



Karl Jaspers and Life Conduct

A Theme with Variations

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Abstract: In this briefest reverie on Matthias Bormuth's *Life Conduct in Modern Times*, I attempt to evoke Karl Jaspers' essential themes through a chorus of simpatico voices. I find Bormuth's book hugely satisfying in its articulation of Jaspers' philosophy – its grounding in Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, and Jaspers' growing skepticism before Freud. I am moved by Jaspers' existence-philosophical meditations and broodings, finding there a pervasive sensibility with which I find myself in almost reflexive attunement. Jaspers on truth, vital lies, and metaphysical refuge; Jaspers on the respective places of biology and the humanities; Jaspers on hidden transcendence and the ethicization of faith; Jaspers' championing of character over and above requisite training; Jaspers on the sanctity of the private realms (the life of the home and *bona fide* friendship) in a world that has arguably/publically seen better days. Most especially, perhaps, Jaspers on existential self-reflection and the craft of psychotherapy – an ongoing endeavour privileging the self-revelation, self-illumination of doctor and patient alike. These thoughts (with supplemental harmonies forthcoming from a compact gathering of kindred spirits and words) coalesce into the talking points of my thumbnail critique.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Kafka, Franz; Dylan, Bob; existence-philosophy; hidden transcendence; character; ethics; psychotherapy.

I should begin my comments with a disclaimer. I am by no means any sort of Jaspers scholar. He is someone I have admired since my doctoral years many years ago in Berkeley, someone who inspired my dissertation inquiry into so-called "boundary events" – those limit-points on the periphery of all epistemological circles from which one gazes upon, in Nietzsche's fine words, "that which defies illumination."¹ Jaspers is someone

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Birth of Tragedy," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Modern Library 1968, pp. 1-144, here p. 98. [Henceforth cited as *TBT*]

Contemplation and activity have their apparent truth; but only the activity radiated by contemplation, or rather, that which returns to it again, is truth.

Franz Kafka (1954), *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, p. 48.

I often find difficult to precisely grasp and, yet a man I continue to hold as exemplar and to whose work I continue to return over time.

A Sort of Introduction

There is a well-known 1965 press conference in which a 24-year-old poet named Bob Dylan holds court with the press at the KQED radio studio in San Francisco. It goes like something like this:

Q: Do you consider yourself a politician?

D: Do I consider myself a politician? Oh, I guess so.

[Pause] I have my own party though.

Q: Does it have a name?

D: No. There's no presidents in the party – there's no presidents or vice presidents or secretaries or anything like that, so it makes it pretty hard to get in.

Q: Is there any right wing or left wing to that party?

D: No, it's more or less in the center – kind of on the Uppity scale.

Q: Do you think your party could end the war with China?

D: Uh, I don't know. I don't know if they would have any people over there that would be in the same kind of party. Y'know? So it might be kind of hard to infiltrate. I don't think my party would ever be approved by the White House or anything like that.

Q: Is there anyone else in this party?

D: No. Most of us don't even know each other, you know. It's hard to tell who's in it and who's not in it.

Q: Do you recognize them when you see them?

D: Oh, you can recognize them when you see them.²

Now, some of you may be thinking that I must have wandered into the wrong lecture hall or conference and perhaps city. I would like, however, to render not so much an apology as a thought. Dylan is articulating here an ethos that is by and large inwardly conceived ("It's lonely where I am," he quips just a few moments later), one that soars above the crowd (those with "long legs," proclaims Nietzsche elsewhere), one unlikely to be discerned by those not already in the know. The attentive ear picks up echoes of Jaspers' esoteric and significantly unscripted code in all this. No doubt, the poet pulls it off with humor and élan the philosopher cannot quite match. Still, Jaspers' insistence upon existence-philosophical ideals that are difficult to articulate and ultimately unmeasurable (indeed, largely unredeemable in the marketplace of everyday concerns) is profoundly moving to me, not least of all for the fact that Jaspers actually does seem to have lived out his life on these rarified moral and behavioral planes. What better proof could there be than the embodied example and life?

Always in Jaspers, this abiding attunement to matters of character. The possibilities of, and prospects for, in Bormuth's apt words, the "ethically consistent" life³ – an ethos and way of being in the world, Jaspers

² Ralph J. Gleason, "Bob Dylan, 1967," in *The Rolling Stone Interviews: Talking with the Legends of Rock & Roll, 1967-1980*, ed. Peter Herbst, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press/Rolling Stone Press 1981, pp. 10-19, here p. 14.

³ Matthias Bormuth, *Life Conduct in Modern Times: Karl Jaspers and Psychoanalysis*, Dordrecht: Springer 2006, p. 49. [Henceforth cited as LCM]

suggests, found only "in the smallest circles" of "transcendentally rooted individual life conduct" (LCM 45). The capacity to radiate humanity – the consequence, Bormuth elaborates, of "a morally convincing form of life shaped by philosophical reflection" (LCM 30). And, relatedly, an understanding of religion as bound up, inextricably, with comportment – "form in movement," muses Beckett,⁴ or in Jaspers' lexicon, the "ethicization" (LCM 49) of faith. Like our own William James,⁵ Jaspers points to the penumbræ of consciousness and experience, that ever-beckoning Jamesean "fringed by a 'more.'" And, equally like James, the cash value herein (these individuals value so differently than so many of us) in terms of life conduct: the rarefaction of character and its enactment in authentic friendship and the sanctified place within the home.

Charismatic Traditions – the University and "Life of the Home"

Equally resonant is Jaspers on education and the non-authoritarian communion and, indeed, charisma (what Nietzsche calls "style") to which he persistently refers – as a philosophy of teaching that points beyond the transmission of finite knowledge to the catalyzation of "actual faith" (LCM 55). The truest teacher is perhaps akin to the Zen master who points to the moon; it is imperative that students be turned on to the larger meanings and images without getting stuck overmuch on the master's finger. The skillful teacher, like the effective psychotherapist, is an intermediary figure who remains attentive to her or his dignified yet ultimately transient role. The South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, very much involved with education in his native land with music at the forefront of the curricular hegemony, speaks in this sense of a word found in the jazz world (at its best, a similarly exalted sphere of existence with a consciousness, language and angle on reality very much its own): trance-mission. Do you get it? Consciousness that jumps a gap, from Ellington to Ibrahim and from there, conceivably, to us. Ibrahim proposes jazz itself as a model of ethics and community for the twenty-first century. Judging by the

⁴ Cited in Shimon Levy, *Beckett's Self-referential Drama: The Sensitive Chaos*, Brighton, Great Britain and Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press 2002, p. 34.

⁵ William Gavin, *William James and the Reinstatement of the Vague*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press 1992, p. 17.

conversations one witnesses routinely in jazz (some of the more moving displays of reverence and pursuance, imagination and discipline, tradition and newness imaginable) and comparing these to much that we observe in the prosaic realms, the point, to say the least, is instructive. Perusing Jaspers' *Man in the Modern Age* with Coltrane on the stereo, a sympathetic, mutually edifying pair.

Jaspers' exhortations concerning psychotherapy and the hallowed place of encounter are also rich with evocation: "existential communication" without "the least exertion of force," exhorts Jaspers; "self-reflection free of all compulsion," echoes Bormuth (*LCM* 31). Further, Jaspers' concern for the "good psychiatrist" who is nonetheless good only "for a certain circle of individuals" (*LCM* 34) with whom that psychiatrist is especially compatible. How quaintly circumspect, even modest, in this brave new world of master therapists who confidently train the self-anointed in the conjoined art and technique of existential psychotherapy in three or perhaps twelve easy lessons (if you can manage the requisite fees, you will not fail) or the Yaloms and Wilbers of the globe who would appear to work indefatigably behind the scenes to institutionalize themselves in the remotest corners of the adoring public mind. Whereas James and Jaspers once sought to inquire earnestly and inwardly into such difficult centrifugal terrain and were not ruled by thoughts of self-aggrandizement, the current cast of characters seek in the end to divide and conquer, planting flags bearing their own reflections and staking out their ground. Emphatically, Jaspers is the quintessential voice of conscience in the face of such things. It is not that he is egoless but, rather, that he is markedly unconsumed by vanity. Jaspers' existence philosophy does not concern itself overmuch with matters of popularity or disciplinary politics or ultimate net worth.

Concerning Freud, I do not doubt that Jaspers was the simultaneously deeper and more visionary man. His voice is supremely principled and solitary, a man who in Nietzsche's words, comes not for the many but for the few. Freud, it seems to me, is one of the great psychological architects of System, his ambitious project in the end one that—however brilliant it may be—risks overreaching and overvaluing and an insufficiently attentive eye to its own human failings. To be sure, Jaspers becomes overly strident, even openly provocative, in a dismissal that refuses to adequately broach the multifarious nuances and tributaries. Still, his criticism concerning the great master builder is not

wholly undeserved; as Henrik Ibsen informs us, such projects risk inevitable inflation and, hence, vainglorious crash and burn. Otto Rank, who knew Freud intimately, was left with a not dissimilar opinion after all and, indeed, presages Jaspers in his attunement to depth and the emotional aspects of therapeutic encounter—*Heilung aus der Begegnung* (healing through meeting) in Buber's stirring phrase.⁶ Rank's parting gift to Freud upon being excommunicated from the Circle would be the collected writings of Nietzsche bound in white leather, a collection of writings that followed Freud even to his final resting place in London. The two erstwhile friends, however, never spoke again.

Jaspers on Hidden (this as opposed to "vanished") Transcendence

Kafka, like Jaspers, had just a few close friends through life. One of the more intriguing was Gustav Janouch, a younger aspiring writer who, for a period of time in Kafka's early thirties, dutifully returned home after each of their many encounters to set down everything the older man said. On one occasion, the following discussion ensued:

"Do you mean that Truth is always closed to us?"
Kafka was silent. His eyes had become quite small and dark...For a few moments he contemplated the tips of his fingers as they lay on the desk. Then he said gently: "God, Life, Truth—they are only different names which we give to one fact."
I pressed him further: "But can we grasp it?"
"We experience it," said Kafka, in a slightly troubled voice. "The fact, to which we give different names, and which we try to apprehend by various processes of thought, pervades our veins, our nerves, our senses. It is within us. For that reason perhaps it's invisible. What we can really grasp is the mystery, the darkness. God dwells in it. And this is a good thing, because without protecting the darkness, we should try to overcome even God. That is man's nature."⁷

And this passage, too, I think, like Dylan's, illumines, through association, Jaspers' esoteric

⁶ Martin Buber, "Healing Through Meeting," in *Martin Buber on Psychology and Psychotherapy: Essays, Letters, and Dialogue*, ed. Judith Buber Agassi, Syracuse, NY: The Martin Buber Library 1999, pp. 17-21.

⁷ Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, transl. Goronwy Rees, London: Quartet Books 1985, p. 63. [Henceforth cited as CWK]

messages and codes. Jaspers' "ciphers of transcendence"⁸ making no claims of gnosis but, rather, continues Bormuth, "prompt[ing] the individual to engage in an inward process of appropriation" (*LCM* 47). One follows Jaspers admiringly toward the further reaches of awareness and conscience only to be returned in the end, as we inevitably must be, to sobered responsibility for our own tumultuous flesh-and-blood selves.

Once again, the sanctity of the private and quietly rarified life is emphasized. Bormuth writes compellingly of "the virtue of a primarily inward, individual cosmos invested with meaningfulness which is independent of society and can never take on clear contours in the public sphere" (*LCM* 48). Yes, I believe he and Jaspers are onto something redolent with sanity, the more so in these modern times of "imagology" and selfies, graphomania and the NSA. Existence-philosophical life conduct recognized solely on the basis of "exceptional moral action" (*LCM* 53). As in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (though I do not think of Jaspers as especially humble), this is decidedly other than the public show of virtue. Nietzsche ponders in his notebook:

I have found strength where one does not look for it: in simple, mild, and pleasant people, without the least desire to rule – and, conversely, the desire to rule has often appeared to me as a sign of inner weakness: they fear their own slave soul and shroud it in a royal cloak... The powerful natures dominate, it is a necessity, they need not lift one finger. Even if, during their lifetime, they bury themselves in a garden house. [TBT 96]

The sanctity of smallness and one's private station – another unmodern and all-but-forgotten philosophical, no less than spiritual, invocation and truth.

Intimated throughout Jaspers' work is the place of suffering. "Truth can cause pain, and drive one to despair. But it is capable – merely in virtue of being truth...of giving deep satisfaction: there is truth after all."⁹ Hence, the prospects, as Bormuth neatly expresses it, for living without "metaphysical refuge" (*LCM* 3). And, relatedly, the place of shipwreck: "Deprived of his world by the crisis," Jaspers writes, "man has to reconstruct it from the beginning...There opens to him the supreme possibility of freedom, with the alternative of sinking

into nullity."¹⁰ "Both alternatives," he proclaims starkly, "are possible" (*PE* 28).

Further, Jaspers' valuing, simultaneously, of both scientific method and the broader humanities: "the Skylla of scientific 'brain mythology' and Charybdis of hermeneutic 'psychomythology'" (*LCM* 12). Each is given its due, though, as Bormuth informs us, the former especially so. So much of the literature of the third force in psychology (and perhaps the psychoanalytic literature as well) remains compulsively inattentive to the biological realms. The result is not only the risk of ungrounded intuitive abandon but, ironically, a humanistically conceived reductionism all its own. There are those who maintain that such woolly-headed Pollyannaism itself leads, in its relentless naiveté and at its inexorable end, to the concentration camp. There are grave risks, it seems to me, of inattention to either end of the dialectic, and Jaspers is a principled antidote to this sort of thing. Why, in the States, is it always Heidegger and so seldom Jaspers? Yes, he loses composure here and there and is not without blind spots, but this is the human, all too human element to which we are, all of us, heir. He hits so many notes up and down and along the spectrum of being, and method is not discounted. Nor is the value of a given life, evaluated at its earthly limits in terms of the life conduct by which it has been engendered and typified.

And, finally, there is the place of guilt. "No man," observes Jaspers, "can contemplate his image in the mirror without some perplexity or dismay"; "the more vigorously he aspires the more sensitive will he be to the presence of other than aspiring elements in himself" (*LCM* 49). All these observations and insights gathering, insistently, around the overarching themes of character and comportment. As I say, quaint and, yet, for this very reason, conceivably timely, even prescient, bedrock fundamentals and overarching themes.

In the Beginning is My End

Let me conclude by returning to my frontispiece and to Kafka who, in conversation with his youthful acolyte Gustav Janouch, meditates also on awareness and life conduct. Contemplating a German translation of the *Tao te Ching* the younger man has brought him, Kafka muses:

"They spell out – as you can see here – transcriptions

⁸ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York: Harper & Row 1967, p. 136.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, transl. Richard F. Grabau, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 1971, p. 33. [Henceforth cited as *PE*]

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, transl. Eden and Cedar Paul, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books 1957, p. 194.

of reality from translations of ancient Chinese instead of quietly reading the original text of their own lives and responsibilities. To them the day before yesterday seems more accessible than today. But reality is never and nowhere more accessible than in the immediate moment of one's own life...All it guarantees us is what is superficial, the façade...one must break through this. Then everything becomes clear."

"But how does one do that? How does one proceed? Is there some sure guide?"

"No, there is none," said Kafka, shaking his head. "There is no route map on the way to truth. The only thing that counts is to make the venture of total dedication. A prescription would already imply a withdrawal, mistrust, and therewith the beginning of a false path. One must accept everything patiently and fearlessly. Man is condemned to life, not death." [CWK 156]

Yes, I think the poet Kafka, whose sisters—like Freud's—perished in the camps, deserves a spot in Jaspers' existence-philosophical Church or Synagogue just as well.

Afterword

The scholar, critic and translator of classical literature William Arrowsmith once wrote an remarkable homage to the filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni in which he expressed hope for an eventual "poetry of criticism," "a criticism designed to do more than report and judge its artistic object, but rather to respond to it antiphonally, to illuminate, even celebrate it." He went on,

we need not an autonomous criticism, as theorists seem to advocate, but a criticism that...tells us how that work does to us what it does; how at its ultimate limits it may even make the work better by completing it in the act of comprehension.¹¹

It is this spirit of gratitude and interlocution that I offer this reverie upon Matthias Bormuth's impressive study—as a resonant and free-spirited response ("we free spirits," proclaims Nietzsche, somewhere) inspired by the original work. Really, this book stimulates contemplation of a profound and ethereal code. And, so, perhaps I am not in the wrong lecture hall at last; poetry, after all, may oftentimes do this as well. ("I practice a faith that's been long abandoned," sings Dylan,¹² sympathetically, in more recent lyrics; "Ain't no altars on this long and lonesome road.") My only grievance is that the publisher's copy Helmut sent arrived a week after I had already purchased it online. The price tag, after all, is almost as lofty as its themes. Esoteric wisdom, God knows, rarely comes cheap.

¹¹ William Arrowsmith, *Antonioni: The Poet of Images*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995, p. 19.

¹² Bob Dylan, *The Lyrics Since 1962*, New York, NY: Simon & Schuster 2014, p. 853.