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Bad Transcendence: Wahl, Anders, and Jaspers on the Dangers of Overcoming

Abstract: With its root of ascendence (*crescendo*, or ascension) and prefix trans (going beyond, crossing over or outside) transcendence generally gets taken for granted to serve a good purpose and entail a positive development of he/she who transcends. Yet from Levinas' evil transcendence to Hegel's bad infinity, this is no longer something that should easily be presumed. This paper investigates the work of three early, existentialist-oriented phenomenologists (Günther Anders, Jean Wahl, and Karl Jaspers) in order to add further specificity to what a »bad transcendence« could look like. Wahl's notion of »transdescendance« takes up an aspect of Hegel's bad infinity in pointing to the necessity of immanent relation. Anders' »transcendence of the negative« draws attention to the necessity of transcendence's role in countering totality. And Jaspers critiques any transcendence that is telic, purposive, and unhinged from unconditional action and *Existenz*.

Key words: Wahl, Anders, Jaspers, phenomenology, transcendence, evil, negative

Povzetek: **Slaba transcendenca: Wahl, Anders in Jaspers o nevarnostih preseganja**

Transcendenca je s svojim korenom v ascendenci (*crescendo* ali vzpon) in s predpono trans (prečkati, iti onkraj ali ven) navadno razumljena kot nekaj, kar služi dobremu namenu in pozitivnemu razvoju tistega, ki ga zadeva. Toda vse od Heglove slabe neskončnosti in Levinasove zle transcendence to ni več nekaj, kar bi bilo samoumevno. Ta članek raziskuje delo treh zgodnjih eksistencialistično usmerjenih fenomenologov (Günther Anders, Jean Wahl in Karl Jaspers), da bi podrobneje razdelal, kako bi lahko izgledala »slaba transcendenca«. Wahlov koncept »transdescendance« razvija Heglovo slabo neskončnost ter s tem opozarja na nujnost imanentnega odnosa. Andersova »transcendenca negativnega« opozarja na pomembno vlogo transcendence pri zoperstavitvi totaliteti. Jaspers pa kritizira vsakršno transcendenco, ki je smotrna, ciljna in nameravana ter ni vpeta v brezpogojost delovanja in v *Existenz*.

Ključne besede: Wahl, Anders, Jaspers, fenomenologija, transcendenca, zlo, negativno

1. Introduction

It generally gets taken for granted that transcendence is always positive; that it inherently fulfills a good and moral purpose. [1] After all, the very etymology and history of the concept seems to attest to this: With its root of ascendence (*crescendo*, or ascension) and prefix trans (going beyond, crossing over or outside) it appears to entail a positive development of he/she who transcends. Although often attributed to originating with Parmenides, it was Plato's phenomena/ideas distinction that originally cast transcendence as something as always worthy of being sought and attained, with the very ideas of »the good« and »the beautiful« as the radical heights of such a movement.[2]

Yet we are not too naive today to believe that this does not already presume far too much. As Philippe Nemo (Levinas and Nemo 1998) once described, even the appearance of evil also is marked by a beyond-the-world with a productive and counter-natural excess or transcendence. Levinas once referred to an evil transcendence that ruptures immanence, when the »wholly other« retreats into utter exteriority (174). A claimed experience of the Devil, for example, fulfills all of the requirements of the theological descriptions of an experience of transcendence, as extra-natural, furnishing special revelation, and entailing activities that by and large are not of the known cosmos. Further, there are bad transcendences whereby the attempt is made to overcome or go beyond humanity and its very conditions (embodiment, material aspects, or the world of experience). In such cases, one seeks to transcend even the parameters of time itself and in so doing, to become like God – infinite.

It was of course Hegel who initiated the notion of a »bad infinity« that amounts to the endless series of one damn thing after another – an infinite straight line that has removed itself of all finite relation and possibility (this would be »true infinity«). Bad infinity short-circuits the flow of the finite-infinite relation and thereby ends the possibility of change itself. As described in his *Logic,* this spurious, bad infinity is »only a negation of an infinite; but the finite rises again the same as ever, and is never dispensed with and absorbed« (1975 137). Or as he put it elsewhere: »Only the bad infinite is the *beyond,* since it is *only* the negation of the finite posited as *real*.« (1986, 164)

A similar tendency can be observed in Rosenzweig, for whom our not-yet-redeemed world is in need of something unimpaired and all-prevailing »beyond all sorrow and joy« (2014, 406). Rosenzweig often bemoaned the confusion or even melding between essence and reality, which is closely related to »the misapplication of meaningless words ›immanent‹ and ›transcendent‹« (Glatzer 1976, 192–193). As he depicts it in the *Star of Redemption*, there is a necessary contrast between immanence and transcendence, yet it can be equalized only temporally

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[2] See here *Great Dialogues of Plato* (Warmington and Rouse 1956).

by special revelation, for in order for the process of redemption to occur, the tension must return, and like God, man must return and become immanent. This climaxes in God's very own redemption.

This paper investigates further into some instances in which we might add further specificity to what a »bad transcendence« could look like, via vignettes of thought from three early, existentialist-oriented phenomenologists – Günther Anders, Jean Wahl, and Karl Jaspers. Wahl's notion of »transdescendance« takes up an aspect of Hegel's bad infinity in pointing to the necessity of immanent relation. Anders' »transcendence of the negative« draws attention to the necessity of transcendence's role in countering totality. And Jaspers critiques any transcendence that is telic, purposive, and unhinged from unconditional action and *Existenz*. The paper interweaves the work of these thinkers into the development of a notion of bad transcendence.

2. Jean Wahl and »transdescendance«

Jean Wahl explains that the meaning of the term transcendence has gone through radical shifts throughout the history of philosophy with its vague *terminus ad quem* of »movement towards«. In his *Traité de Métaphysique*, Wahl traces this evolution by distinguishing three main positions towards transcendence: (1) transcendence as corresponding equivocally to the Absolute, (2) transcendence as a condition of possibility of experience (i.e. transcendence as the transcendental), and (3) transcendence as a movement, as lines of exteriority, alterity, or beyondness. »Nous transcendons vers le monde, vers les être autres que nous, vers les choses«, asserted Wahl (1968, 644). When we seek to transcend from nothingness toward Being, we are left unfulfilled, as the experience of transcendence does not teach us any substantive content (think here Kant's hope for a synthetic a priori) about the world. All transcendence can do, within our necessarily immanent frame, is »allow us to glimpse something which shines at the limit of our intelligence« (644). There is, by merit of its retaining a kind of metaphysical taboo, a certain »charm and the attraction of these ideas of the transcendent and the absolute derives, in part, from their ambiguity and the sparkling of their meanings« (505).

On the one hand, a bad transcendence for Wahl would, not unlike that of Nietzsche, amount to a crushing pietism that holds over one's head the moral imperative to overcome oneself in more immanent terms; a pietism that, in the end, cannot balm or sooth the most crushing of these imperatives to live affectively and with pathos beyond its anxieties. Yet on the other hand, overemphasis upon the ecstasy of absolute otherness that disregards an immanently oriented moral imperative is equally divisive, as the embodied individual can never live up to the standard of the idea of God. (1944b)

Both overemphases, as Wahl teaches, foster the same results: a lack of authentic life, and an imbalanced relation between the three sorts of time-consciousness; past,

present, and future. Wahl makes it quite clear, that to go too far in the direction of an »immanentization of transcendence« would be to lose sight of its significance and the powerful aporia that fuels its secret power. Necessary then, »is a tension and intensity by which existence is defined, a tension that endures between the transcendent immanence of perception and the immanent transcendence of ecstasy« (498). This tension could also be expressed (as Plato's Parmenides already had initiated) as such: »the absolute is the separate and that which unites« (1968, 505).

Is it possible to have a transcendence that is »irreducible« for us, and independent from us (*est indépendant de notre esprit*)? Or is it our greatest possibility, at our limits, projecting our »highest point«? Can transcendence itself be transcended, and is this even possible without a return to immanence? These questions all »run the risk of losing the value of transcendence« (*la valeur de la transcendance*), ultimately resulting in what we might conclude to be bad transcendence. (646) Such bad transcendence, or as Wahl once refers to it elsewhere »transdescendance«, appears when we project essences anterior to phenomenality, and in so doing, step away from the things themselves; things that in fact make us human (1944a, 37). Coincidentally, in another context and another language, similar concerns get posed by Günther Anders.

3. Günther Anders and the transcendence of the Negative

Günther Anders is known for his penetrating insights into modern, industrial life, from television/media, to the atomic bomb and the realities it creates. For Anders, a post-Hiroshima society operates in a rather industrial way, with a speed like never before, initiating a new kind of »apocalyptic« temporality.[3] Our *Apokalypse--Blindheit* has left us to struggle without the means of understanding the speed and quantity of our very own activities that are changing our world.

There is a certain disproportion between our activities and our understanding of them, and this could reach two possible outcomes: a new kind of totality, or the end of time itself (via the bomb erasing humankind). Our bourgeois optimism, which fuels this apocalyptic blindness, once very briefly gets described, in his Theses for an Atomic Age, as a »transcendence of the Negative«. One might find correlations to this notion already present in his masterwork, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen 1* especially in point 3, Über die Bombe und die Wurzeln Unserer Apokalypse-Blindheit.[4] Overall, this work addresses select themes that demonstrate how humankind is bringing about its own outdatedness via technological »advances.« All means contains ends in themselves, and everything is subject

[3] Anders cast this problem in technological terms: »The moment devices were replaced by machines signaled the beginning of the obsolescence of human beings.« See also Anders 1987, 55.

[4] See also, *Burning Conscience* (1962), in which Anders initiates letter exchanges with Claude Eatherly, the pilot responsible for dropping the bomb on Hiroshima – the pressing of one button to set off a series of effects reflective of the burnt-up conscience of man himself.

to action. In fact, the least meaningful something may seem, the more dangerous potential it retains for moving on without us, pushing us further and further away from our realizable cosmos of activity and into abstraction and artificial commodification.

Technology is the-without-us, and the enlightenment ideal of progress has been outsourced to technological developments, thus making humankind only »co-historical«. Our technologies operate without consent in the »technification of our being«.[5] This makes us annihilists (1980, 293). We threaten our own non-existence as »Lords of the Apocalypse«, making us simultaneously »the first titans« and »the first dwarfs« (235). Our power has become transcendent and infinite, but it necessarily ends in our self-destruction on the existential level.[6] We therefore end up carrying around a »Promethean shame«, embarrassed that our created technologies and machines are now developing in a far more advanced way than we are. This is the prosthesis of human development, with a *Fortschrittsglaube* or »belief-in-progress« that is a form of transcendence. (268) This is one kind of bad transcendence.

Another kind of bad transcendence, not unlike that of Hegel, Rosenzweig, or Wahl, would be a theological abstraction and reference to the »inaccessible« as exemplified by mystics who on the one hand »seek to open a metaphysical region« yet on the other give up on this seeking by merit of their self-referred »metaphysically-inferior position«.[7] Such a suppression of the will leaves one vulnerable to any number of totalities. It also produces, often inadvertently, an optimistic nihilism that drives a fatalism as »incurably optimistic ideologists« (Palaver 2014). If there is an inferior position to which one might refer that Anders would support, it would be one that embraces humanity's *das Gefälle* or fallenness (Anders 1980, 267).

This sets the stage for the very subtle reference to a »transcendence of the Negative«, which in being consistent with Anders work, maintains a few layers of meaning. In his words:

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5 For Anders »the chain of events leading up to the explosion is composed of so many links, the process has involved so many different agencies, so many intermediate steps and partial actions, none of which is the crucial one, that in the end no one can be regarded as the agent. Everyone has a good conscience, because no conscience was required at any point.« (1956)

6 Anders continues, »Wenn es im Bewußtsein des heutigen Menschen etwas gibt, was als absolut oder als unendlich gilt, so nicht mehr Gottes Macht, auch nicht die macht der Natur, von den angeblichen Mächten der Moral oder der Kultur ganz zu schweigen. Sondern *unsere* Macht. An die Stelle der, omnipotenzbezeugenden, creatio ex nihilo ist deren Gegenmacht getreten: die potestas annihilationis, die reductio ad nihil – und zwar eben als Macht, die in unserer eigenen Hand liegt. Die proetheisch seit langem ersehnte Omnipotenz ist, wenn auch anders also erhofft, wirklich unsere geworden. Da wir die Macht besitzen, einander das Ende zu bereiten, sind wir die *Herren der Apokalypse. Das Unendliche sind wir*.« (1980, 233) Liessmann (2014, 74) refers to this interestingly as »omnipresence in space and time«.

7 For Anders: »Aber das bedeutet natürlich nicht, daß es sich in unserem Falle um eine echte mystische Aktion handelt. Der Unterschied bleibt trotz der Typus-Ähnlichkeit fundamental: Denn während sich der Mystiker metaphysische Regionen zu erschließen sucht und in der Tatsache, daß diese ihm gewöhnlich unerreichbar bleiben, selbst etwas Metaphysisches sieht (nämlich die Folge seiner eigenen metaphysisch--inferioren Position); gelten unsere Versuche der Erfassung von Gegenständen, über die wir verfügen; ja von solchen, die wir, wie die Bombe, selbst hergestellt haben; von Gegenständen also, die keineswegs uns unerreichbar sind, sondern allein uns als Vorstellenden und uns also Fühlenden.« (1980, 267)

»Such ›total abstraction‹ (which, as a mental performance, would correspond to our performance of total destruction) surpasses the capacity of our natural power of imagination: ›Transcendence of the Negative‹. But since, as *homines fabri*, we are capable of actually producing nothingness, we cannot surrender to the fact of our limited capacity of imagination: the attempt, at least, must be made to visualize this nothingness.« (2014, thesis 8)

First, it is a reference to a kind of bad transcendence that overlooks the conscience and moral relation one holds, replacing »conscience« with »conscientiousness« to the point that bad and good no longer have any meaning in terms of transcendence. Transcending or overlooking the negative in this case amounts to a kind of willful ignorance, of how »this framework itself, of the world as a whole«, of non-abstracted reality points to a total destruction. It is necessary to broaden our sense of time, and in so doing, imagine »nothingness« itself. Especially since the first industrial age, humankind has developed the trenchant ability to abstract from reality, and to live in an »ivory tower of perception« (thesis 12). This bad transcendence is the means by which we distance ourselves from the realities of our actions as »inverted Utopians« who »are unable to visualize what we are actually producing« (thesis 9). Our only hope in not transcending the negative is to learn how to fear through imagination of the negative and of nothingness itself (thesis 13). In an age of optimism that cloaks itself in hope and necessitates one to at least smile during the process, this amounts to a kind of seemingly involuntary transcendence, even to the point that we have endowed our technologies with the optimism of this transcendental function of »going beyond« on our behalf, yet without us.

A final interpretation of what bad transcendence could look like for Anders concerns political totality, as expressed in a thought experiment conduced in *Das verspielte Außerhalb* (*The Forfeited Beyond*). There, Anders imagines a student in the year 2058 who in reading 20th century history books cannot comprehend the idea of its references to »when here and there the pressure of dictatorships became unbearable, masses of refugees were generated«. The student was born into a »World State« void of all political exteriority, and therefore no possibility of political transcendence – »›Masses of refugees? What does that mean? Where could one escape to? Was there something outside?‹« The dark, eventual consequence of a transcendence of the negative is the removal of possibility, for »Where there is only *one*, there can be no remains. Thus, also no remaining site of refuge.« (1984, 53) The »negative« itself is a means of overcoming the principalities of darkness in order to arrive at »the what is«.

4. Karl Jaspers and a secular transcendence

A third and final figure worthy of consideration in this context is Karl Jaspers, who was quite consistent on his view of transcendence. Although he accepts the unconditional obligation of a Kantian categorical imperative, he rejects the transcen-

dence/transcendental distinction made by Kant, and points to how transcendence (its more-than-human overcoming of itself) is a basic human trait. And although he defends critiques that Spinoza was merely an immanent pantheist, he nevertheless claims that »Spinoza's transcendence does not take the form of an irruption into the world from elsewhere or of a revelation to man; it is not present as a divine commandment or mission. Further, there is in Spinoza no absolute ethical injunction to act in the world against the world.« (1966, 365) Thus, Jaspers' transcendence takes the form of immanence, but through a kind that retains unconditional action as its ally in making eternal decisions in order to have an existential historicity.

Yet immanence should not be confused with purpose, demonstrability, or knowledge, as all three mark a kind of bad transcendence. First, transcendence (following Spinoza's description) retains in one of its attributes the transcending of all purpose, for telic ends are always sutured to the conditions of a desired outcome or effect, placing the hoped-for result at the center of a finite wish-fulfillment.[8] Any relation with the unconditional, following an unconditional imperative that extends beyond purpose, »demands an existential decision that has passed through reflection« (2003, 57). There is a true and pure freedom that does not arise from any natural state as one locates »its foundation in transcendence« (57).

In Volume 2 of his 1931 *Philosophie*, he refers to »Unconditional Transcendent Action«, which seems irrelevant to the world and its purposes via an unsecure faith. There indeed are religious acts that are not unconditional transcendent ones, such as those that seek to create a social order or ethic that »claims to an exclusive determination of the world« (1970, 274). These acts hope to fashion a »force of habit« and regulation of purpose, and therefore amount to a bad transcendence.

Second, a demonstrable transcendence is no transcendence at all. This is because it reduces the transcendence to a series of predicates that remain putatively of this world. There is an important distinction here for Jaspers – while transcendence occurs in this world, its demonstrability is not reduced to it. As he puts it in rather clear terms: »A demonstrated unconditional is merely a powerful force, a fanaticism, a frenzy or a madness.« (2003, 57) In this movement, the transcendent experience becomes precisely non-transcendence, or as we might here call it, bad transcendence. One comes to operate with a confidence and fanaticism that cloisters the act in temporal conditions, and severs it from its source – transcendent life.

And this leads to a third kind, a knowable transcendence with which one relates dogmatically by abandoning existential decision. Dogmatism always is reducible to a surrendering of oneself to an authority, and therefore releasing indivi-

8 As Jaspers interprets, »God's transcendence is attested in Spinoza by His infinitely many attributes; by the transcending of all purposes in a more powerful principle which is necessary and free form purposes; by the infinity of the never known totality of natural laws; by the fact that man is not the center, but only a mode in the world« (1966, 365).

dual decision. It is fundamental for Jaspers' existentialism that »we must all continuously recapture ourselves from indecisions« (61). In conceiving this question of authority in the context of Christianity's history, what once began as trust ended in surrender and pacification:

> »Originally such communities were built upon trust but later they came to be based on the inspiring command of an authority in which men believe, so that faith in this authority became a source of the absolute. This faith freed men from uncertainty, spared them the need to inquire for themselves. However, the unconditional in this form was subject to a tacit condition, namely the success of the authority. The believer desired to live through his obedience.« (52)

Although religion furnishes a special vocabulary for Jaspers to point to how humanity is more than the sum of its forms in a materialist anthropology, he over and again insists on the necessity of the breaking of natural laws and being disobedient to its orders, which are also how transcendence operates. Humans lose their humanity when they become content with the objective world in which they find themselves, and the Christian tradition, although it has had this tendency to whip its members into obedience, is believed by Jaspers to harbor a truth of releasing possibilities that are not concretely given with an infinite order. Obedience to authorities feed a dogmatic knowledge that amounts to a pacification of possibility, reducing us to a bad transcendence. Instead, we are beings that must retain relation with possibilities in order to overcome the law. Only then, »as we grasp the sense of possible existence the circle of all the modes of objective and subjective being is ruptured«.[9] Religion therefore inherently is called to undermine itself, for with its insistence upon faith it is non-dogmatic, yet must be practiced in a community of ordinance and tradition. It is from this element of religion and its faith that secularity can gain insight, and it is precisely a kind of secularity, informed by such a reflection that might be, as Thornhill puts it, »the precondition of human transcendence, not its antithesis« (2002, 16).

In the final analysis, Jaspers seems to reserve his harshest criticism for any actions that seek to arrive at fully understandable purposes. There are moments at which »submission« to an authority can be transcendent because it counters purposiveness, as »prayer in a posture of submission to a personal God is purposeless« and precluding justification (1970, 275). Yet in a bad transcendence, the negative resolution of the total incomprehensibility of transcendence is sought to be counteracted, and a divine purpose assigned. A better understanding of transcendence, with its negative, exceptional, and ambiguous nature, leaves it in constant suspension with the positive/expectancy of the everyday that immanence provides.

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[9] As Thornhill puts it quite well: »Jaspers /… / demand for the reorganization of the Christian tradition, which argues, on one hand, that the truth of Christianity resists in its disclosure of human possibilities, but which also insists, on the other hand, that these possibilities are only *possible*: they are not given, revealed or realized.« (2002, 13)

5. Conclusion – bad transcendence

Jaspers held to transcendence as an ineradicable human activity that can be directed in various ways through a radical decision through *Existenz*. Transcendence is acted upon, and qualifies a type of unconditional action that, to the surprise of many, is in fact counter-fanatical yet in a way that the action springs from conviction. This, however, bars any bad transcendence that would be reducible to submission and authority, subjected to purpose, and demonstrable in its activity.

As Wahl would have it, transcendence must correspond to the Absolute but in a way that makes it a possibility of/for experience, otherwise we are left with nothing to even discuss or act in relation with, despite the charm according to which some contentless ideas may present themselves. Otherwise we fall into a »transdescendance« that is totally abstracted from phenomenal life and the very things that make us human. Anders sought to make everyday life perhaps even more relevant by pointing to how there are bad transcendences upon which we easily rely as we abstract ourselves from our very own activities. Bad transcendence for Anders would be an inverted, utopian, and blind optimism fueled by: an open-ended »progress« narrative; a metaphysical regioning of the inaccessible; and a total eradication of all exteriority by removing the world of its potential otherness and outside.

In the end, it seems that all three thinkers are not so naive as to think that transcendence is the mere ecstasy of consciousness, which often fuels our idea that it presents an inherently good imperative. Transcendence cannot be a purely open self-projection, otherwise it is under threat of paradoxically reinforcing all the greater the banal immanence of its activities with a convictionlessness and contentlessness. This would be a false transcendence, an *immanence manquée* as Levinas once called it. The Dasein of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, the being-free-for, the always out-there *Res transcendens,* may have, in the final analysis, abstracted itself to the point of total dissolution, justifying the suicide of its own conscience.

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