



An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Volume 2, Nos 1-2, Fall 2007

ISSN 1932-1066

## Karl Jaspers and the Concept of Philosophical Faith

Armin E. Wildermuth

*University of St. Gallen*

wildermutha@bluewin.ch

**Abstract:** The essay reflects on the ontological basis of Karl Jaspers' concept of philosophical faith. As a comparison with Heidegger's existential ontology makes clear, Jaspers stresses much more the act of philosophizing than philosophy itself. In one sense, Jaspers' philosophy has a deontological and open aspect, in another sense this openness is threatened by his theory of the encompassing and his dogmatic understanding of Kant's theoretical instruments. Furthermore, Jaspers' existential philosophy, and especially his concept of philosophical faith, can be elucidated by a confrontation with the existential philosophy of his colleague at the University of Basel, Heinrich Barth, the brother of the theologian Karl Barth. This philosophy was developed out of the basic ideas of the "Marburg School," namely from Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp. There was a chance for fruitful cooperation between Jaspers and Heinrich Barth, two philosophers with a Kantian background and in opposition to the dominating ontologism of Heidegger after the Second World War, but it was a missed opportunity. Jaspers' existential philosophizing pushed him into an almost prophetic posture, but his concept of philosophical faith, publicly known since his "atom book" of 1959, still commands global attention.

---

### Philosophy and Philosophical Faith

The concept of philosophical faith can be understood adequately only if philosophy itself is clearly understood. Jaspers' chief concern is to depict the singularity and originality of philosophy; or, as he phrases it, to "elucidate" (*erhellen*) philosophy. For Jaspers, this elucidation or clarification occurs not through an agency outside philosophy; instead, philosophy elucidates itself and philosophical elucidation itself constitutes its innermost act.

Phrased in such terms, the weight of this definition cannot be measured. What philosophy is meant to be becomes clearer in its confrontation with the tradition of dogmatic revelation in the Christian churches and its institutions and colonies in Europe and America down

through the ages. Missionary persuasion was not the single, foremost practice, however. As is well known, brutal violence and the striving for political rule were exercised all too often. In the face of the violence that the various theologies of revelation were and remain capable of committing, however, it is nothing less than a miracle that philosophy still exists. It is doubtful whether it will survive.

Jaspers did not conceive philosophy as a purely academic discipline fitting neatly into the range of existing university subjects, and especially the so-called "humanities," without any qualitative difference. This became common when "Neo-Kantianism" was the dominant philosophical orthodoxy at many German universities. Jaspers already made an impact on public life in 1931 when he published a small political work

entitled *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (*The Spiritual Condition of the Age*).<sup>1</sup> He later rose to considerable prominence in the immediate post-World War II period, most particularly with *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of German Guilt*), published in 1946, in which he discussed the question of collective guilt. Outlawed by the Nationalist Socialist regime, and surviving severe harassment and danger of death, Jaspers became a figure of outstanding ethical integrity in post-war Germany. Even after his self-exile to Switzerland and the University of Basel in 1948, which baffled many of his admirers and followers, Jaspers sought to make existential philosophizing part of the public debate through radio broadcasts, introductory primers, and political statements on the Federal Republic of Germany and the atom bomb. In the 1960s, this public role was adopted by the representatives of neo-Marxist "Critical Theory" and "Discourse Theory", most particularly by Jürgen Habermas, who continued to argue its merits in the public sphere. Whereas Discourse Theory emphasized the power of impersonal, rational, and linguistically articulated arguments, Jaspers' communicative interventions were all underpinned by the "honesty" and "seriousness" of his personal existence. He thus became the political conscience of the Federal Republic of Germany well into the 1960s.

Let me return to the initial question: "What is philosophy?" This question includes two issues to which Jaspers attached even greater importance: firstly, "What is philosophizing?"; and secondly, "How does one philosophize?" The latter two questions are highly relevant since Jaspers virtually replaces the "what" question with the "how" question. This shift raises a further question: what is Jaspers' notion of traditionally valid philosophy? He set out his views comprehensively in the three volumes comprising a work daringly entitled *Philosophy* (1931).<sup>2</sup> But the title suggests that Jaspers does not attempt to describe philosophy *per se*, but rather the ways in which it is treated, which elude philosophy as such. He is concerned with that particular activity which produces formulated philosophies in the first place:

philosophising. For Jaspers, the intention to philosophise is founded in human existence itself. Hence he argues that every human being can and should become conscious of this intention regardless of education and background. His later *Einführung in die Philosophie* (*Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*)<sup>3</sup> published in 1950, and based on a series of radio lectures aimed at a non-academic audience, includes definitions of what philosophy is meant to be. Thus Jaspers expounds at length what philosophy should *not* be allowed to be. He distinguishes what Kant referred to as "scholastic philosophy" (*Schulphilosophie*), which can be learned, from "world philosophy" (*Weltphilosophie*), which requires the development of aptitude. This recalls Jaspers' own career as a philosopher. When he obtained his second doctorate (*Habilitation*) at the University of Heidelberg and qualified for a professorship to teach philosophy, his first doctorate was in medicine rather than in philosophy. Ever since he closed ranks with Heidegger in the 1920s, he was unfavourably disposed towards orthodox academic philosophy.<sup>4</sup> However, this inner disposition never prevented him from regarding himself as a responsible member of the university as an institution and as someone keen to preserve the European idea of the university.

Approaching the origin of philosophizing calls for a radical, epochal break from all certainties as well from all life-world presuppositions and objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*), which the philosopher moreover knows rests upon non-objectivity or "trans-thing-ness" (*Übergegenständlichkeit*). Jaspers makes explicit reference to an act that envisages the features of a mystical separation from all the conditions of worldly life (*P*, p. 33). Kierkegaard had described this act as existential rebirth. Jaspers discovered several precursors of true philosophizing in the great philosophers of radical transcendence, such as Plotinus, Cusanus, and Nagarjuna, the Buddhist philosopher; and he follows Kant and Kierkegaard with regard to the (sceptical-phenomenological) epochal act of attaining existential knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960) - The book was written three years before the takeover of the National Socialist regime in Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie* (Berlin, Göttingen and Heidelberg: Springer, 1948). Hereafter this edition will be abbreviated as *P*.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie. Zwölf Radiovorträge* (Zürich: Artemis, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> About the difficult relationship between Heidegger and Jaspers see Antonia Grunenberg, *Hannah Arendt und Martin Heidegger, Geschichte einer Liebe* (München: Piper, 2006) pp. 13ff, 56ff, 66ff, and *passim*.

Let us turn to one of Jaspers' radio lectures to gain an even better sense of how he understands philosophy. Notwithstanding his intention to the trans-objective-being, he made "existence" rather than "transcendence" central to his concept of philosophy. He affirms that: "Philosophy is that which concentrates, through which man becomes himself, by participating in reality" (P, p.15).

In what follows, I wish to approach Jaspers' concept of philosophy and philosophizing even more closely, to show how he appeals to his listeners and readers to dare to engage in philosophizing. He does this because he believes that philosophizing, which we all engage in consciously or unconsciously, is inevitable. I shall refer to another statement and appellative definition, such as one that occurs on the first page (p. V) of *Philosophie*:

Philosophizing is the way of man, who, historically in his time, seizes being. Only in this manifestation, and not in itself, is it accessible to him. In philosophizing, a faith lacking all revelation reaches expression, appealing to the one who is on the same way...

### Existence and the Quest for Being

Jaspers' entire philosophy is guided by the "quest for being" (P, p. 4). There is an insurmountable hiatus between "real being" – which Jaspers also equates with the "absolute" (P, p. 32) – and the situation of humankind, its abilities and intentions, even though everything that is thought, said, dreamed, and somehow manifested is assimilated by the medium of a universal being. Acceptance into being (*Seinsaufgenommenheit*) and the failure of being (*Seinsverfehlung*) form a continuous dialectic to which existence knows it is harnessed and wherein it must assert itself. "Being is", but at the same time it constitutes the ongoing challenge to a gradually enhanced "certainty of being" (*Seinsgewissheit*). The quest for being cannot be brought to completion. This insight entails a further insight, namely that as long as existence has not fully taken hold of being, it remains but "possible existence" (*mögliche Existenz*). As Jaspers observes, philosophizing cannot change this condition: "Philosophizing from possible existence, which seeks to become real through philosophical life, remains a quest" (P, p. 21).

This searching movement undertaken by existence (to which Jan Patocka also has recourse) can be identified not only as a fundamental condition, but also

as the very "elucidation of existence" (*Existenzerhellung*), thus constituting a movement from possible to real existence. The human aptitude for philosophy presupposes this actualising movement, which Jaspers also designates as "inner action." Hence Jaspers notes: "Philosophizing presupposes the *seizing* of existence ..." (P, p. 299).

While philosophizing is linked to existence, and to existing, it also constitutes a problem of being. The priority of "the search for being" in Jaspers' *Philosophy* suggests an analogy with Heidegger's exploration of the question of being in *Being and Time*<sup>5</sup> or what he terms the "question of the meaning of being." Jaspers' and Heidegger's approaches to existence via the question of being, however, are distinct.

A brief comparison of their notions of existence makes this quite clear. Jaspers defines existence in various ways. Whereas some of his definitions are specific, others remain indirect. Referring to Kierkegaard, he notes: "Existence is that which relates to itself and therein to its transcendence" (P, p. 13). Jaspers refers explicitly to Kierkegaard's *Die Krankheit zum Tode* (*The Sickness unto Death*) (P, p. 18). Alternatively: "This Being that – in the manifestation of *Dasein* – *Is Not*, but can be and ought to be and hence decides in time whether it is eternal. I myself am this being as *existence*" (P, p. 295). Furthermore: "My *Dasein* ... is not existence, but *man in Dasein* is possible existence" (P, p. 296).

Like Jaspers, Heidegger also adopts an indirect attitude towards existence. But unlike Jaspers, Heidegger is not concerned with the "philosophy of existence," but rather with the structures constituting existence, with what he calls "existentiality" (GA 2, p. 17). *Dasein* is a particular kind of being, "that in its being to this being has a relationship to being ... What characterizes this being is that it can deduce itself from and through this being. *Understanding being is itself a definition of the being of Dasein*" (GA 2, p. 16). In a later addendum, Heidegger specifies that this notion of being also refers to "being as a whole." He subsequently specifies this definition as follows: "That being to which 'Dasein' relates in one way or another and is always somehow related, we call 'existence'." Heidegger raises the "question of the meaning of being" as an ontological and an epistemological question. Ingeniously, he links man's question about his own being, that is, his concern about his survival or non-being, to traditional ontology.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Gesamtausgabe, Frankfurt am Main, Band 2). Hereafter abbreviated as GA 2.

Put differently, Heidegger combines the philosophy of life with ontology to form a new type of "fundamental ontology," wherein he integrates existential analytics. Hence, Heidegger's work is not about existence as such; rather existence serves him as the site to clarify the "question of the meaning of being."

While Heidegger developed an existential analytics of *Dasein* (*Daseinsanalytik*) in *Being and Time*, Jaspers undertook a form of practical-intuitive "hermeneutics of the origin" (*Ursprungshermeneutik*). It would be more appropriate to call this an "elucidation of the origin" (*Ursprungs-Erhellung*), from which reflection and human action subsequently arise. In formulaic terms, the distinction between Heidegger and Jaspers can be described thus: whereas Heidegger's notion of existence is ontological, Jaspers' notion is deontological. This distinction runs through and determines both philosophies. Notwithstanding their apparent analogous similarities, Heidegger's and Jaspers' philosophies pursue different objectives: whereas Heidegger aims at overcoming metaphysics, Jaspers strives to incorporate metaphysics in the movement of existence and adopts, in Kantian terms, the position of Practical Reason. In his principal work, he observes quite casually: "Existential philosophy is metaphysics. It believes in what it emanates from." Elsewhere he asserts just as casually: "Philosophy is origin [*Philosophie ist Ursprung*]." Or in more differentiated terms: "Philosophy is consciousness of being emanating from another origin [*Philosophie ist Seinsbewusstsein aus anderem Ursprung*]."

This "other origin" is often referred to as "transcendence." The concept of the "origin," however, places irreducibility and self-manifestation (*Sich-selbst-Bekundendes*) at stake. Jaspers' existential philosophy is meant to grow out of the transcendent origin and at the same time out of the actual conditions of real life to reach expression and to become an instance of life as an articulated philosophy. Such a life-based, efficacious concept of philosophy went beyond orthodox academic philosophy at the time. Initially, Jaspers did not realise that his existential approach was radically distinct from Heidegger's ontology. In a note written later in his career (that is, post-1945), he described this difference as follows:

Philosophy bears witness to itself in the reality of life, of judgement, and of action, reaching down into the bottom of the soul, into every corner of the house, into all modes of communication ... Here I probably differ radically from Heidegger, for whom philosophy would

appear to exist in the work itself, or also as the experience of thought removed from his own life, which regards itself as unconcerned in private and philosophical terms, he steps out of the reality of *Dasein* into the quiet space of philosophy – closing the door behind him – and the two spheres remain strictly unrelated. But what occurs in that sheltered, closed space is supposed to bear upon the history of the world and the history of being.<sup>6</sup>

### The Elucidation of Existence and the Step toward the Encompassing or Periechontology

In 1935, Jaspers held a series of five lectures on "Reason and Existenz" (*Vernunft und Existenz*)<sup>7</sup> at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. In these lectures he expanded his philosophy of existence of 1931 with the concept of the encompassing (*das Umgreifende*).<sup>8</sup> It is worth asking whether this addition actually constitutes an expansion, or perhaps rather an unintended constriction, or even an ontologizing of his existential approach. Comparing it with his previous account of the problem of existence would appear to suggest this. The second volume of Jaspers' three-part *Philosophy – The Elucidation of Existence* – is without doubt the most substantial; it provides a broad and profound account of how the constitution of existence occurs. Among others, communication, historicity, freedom, boundary situations (*Grenzsituationen*), and unconditional action (*unbedingte Handlung*), are all aspects of the method of the elucidation of existence that have become famous and which brought Jaspers' method to public awareness. I refer deliberately to "aspects" here rather than to Heidegger's "existentials" or "structures," which easily take on a life of their own. Jaspers' aspects are aspects of existence itself as well moments of "being-oneself" (*Selbstsein*). Without a doubt, the comprehensive philosophy outlined by Jaspers is preeminently focused on the individual subject, on first-person experiences, on the "I myself," on account of

<sup>6</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Notizen zu Martin Heidegger*, Hg. H. Saner (München: Piper, 1978) Nr. 246, p. 259f. Abbreviated as *Notizen*.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vernunft und Existenz. Fünf Vorlesungen* (München: Piper, 1960).

<sup>8</sup> Karl Jaspers would have rejected the term "ontologizing" regarding his theory of the encompassing. The term Periechontology is extensively used in Jaspers' philosophical logic *Von der Wahrheit* (München: Piper, 1947) pp. 158f, 601ff.

Cartesian and Kantian ontological requirements. While many critics have taken issue with the lack of an explicit systematic approach in Jaspers, his method of elucidation effectively refutes this criticism. Jaspers holds that no clarifying "deduction" is required to reveal the deontological essence of human existence, just as Kant refused to apply an abstract-theoretical "deduction" to buttress the *Critique of Practical Reason*. For Jaspers, existence suffices in itself, and proves itself through the practical reality of life.

Jaspers' claim that both human existence and the "modes of being of the encompassing" have their own proper "philosophical logic" recurs time and again alongside the method of elucidating existence. The "World Orientation" of the first volume of *Philosophy* is elevated further by the tenet of the "Orientation of the Encompassing" – the horizon of all horizons from which everything objective and determinable should be understood. The encompassing is nothing tangible and objective, but understanding its reality is made possible, and at the same delimited, by a number of "modes of the encompassing." Only through acts of transcendence, which transcend all limits of objectivity and materiality, does the non-objective "horizon" come indirectly into view. All modes of the encompassing can be telescoped onto this furthest horizon, but come against up their own boundedness and failure, if they fluff themselves up into "being in its entirety." These modes are divided into two groups: the first group comprises Existence, Dasein, Consciousness in General, and the Spirit, each of which represents a particular mode of the encompassing which *we are*; the second group consists of Transcendence and the World, that is, of the encompassing which *we are not*. Transversal "reason" is a somewhat floating and non-solidified mode of the encompassing. It is the tie or linkage between all modes of the encompassing. Jaspers refers to this insight into the schematic orientation in the panorama of the regions of being as the "basic knowledge" (*Grundwissen*) required for the elucidation of existence.

However, this proclaimed basic knowledge threatens the character of Jaspers' elucidation of existence. While existence is also pivotal to his theory of the encompassing, it becomes a medium of the transformation to "being-as-such." Existence itself is "being," but is inserted as a specific mode of being into general being, and hence loses sharply delineated edges. The particular character of existence has often been highlighted, since it is identical with original, that

is, primordial philosophizing. In Jaspers' case, we must emphasize the verbal meaning of "philosophizing" since he is concerned with preserving the appellative character of philosophy and its movement of thought in order to distance all attempts of allegedly grasping reality itself or to claim that one has discovered being residing in reality through and in philosophy. Existence and philosophizing rest upon no other source than self-knowledge and self-apprehension (*Selbsterfassung*). Once all reliable objectivity and putative insights into reality have been blown asunder, it becomes necessary to introduce a concept of knowledge capable of grasping existential self-justification and self-transcendence. Faith, and more precisely "philosophical faith" assume their unique significance at the very place of possible existence, about which there is nothing solid, factual, or self-contained. This insight can be likened metaphorically to a plant that must be watered with utmost care, and a spring that can easily run dry.

Periechontological basic knowledge occupies a central position in the confrontation with "revelation." It serves Jaspers as armour designed to protect him against the onrush of a challenge shifted into the incomprehensible. What he calls "transcendence" assists him in transforming religious insight and understanding into ciphers, that is, in transcending that reality which we are *not* and which appears to speak to man from another dimension. Notwithstanding its non-objective ontology, Jaspers' relationship with this dimension is ambivalent: on the one hand, he must practise asceticism in the face of his basic intention to dissolve all approaches into gnostic objectivations; on the other hand, he realizes that it is precisely the incomprehensibility of revelations (and their institutionalization) that drives him toward philosophical knowledge and existential self-becoming. The elucidation of existence is thus enhanced by the admitted unknowability of the darkness announcing itself threateningly in revealed faith and forever entailing aberrations and undoings.

### **Critique of post-Kantian Philosophies: Fichte, Schelling, Hegel**

Jaspers discovers this darkness not merely in his encounter with revelation, but also in the entire intellectual development of Germany after Kant. In his

study of Schelling,<sup>9</sup> Jaspers explores the dissociation of German Idealism from Kant. He asserts that greatness and fate were closely related at the time:

The great truth in German Idealism resided in understanding the need to complement, appropriate, and continue Kantian philosophy against Kantian orthodoxy. But it was a particular German fate to approach this task by forsaking the Kantian way of thinking ... Sorcery took the place of high philosophy, and, since it also contained a truth, had even greater seductive power (Schelling, p. 317f).

Furthermore: "One has always sensed how profound the break between the Idealists and Kant was, but perhaps not made it perfectly clear until now..." (Schelling, p. 313). And finally:

The break in the mode of thought took effect in one particular area of German education in the 1790s ... Prior to this break, the spirit of Lessing, Goethe, Kant, and Humboldt abided ... With the break something quite different arose, the spirit of sorcery, subsequently known as Romanticism; in philosophy this spirit reached its utmost expression in Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (Schelling, p. 314).

The backlash followed promptly and occurred "amidst the platitude of materialism and positivism, purportedly scientific world views"; thereafter Kierkegaard and Marx launched their own counter strikes (Schelling, p. 315). Nor could the Neo-Kantian philosophies embracing Otto Liebmann's rallying cry "Back to Kant!" overcome the break anymore. Jaspers considered the rejection of Kantian philosophy, and the failure to recognize its merits, a never-ending disaster.

Jaspers' analyses and critique concern not only Schelling, but indirectly Heidegger as well. One of his notes on the latter reads thus:

He lacks a consciousness of truth in favour of self-exorcizing sorcery, which leaves behind a void ... He adheres to Schelling, Eckhart, gnosis lacking an awareness of origin and suffering an impoverishment of former sense; verbatim borrowing in decisive places.<sup>10</sup>

The "sorcery" and "gnosis" that he makes out in Schelling is also at work in Heidegger. For Jaspers, Heidegger's philosophy accounts for his political

aberration. It seems that Jaspers was alone in his harsh critique against Heidegger, but he had a philosophical partner in Basel who also was involved in a polemic against Heidegger's ontologism: Heinrich Barth.

### Jaspers and Heinrich Barth

The literary nucleus of Jaspers' book on revelation is a piece he contributed to a valedictory volume for the philosopher Heinrich Barth (1890-1965),<sup>11</sup> his colleague in Basel, on the occasion of the latter's seventieth birthday. It is entitled *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der christlichen Offenbarung (Philosophical Faith and the Christian Revelation)*,<sup>12</sup> and is more contained and more specific than his later, more comprehensive work. Other contributors to Heinrich Barth's valedictory volume included Karl Barth, Hermann Diem, Emil Brunner, Fernand Brunner, Alfred de Quervain, and Gerhard Huber. These names suggest just how important Heinrich Barth was at the time, although he has never been afforded the recognition he rightly deserves up to this day.<sup>13</sup> Barth's name occurs on several occasions in Jaspers' writings,<sup>14</sup> such as (somewhat amusingly) in his correspondence with Hannah Arendt.<sup>15</sup> For his part, Heinrich Barth took issue with Jaspers' philosophy explicitly in an essay about Jaspers' concepts of faith and history,<sup>16</sup> but essentially his views concurred with Jaspers

<sup>11</sup> Heinrich Barth was professor of philosophy at the University of Basel, from 1928 to 1960. As a philosopher he had a great impact on the theology of Emil Brunner. About the controversy between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner see Frank Jehle, *Emil Brunner, Theologe im 20. Jahrhundert* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2006) pp. 293ff.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Jaspers, "Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der christlichen Offenbarung," in: *Philosophie und christliche Existenz. Festschrift für Heinrich Barth zum 70. Geburtstag am 3. Februar 1960*, hgg. von Gerhard Huber (Basel 1960), pp. 1-92. - See Alan M. Olson, "Isaac and Ishmael Revisited," in: *Existenz*, Volume 1, Nos 1-2, Fall 2006, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung* (München: Piper 1962). Abbreviated as PGO.

<sup>14</sup> PGO p. 498f.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers *Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, hgg. von L. Köhler und H. Saner (München: Piper, 1985) p. 129f.

<sup>16</sup> Heinrich Barth, "Karl Jaspers über Glaube und Geschichte," in: *Theologische Zeitschrift*, hgg. von der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Basel, Jahrgang 6, 1950 (Heft 6) pp. 434-460 (Basel: Reinhardt).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Schelling, Grösse und Verhängnis* (München: Piper, 1955) pp. 313-323. Hereafter this edition will be abbreviated as *Schelling*.

<sup>10</sup> *Notizen*, Nr. 180, p. 102.

throughout. A certain tension clouded their personal relationship from the outset, since Heinrich Barth had hoped for quite a considerable time that he would be appointed to the chair of philosophy in Basel to which Jaspers was ultimately appointed. Later, when Heinrich Barth was supposed to be promoted to the rank of full professor of philosophy, Jaspers expressed reservations. While this might be brushed aside as academic gossip, it is in actual fact worth mentioning because Heinrich Barth embodied precisely what Jaspers considered inadmissible in philosophical terms: a philosopher who was at the same time a believing Christian.<sup>17</sup> I might add that Heinrich Barth was after all the brother of the famous Karl Barth, full professor of theology at the University of Basel, whose Dialectical Theology Heinrich Barth helped shape decisively in its early stages.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Heinrich Barth adhered to the so-called "Marburg School," attended lectures held by Hermann Cohen, Paul Natorp, and Ernst Cassirer, and aligned himself with "Critical Idealism" in the 1920s. He developed his philosophy of existence along the lines of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and the "Marburg School,"<sup>19</sup> whereas Jaspers adopted a revolutionary stance in his attempt to "transform" philosophy and the Biblical tradition.

Without a doubt, there were striking personal differences between Jaspers and Heinrich Barth. When

I embarked on my degree course in philosophy at the University of Basel in 1949, Jaspers was a celebrity; his lectures were marked by overwhelming eloquence, he filled the main lecture theatre on every occasion, and he self-assuredly promulgated his knowledge, which extended far beyond European philosophy; he stood tall and dignified, and carried himself like a true man of the world. By stark contrast, Heinrich Barth was severely handicapped, lectured at impossible hours (from 7 to 8 a.m. in the summer term), hunched over his manuscript, speaking in a quiet voice and adverse to any rhetorical pose. Attendance at his lectures was scant and his seminar groups could often be counted with two hands; classes were held in the cramped premises of the philosophy department on the Münsterplatz; minutes had to be taken, philosophical texts were interpreted in class, and only original-language texts were permitted. For many students, Jaspers' Swiss colleague was simply non-existent. Nor could they be blamed, since the philosophy of Heinrich Barth was accessible only in a handful of essays. Following the breakdown of philosophical intercourse between Switzerland and Germany after 1933, no one could recall Barth's *Philosophie der praktischen Vernunft* (*Philosophy of Practical Reason*),<sup>20</sup> published in 1927. The two-volume *Philosophie der Erscheinung* (*Philosophy of Appearance*)<sup>21</sup> was misconstrued as a monograph. Together, however, both volumes reveal that all cognition proceeds from the manifestation of appearance, the appearing (or emerging) of appearance (*Erscheinen der Erscheinung*), the "*phainesthai*," (in the Greek grammatical sense of medium) even though this was never regarded as the starting point proper. The clear focus on appearance in his philosophy gave rise to a fundamental difference not only between Heinrich Barth and Jaspers, but also between Heinrich Barth and the theology devised by his brother Karl Barth. His major work *Erkenntnis der Existenz. Grundlinien einer philosophischen Systematik* (*Cognition of Existence. Outlines of a Philosophical Systematics*) was published in 1965,<sup>22</sup> the year of his death, and was brushed off as a belated

<sup>17</sup> Another colleague of Jaspers at the University of Basel, the theologian Fritz Buri, tried to integrate Jaspers existential theories of existence, periechontology and ciphers in the horizon of his own theology. See Hans Saner, "Einmütigkeit und Differenz. Zur Philosophischen Begegnung von Fritz Buri und Karl Jaspers," in: *Internationale Fritz Buri-Gesellschaft* (Luzern) Bulletin 1, 1998, pp. 23-45.

<sup>18</sup> See Heinrich Barth, "Gotteserkenntnis" Aarau 1919, in: *Anfänge der dialektischen Theologie. Teil I Karl Barth, Heinrich Barth, Emil Brunner*, hgg. von Jürgen Moltmann (München: Kaiser, 1962) pp. 219-255. - Karl Barth confessed that the contribution of his Brother Heinrich Barth for the second edition of his "Römerbrief" (1921) was very important, especially the texts about Plato and Kant, see op. cit. p. 107.

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes Heinrich Barth characterised himself as a "Latecomer of the Marburg School." As we can read in his review of Hermann Cohens philosophy of religion he was inspired by his concept of "origin" (Ursprung), see "Hermann Cohens religionsphilosophische Schriften," in: *Blätter für Deutsche Philosophie*, Band 5, 1931/32 (Heft 1) pp. 454-474 (Berlin). About the problem of origine in Heinrich Barth see Günther Hauff, "Ursprung und Erscheinung, Zu Heinrich Barths Vermächtnis," in: *In-Erscheinung-Treten. Heinrich Barths Philosophie des Ästhetischen* (Basel: Schwabe, 1990) pp.41-49.

<sup>20</sup> Heinrich Barth, *Philosophie der praktischen Vernunft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1927).

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich Barth, *Philosophie der Erscheinung, Eine Problemgeschichte, Erster Teil: Altertum und Mittelalter* (Basel: Schwabe, 1947, 1966) - *Zweiter Teil: Neuzeit* (Basel: Schwabe, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Barth, *Erkenntnis der Existenz, Grundlinien einer philosophischen Systematik* (Basel: Schwabe, 1965).

work of existential philosophy. It is doubtful whether Jaspers ever undertook a thorough reading of this work.

I would like to offer a brief personal comment at this juncture. I am sure you will forgive a former doctoral student, who sat his examinations with both Heinrich Barth and Jaspers, if my remarks are somewhat coloured by juxtaposing these two philosophers. I quite readily admit that my critical thoughts on Jaspers are rooted in that formative experience. Following this brief anecdotal digression, I would like to consider the similarities and differences between these two different philosophies.

Both philosophers are influenced by Plato, Augustine, and Kant, whom Jaspers heralds as the "founders of philosophizing."<sup>23</sup> Heinrich Barth emerged from the "Marburg School," whereas Jaspers waged a battle against Southwest German Neo-Kantianism (Heinrich Rickert).

Jaspers has recourse to "Biblical religion"; and Biblical writings have a formative influence on both his work and Heinrich Barth's. But the dissociation of "Christian religion" (as practised by the churches) from Biblical foundations divided them.

Both espouse the concept of a philosophy of reality initiated by the later Schelling and subsequently by Kierkegaard and develop it into existential thought. Jaspers speaks of "possible existence" (*mögliche Existenz*), whereas Heinrich Barth is interested in existence as "entering-into-appearance" or "becoming manifest" (*In-die-Erscheinung-Treten*) and existence as the "event of cognition" (*Erkenntnis-Ereignis*).

The existential philosophy of both Jaspers and Heinrich Barth has a deontological nature. Both philosophers emphasize the idea of "oughtness" (*Sollen*) as essential for the reality of existence, because they are convinced, that this reality, open to the future and incompatible with worldly beings, can never be reached in terms of rational explanations – existence can only indirectly become an 'object' according to special ways of existential elucidation."

Both Jaspers and Barth strictly and fundamentally observe the independence of philosophical cognition from that of revelation.

The question remains whether Jaspers and Heinrich Barth, who both worked at the same

university and who had much in common, might not have collaborated more fruitfully had there been fewer reservations between them. Regrettably, this collaboration never happened. Jaspers' philosophizing became very dogmatic after his Groningen lectures. He never altered the categories of his system which he brought to bear against all philosophies with an almost clinical thoroughness. Were we to devise a formula that bears out the comparison between these two philosophers, it might sound like this: Jaspers' notion of philosophy was extensive, reaching out towards a "World History of Philosophy" and a "World Philosophy"; by contrast, Heinrich Barth's notion of philosophy was intensive, dedicated to analysing the foundations of philosophy from Plato to the present. While Jaspers was convinced that European philosophy was coming to an end, Heinrich Barth accessed largely unexplored dimensions of philosophical reflection through his work on the problem of appearance, of the act of appearing, of the transcendental basis of all understanding and an overcoming of the subject-object dichotomy.

### Philosophical Faith and Reading Cipher-Script

Heinrich Barth's critique of Karl Jaspers is ambivalent. Basically, it is positive, holding in high regard the immense achievement of Jaspers and his own existential commitment; and yet Barth doubted whether Jaspers' philosophy is the best instrument to tackle the tasks at hand. He felt particularly ambivalent about Jaspers' acceptance of revelation-based religious faiths, which came with an uncharitable attitude towards the religious understanding arrived at by believers in the various "denominations" and religious organisations. Without a doubt this critical *diastasis* also reveals Heinrich Barth's inner conflict as a philosopher striving to accord equal respect to both the independence of philosophy and religious truths in their own right.

Notwithstanding Jaspers' highly developed awareness of the historical uniqueness of each and every instance of becoming, he assumes a timeless human being capable of attaining the highest realisation, albeit with varying cultural nuances. Allusions to neo-Platonic and mystical intentions of self-redemption can hardly be dismissed. Regardless of whether or not this is justified, we should uphold Jaspers' insight that human existence in its particular manifestation does not fit altogether into the world

<sup>23</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die grossen Philosophen, Erster Band* (München: Piper, 1959) pp. 231-616.



horizon and so cannot be accounted for in these terms. The notion of "Existenz" living "from another origin," from its own utterly distinctive origin, is something like an epiphany of transcendence itself. While this might be a mere "cipher" in Jaspers' terminology, it does contain a truth that lays claim to a quasi-ontological status. In its reality, existence differs from all other being and beings. It is justified by "freedom," which is non-deducible but self-evident, as with Kant. The non-deducibility of the freedom of existence marks the breakthrough past the allegedly closed and disenchanted being-of-the-world (*Weltsein*). Neither is the particular nature of the being of existence obliterated as a "mode of the encompassing." This particularity is constitutive for existence and must be made manifest through keeping a constant distance from all hardening. Paradoxically, it follows that precisely the dark thoughts of revelation, the petrifying of world-concepts into gnostic realities, and the decline of scientific research into scientific superstition all become negative incentives to unmask, combat, and overcome these very things as challenges, aberrations, and temptations, thereby affirming being-in-itself, that is, the selfhood of existence (*Selbstsein der Existenz*).

In simplified terms, philosophical faith transforms and replaces with ciphers the revelations handed down and their substantialized appearances of transcendence. This occurs through a particular "operation," namely the suspension of the arbitrariness (*Eigenmächtigkeit*) of phenomena. Their potential capacity to harden into existential challenges and their graceful potential to become ciphers is rigorously left to the discretion of the authenticating disposition of existence. Those aspiring to be ciphers, be they human beings, landscapes, towns, places or myths, rituals or laws, and others, are at first left to exist as phenomena. However, the transcendent intention of the subject, which penetrates into the horizon of all horizons of the phenomenality of being, transforms these aspirants into ciphers of transcendence. The transformative power thus resides entirely in the subject so that each allusion of "condescension" must be regarded as gnosis and reversal. But I wish to emphasise once more that Jaspers' point is not that religious knowledge and its symbols should be destroyed. Rather, he is concerned with altering their comprehensibility and understanding their incomprehensibility; that is, he aspires to another "conceptual mode," of a mode of thought capable of coming to terms with the non- or

misunderstood. In any event, the phenomenality of ciphers as such remains intact.

This prompts further deliberations. In an ontological sense, ciphers are nothing, and yet not nothing either. They have a floating character, which on some occasions refers beyond itself, and on others collapses into objectivity and bodily existence. They are destroyed in both cases. There must be an existential impetus that preserves their condition of being-something-and-not-nothing (*Etwas-und-nicht-Nichts-Seins*) and thus allows them to mirror existence itself. Being-oneself and recovering from not-being-oneself fuse into a movement that drives existence at once into itself and beyond itself. It is accepted that existence-itself bears something dark and incomprehensible, even negative, and continuously integrates this aspect. The question has been raised, and quite rightly, why ciphers are needed at all. Kant employed the concept of ciphers in his *Critique of Judgment*<sup>24</sup> with reference to a possible "interpretation of cipher-script ... through which nature speaks to us in its beautiful forms." In Jaspers, cipher-script is much more than an "interpretation" of nature's beautiful figurativeness, for with him everything can become a cipher. This should be understood entirely in terms of an existential-personal hermeneutic, which might prompt one to think of once-fashionable "individual mythology" (Harald Szeemann). But ciphers thicken into cultural symbols, and thus become effective in the lifeworld. We now need to inquire whether the floating, independent existence of such symbol-ciphers could not perhaps have repercussions on the living. The distinct phenomenality of ciphers cannot simply be a reflex of deep existential events, for how could a new and more profound existential knowledge be awakened by a deepening in the self-evidentiality of the ciphers? The later Schelling's positive philosophy advances not only into an increasingly deeper gnostic reality, but opens up the way to new existential knowledge – that is, as long as one adheres to reading ciphers. Kierkegaard already practised the development of ciphers with regard to contents in a theoretical-secular form in his pseudonymous writings. Curiously, Jaspers evinces such a mindset at the end of his book on the atom bomb, namely in those passages in which he employs the notion of immortality as a cipher and penetrates its

<sup>24</sup> I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, §§ 42, 120.

content.<sup>25</sup> This cipher focuses on the possible non-reality or annihilation of the world as a whole in the face of the total threat confronting mankind in the form of nuclear disaster. The detour through a nothingness that we ourselves might bring about inflames the world of appearances, altering their radiance.

### The Politics of Philosophical Faith

Jaspers delineated a new situation of world history, one to which we have grown accustomed in recent decades. In formulaic terms, the reality of existence and the reality of humankind have amalgamated into a single entity. Jaspers therefore declares that thinking must be "reversed" (A, p. 298), and that "rethinking" is called for (A, p. 231), a "turn" (A, p. 283), a "reversal" (A, p. 322), a radical "revolution of the mode of thought" (A, p. 321), all emanating from freedom. Such Kantian statements move philosophical faith into the political sphere; indeed, such faith now becomes politics itself. The apocalyptic threat also fuels Jaspers' subsequent book-length account of philosophical faith (published in 1962), namely to safeguard "the survival of mankind" through universal communication. He argues that one should aspire to reduce everything that separates the ossified theologies of revelation.

The nuclear threat subjects the abstract category of the "whole" to a global, all-embracing incarnation, one that affects all humankind. Seizing existence now corresponds to humanity grasping hold of the planetary basis – through its consciousness, its institutions, and the "rational community" (A, p. 301 ff). The weakest link in the hierarchy of powers, the very concept of philosophical faith, must compete against the "religious powers professing violence" which dominate politics. Unlike Heidegger, Jaspers expects no reversal of fate. He opposes Heidegger's ontological self-disempowerment, and he regards his own writing as an agency in this colossal process of change and reversal. He knows this endeavour is utopian, but considers it not an entirely lost cause – notwithstanding the slim realistic chances of success. The last forbidden resort would be to initiate a "philosophical religion" as Schelling did. Nor can Jaspers envisage a syncretistic world religion or world wisdom, even though the appeal to rationality, from which all existing beings

originally live and act, suggests this. What remains is the continuously self-renewing movement of reason and its universal communication. Reason must be neither expected nor employed as a "tool," but abides among us as a shared asset or an open book, and remains unrecognised as an "absolute," as Hegel stated in his *Phenomenology*,<sup>26</sup> or as Jesus said: "The Kingdom of God is at hand, it is within you!" Philosophical faith refers to itself and to an origin; through its self-elucidation it constitutes at the same time the faith in the philosophical *per se*, as the only substance of the occurrence of reason. Jaspers hence insists on the consciousness of "presence," which can only be grasped if its aspect of eternity is recognized in the here and now. Jaspers hence raises the thought of immortality to an illuminating cipher.

The existence of technical means to terminate the survival of humanity prides open a new dimension for philosophical faith. The individual apprehension of existence runs parallel to humanity taking hold of its existence through preserving the material conditions of life. Individual death and the death of humanity move closer – indeed most tangibly in the delusions of pathological, power-hungry individuals. Adolf Hitler is supposed to have said: "We can perish. But we will take a world with us." The individual lifetime and universal time merge in the absolute defined within the compass of individual power obsessions. Philosophical faith is radically opposed to such an absolute mindset. If it is faced with possible extinction in the cosmic sense; however, the materiality of the world itself becomes a basic moment of existence. It follows that existence is the conscious manifestation of the being-of-the-world. Heidegger's "being-in-the-world" (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) and Heinrich Barth's "entering-into-appearance" (*In-die-Erscheinung-Treten*) suddenly reveal their cosmic concreteness.

Jaspers also detects the incommunicable, dark, and absoluteness of the politics of violence in our encounter with "revelation." But a simple parallel cannot be drawn. Misunderstood revelation also compels existence to examine itself, and the apocalypse of human self-annihilation impels concrete, practical action. Current public discourse in the media is also largely determined by this dual encounter. Fear of the violent potential of religious fundamentalism abounds, as does the proliferation of nuclear weapons – among

<sup>25</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen. Politisches Bewusstsein in unserer Zeit* (München: Piper, 1960) p. 493ff. Abbreviated as A.

<sup>26</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1948) p. 64.

both states and terrorist groups. The dangers have intensified since Jaspers published *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* in 1960 and since the end of the so-called "Cold War" in 1989. They can, however, no longer be perceived in terms of the Manichean duality of two superpowers. The new, asymmetric wars and the elusive war of the secret services against global crime have fundamentally changed the world political situation.

Today, philosophical faith is being challenged by the renewed political role of religion and culture, given that such faith is embedded in both due to its historical actuality. In what constitutes a countermove to the ongoing globalization of markets and of communication technologies and media, religion and culture have reawakened reactively, becoming islands for the formation of identity and outlook. This reaction produces differences within, and also between, individual civilizations. Interreligious and intercultural dialogue remains largely utopian; and interethnic violence and murderous strife are now the dominant realities. Can philosophical faith actually assume a practical role in this context? It would appear doomed to powerlessness once a conflict has erupted. And yet there are shining examples, most of all Mahatma Gandhi, who has almost become a cipher today. Jaspers points out Gandhi's particular predicament in the context of the British Empire, but also mentions his limited function as a role model. Even if philosophical faith only abides secretly in individuals at times, it remains an unbroken hope. Precisely because religion and culture become disruptive powers, a "mode of thought" which at once embraces and undermines them has a chance to discover some basis for mediation. The opportunity resides precisely in the fact that philosophical faith rests upon no dogma, apart from having recourse to itself, which can become operative through hazardous rationality in what is perhaps a hopeless position.

What I have phrased in such dreadfully simple terms almost amounts to declaring the obvious, yet it also constitutes a looming imperative, as we all know. Nonetheless, embracing such banality, although appearances are deceptive, requires a "reversal," a "turning round of thought," a "revolution of the mode of thought," to the point of accepting the singularity of that imperative. Religion and culture rest upon conscious and unconscious dogmas, whereas philosophical faith knows only one dogma – which may be called the dogma of rationality.

While philosophical faith can have an isolating effect, it also opens up communicative possibilities. In his work *Philosophy*, Jaspers already placed communication at the centre of the elucidation of existence. The vision of a community of all existences could become present. Jaspers continued on his path and expanded philosophical faith into a projected "World Philosophy." Within this aspiration, he envisaged that a further apprehension of existence should unfold in the dimension of world history. He believed that such a task was interminable. This can be understood, however, as a sign that philosophical faith will continue to have a future.