Achsenzeit*, even if (or though) Jaspers' formulation is (in his opinion) too narrow, too quick to favor local and doctrinaire application, and, perhaps finally (in Jaspers' hands—possibly even in his own), not much more than a *deus ex machina*. That is to say, the normative argument about the calling of universal humanity and the historical role open to Jerusalem may actually be capable of being compellingly formulated through the instrumental resources of the

concept of the *Achsenzeit*, the advent of monotheism, the approximate parallelism of scriptural moments across the world that effectively address the normative meaning of globalization without confirming Jaspers' specific version of the *Achsenzeit*.

I must leave most of Zank's musings on these matters to one side in order to focus on a few strategic questions his essay obliges us to consider if we are to assess the deeper thesis Zank shares with Jaspers. I don't mean to press these issues in the spirit of chiding Zank. On the contrary, his openness encourages us to admit in the frankest way that the assumptions of Jaspers' (and his own) reflections are simply too imprecise to expect much in the way of advancing the thesis in the challenging way he intends. I confine my remarks, therefore, to certain problematic features of the assumptions on which the *Achsenzeit* thesis depends, without adopting Jaspers' or Zank's (alternative) temporal location of the supposed axial age itself.

First of all, I'm not persuaded that monotheism addresses universal humanity as a matter of course, or that the religions of lesser deities (the gods of nature, say) preclude invoking universal humanity—if, indeed,

we can rightly claim to determine the normative import of the condition we name universal humanity. I am not persuaded that Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, Habermas (or anyone else) has, as each of these figures seems to believe, actually caught the conceptual nerve of universal humanity. Certainly, globalization—or reflections on the salient concerns of the global population of mankind—is not in any obvious sense the right way to attempt to isolate what, spiritually (or morally, if such perspectives may be usefully distinguished), could ever be rightly called universal in the normative (perhaps essentialist) sense intended.

For one thing, globalization seems to invite generalizations that are insuperably subject to historical eclipse rather than straightforwardly confirmed as universally valid (whether merely descriptive or normative) which might (for that reason) help to answer Jaspers' or Zank's question about the *telos* of world history. I think we know of no way to succeed here that could convincingly count as an objective and genuine discovery. I do not think the definition of humanity in any universal or normatively essential sense is a question that invites discovery at all. The reason usually eludes us, though, in my opinion, the inevitability of failing is the very lesson of Plato's elenctic dialogues, which rightly defeats the conjectural proposal of the *Republic*. Man, let us admit, is a featherless biped. Is that a universal discovery? What does it yield in the way of a way of life?

I see no basis for supposing that there is any assignable, natural, normatively determinate function that being human entails. That a shepherd or a saddle maker has a function (in the familiar way Socrates develops in the *Republic* and the early dialogues, regarding the definition of various virtues) says absolutely nothing about the function of being human. A friend of mine, Zeno Vendler, in a memorable little book, *Res Cogitans*,<sup>1</sup> asked quite a number of years ago what the function of a baboon is—a fairly transparent jibe at the official reading of the *Republic*. (Bear in mind that the definition of man arrived at in the *Statesman* and the *Laws* holds that man is a herd animal unique in the habit of discussing how he should govern himself and his fellows, always in need of self-government even though he cannot find the right principle.) There is no known argument that leads us to suppose that the

concept of a human being (or a baboon) entails the concept of a good human being (or a good baboon). I see no reason to think that the sages of the *Achsenzeit* have greater resources at their disposal. What they seem to have been able to do is provide a vision of mankind's universal calling that has convinced parts of the human race to declare themselves loyal adherents, even as they violate their own dictum.

They treat their doctrine as universal according to their own conviction. But just as the singular God of each of the great monotheisms finds no logical difficulty in warring against the singular God of other monotheistic peoples—the same God or the one true God that the false monotheisms have failed to recognize—the champions of any one supreme norm of humanity have no difficulty in warring against the champions of any other supreme norm.

You may say that I have not secured my own argument: I have merely offered a counter-proposal. Fair enough. But that brings me to a deeper argument. Zank is helpful here—but chiefly against his own objective (if I understand him rightly). He says:

Prehistory is not yet history but it structures human history ... prehistory is in fact the token or historical expression of our consciousness of a common origin and hence, as it were, descended from Adam.... In other words, history begins when humans emerge from silence and begin to speak.

Zank is speaking of our common humanity in terms of "the natural history of the *genus homo*," which is itself "an unfathomable abyss of time ... that determine[s] what we are as a species in decisive but perhaps irretrievable ways." That is, until the achievement of the axial age provides "a point of orientation in a historical horizon that is on the verge of a world historic turn" addressed to globalization. But, of course, it's precisely there that the failure of discovering universal humanity sets in.

Here, I venture an argument inspired by Darwin's achievement but not entirely explicable in terms of biological evolution or the genetics or epigenetic development the neo-Darwinians offer. Of course, the argument is hardly meant to disallow our defining the normative objective of universal humanity; on the contrary, it anticipates an unending contest among various such convictions. But what it does provide is the reason any such *telos* must be a human construction subject to the vagaries of history and cultural diversity: hence, that the intended achievement of the axial age must either be denied outright (because whatever

<sup>1</sup> Zeno Vendler, *Res Cogitans: An Essay in Rational Psychology*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972.

norms it might propose would still be artifactual rather than discovered) or must be greatly diminished in what it could rightly claim (because the posit of any pertinent visio—universal, let us say—could never demonstrate that it relied on resources greater than those that characteristically have led humanity to the most bitter struggles the race has ever generated). Alternatively put: we are, now, in the throes of various mortal struggles in our own post-axial age, and we see no way to escape. On the contrary, the wars of our post-axial world threaten to be, if possible, more destructive than any wars our world has ever imagined. It is entirely possible that we shall destroy our world and ourselves—in the name of goals directly drawn from the visions of the axial age itself.

The argument I have in mind rejects the primacy of any attempt to discover the natural or normative function or *telos* of the genus *homo* (as Zank would argue) or, more restrictedly, of the species *homo sapiens sapiens*, or Neanderthal man (now extinct), which, unlike the early species of *homo*, was the first to achieve the *sine qua non* on which the question posed by the axial age could ever have arisen. Put in the simplest terms: my claim is that the biological evolution of the genus *homo* reached a critical point with the advent of *homo sapiens* (and, very likely, with Neanderthal man as well): because *homo sapiens* is the only viable species to have achieved a level of biological competence that made possible the cultural invention of true language, the culturally regularized transformation of the proto-cultural (prelinguistic) achievement of non-hominid and early hominid primate communication into any of the reliably transmitted forms of language.

That is, I argue that the native primate abilities of the human infant are, on indisputable evidence, capable of internalizing the mastery of any true language as a first language; that human language (whatever its variety) is itself an artifact of an accumulating cultural evolution (embedded in biological evolution but conceptually altogether different) that has gradually emerged from self-transforming prehomimid forms of primate communication (incipiently cultural, not merely or innately biological), capable of being transmitted without serious loss or deformation from generation to generation; and that what we call the self or person is the artifactual transform of the functional site of prelinguistic primate communication. In short, the self is a natural artifact, as Marjorie Grene has neatly put it, a cultural construction apt (at the very least) for the use

of that other essential construction, true language—the first, by what may be called internal *Bildung* (centered on the upbringing of the infants of successive generations, in Aristotle's sense, very differently construed in Hegel's sense); the second, by what may be called external *Bildung*, the originary invention of culture and language, the condition that makes internal *Bildung* possible, through the intertwined processes of biological and cultural evolution (only now incipiently perceived).

This is obviously a very complex matter. In fact, in our own time, there is surprisingly strong evidence that the bonobos (the species that used to be regarded as pygmy chimpanzees) may well possess more than a merely incipient ability (contra the conjectures of the Chomskyans) to acquire a significant mastery of human language (though, in the wild, they produce no language of their own), and may therefore be able to exhibit some of the learned capacities of human selves. The evidence tends to support the general thesis that the self is a hybrid artifact, the site of the encultured powers of reporting one's thoughts and perceptions, sharing information of this sort with other selves, and of acting intentionally on the basis of reasoning about the consequences of one or another choice of action. The bearing of all this on Jaspers' and Zank's speculation is that their question arises as a culturally artifactual issue within the contingent and variable conditions of forming human selves and human societies, and that achievement precludes any solution to the problem the *Achsenzeit* thesis poses that would require the discovery of a truly universal or supreme normative *telos* assigned to the human race. Our norms and purposes, however easily acquired, are doubly artifactual: because we are ourselves artifactual and because our norms and interests are artifactual transforms of the native biological regularities that mark the distinctive life of our species. Our universal humanity lies in our artifactuality.

I see the sense in which Jaspers' original conjecture had a genuinely exalted purpose—made more poignant by the import of World War II. It need never lose its grandeur. Nor need Zank's conjecture. But its distinctive pathos lies with our being forever drawn to the temptation Jaspers and Zank share, which our conceptual (or human) resources can never match in the manner wanted. We cannot find in our biology the endlessly varied universals we artifactually invent.