



Review of *Karl Jaspers: A Biography – Navigations in Truth*

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Abstract: This review was presented at the Author Meets Critics session of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America in conjunction with the 84th Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, San Francisco, April 2010.

Suzanne Kirkbright's *Karl Jaspers: A Biography* is an unusually helpful study.¹ Subtitled *Navigations in Truth*, it helps us find our way down the various streams of Jaspers' thought, making that large reservoir of insights Jaspers has bequeathed us even more lucid and accessible.

The remarks I offer are complementary in a twofold sense. I want both to complement her on what she has accomplished and also to add some reflections—these, however, by no means bringing to any completion those opportunities for probing Jaspers' thought that are his continuing challenge and gift to us. Quite centrally, we know, Jaspers valued communication. Kirkbright's study helps us communicate with him—and with each other—even better than had been possible before, especially regarding those complex, often tangled strands that bind thought together with life.

Let me begin with a distinction many philosophers of existence not only frequently make,

but equally often find themselves having to live with: that between the inner and the outer. I found the "ailing plant" metaphor from Jaspers' *Über meine Existenz* (1904) most illuminating. Its inclusion and discussion early in Kirkbright's book (pp. 25-26) not only makes obvious chronological sense but revealing philosophical sense as well. Kirkbright speaks of the sharpness of Jaspers' ability to reorient his thoughts from his inner unhealthy condition to a more robust state also available to him, though not without effort. With sensitivity she wonders as to the extent to which the illness may have separated, possibly even isolated Jaspers to some degree. At the same time she rightly points to Jaspers' rational-analytic ability to orient himself positively and, one must think, thereby to connect. The communicative connecting, then, though immersed in vulnerability, emerges out of and as strength. We might think of this as an underlying overcoming that is a continuing and paradigmatic feature of Jaspers' life and thought.

The picture with which Kirkbright provides us shows us the split between a man undergoing something far from marginal—after all, his life is under threat—and in the midst of this exhibiting deep resources of humanity and rationality. To suffer and yet

¹ Suzanne Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers: A Biography – Navigations in Truth*, London, Yale University Press 2004, ISBN 9780300102420.

productively to reflect, the first largely a private affair for Jaspers, the latter more—and increasingly so—a public one, portrays an extraordinary challenge overcome. In a non-confessional mode Jaspers comes to articulate the human condition in its limit situations. This is an extraordinary undertaking and accomplishment, italicized in its authenticity through the life circumstances out of which it grew. We are much indebted to Suzanne Kirkbright for the light she sheds on this.

Receptivity must, if honest, accept what is given, requiring of the receptive one both patience and acquiescence in the role of patient. For those with both courage and the appropriate, if rare gift, spontaneity must hope to transform the "given" in generative ways. I have used words such as receptivity and spontaneity to suggest that Kirkbright has offered us significant biographical reason to view Jaspers in an existentialized Kantian way. Of course to do so I have dwelled with a relatively early and surely decisive situation and experience in Jaspers life. In so doing I believe I am true both to Jaspers and to Kirkbright's Jaspers—in this regard, as in so many others, essentially the same person. It is often said that the existential outlook requires that one's philosophy grows out of one's life and then seeks to transform one's understanding of that life and of human life itself. Surely Kirkbright's biography gives us numerous buds, blossoms and blooms for that "ailing plant" that once was Jaspers. Could the extraordinary restorative life and powers of this plant be among the best templates for an understanding of Jaspers' trajectory and journey, from psychiatrist to philosopher of human existence, from sensitively positioned German academic to judicious assessor of the troubled and troublesome status of Martin Heidegger?

Jaspers reflections in *Einsamkeit* (1915-16) are illuminating. They bring those aspects of Jaspers I have been exploring into further focus. Kirkbright serves us wonderfully well in quoting them (p. 39):

To say 'I' is to be alone. Whoever says 'I' establishes a distance, draws a circle around himself. To give up solitude is to give up myself. Solitude can only be present where individuals are present. Wherever individuals are present, though, there are twin aspects: desire for individuality and therefore a drive *into* solitude; and suffering out of a sense of individuality, and therefore the drive to break *out* of solitude. In that case, what always counts is not so much to be an individual as to feel and know oneself as an individual.

Here existential separation and relatedness are given a dynamic and rationale that are hard to emend or to improve on.

I now turn to another and somewhat vexing topic of interest and concern: the complex intellectual and personal relationship between Jaspers and Heidegger. Here Kirkbright is also consistently illuminating. Since not all present may know of some of the details of this relationship—I certainly hadn't until my reading of this most informative book—I will mention just a few that I found particularly enlightening, if nonetheless also somewhat perplexing. After each I have chosen to enumerate, I offer a brief comment or question:

(1) It was Jaspers who proposed that Heidegger join him in establishing a journal, *Philosophy of our Time, critical journals by Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers* (p. 130). As Kirkbright indicates, it was Jaspers, particularly, who wanted to stand in opposition to the academic, university tradition that both he and Heidegger found bureaucratic authoritarian and in numerous ways philosophically moribund. In fact, Jaspers mused that once such polemic had sated them, Heidegger and he might bring the journal to its end.

Regarding this historical circumstance the question I offer is this: How realistic at the time would the hope have been that such a journal could alter the landscape and course of academic philosophy, and to what reputational risk was Jaspers subjecting himself in pursuing such a course of action? I note in this connection Jaspers' concern regarding Heidegger's dedication of works to such significant figures as Scheler, Rickert, and Husserl. Kirkbright notes that Jaspers was troubled by the possible insincerity and opportunism involved in Heidegger's actions. I wonder how we are to understand Heidegger as Jaspers' choice for co-editor in terms of Jaspers' own perception of the constellation of personalities and forces that constituted the lay of German philosophical land.

(2) Jaspers' second book, *Psychology of World Visions* (1919), was aggressively critiqued by Heidegger; a copy of Heidegger's review being sent personally by Heidegger to Jaspers. In the review Heidegger observes that Jaspers' "limit situation" concept was articulated in an altogether unsatisfactory way. Not only this, from a formal standpoint Heidegger reduces the level of Jaspers' book to a "basic aesthetic experience." There is more.

Very helpfully we learn from Kirkbright that in a letter to Rickert Heidegger states, "this book must, in my opinion, be fought in the severest manner, precisely because it has so much to offer that Jaspers has learned from everywhere and because it appropriates a trace of the times" (p. 131).

My question is this: granting that in human relationships the personal and the philosophical can and often do proceed along separate tracks, how was it nonetheless possible for Jaspers to consider Heidegger an ally and trustworthy, continuing partner in any common philosophical cause, given the insincerity issues implied in the various communications?

(3) Kirkbright does those of us engaged with Jaspers a great service by mentioning the Gumbel affair of 1924. It highlights highly commendable features of Karl Jaspers that are constant and richly deserve repetition and praise. For those not aware of the Gumbel episode, the circumstances and facts are roughly the following. Gumbel, and unpaid lecturer for statistics on the philosophy faculty at Heidelberg, had made some controversial statements at a political meeting, presumably outside of the University. These reached a newspaper and were duly reported. Jaspers was asked to serve along with two other colleagues on the investigative committee. The recommendation of the faculty of philosophy, subsequently passed by the University Senate, was to withdraw Gumbel's teaching rights. Jaspers himself voted against this motion of his colleagues. He was clearly set against the politization of academic life. In this connection, though some few years later, Heidegger writes to Elizabeth Blochmann that Jaspers had not comprehended the political situation of the early 1930s and was politically unaware, possibly naive, we might say.

But how oblivious was Jaspers to such political matters at any point in his adult career? And, in this regard, where precisely did he stand in the early 1930s with respect to University reform? By no means am I wishing to speak negatively of Jaspers, not do I wish to lump him in with the fleeting Rector of Freiburg. But the circumstances are surely complex. As Kirkbright notes, in *The Idea of the University* Jaspers attributes the erosion of Germany's scientific tradition to a failure of leadership. She rightly informs us that Jaspers' ultimate educational vision, at least at this time, was Nietzschean (p. 135). We are also informed in convincing ways by Kirkbright that Jaspers'

concerns for reform of University life in 1933 were on a relatively similar level—and not altogether opposed—to Heidegger's. Regarding these matters we both benefit from Kirkbright's revealing book and can benefit even more by further reflection on a difficult and dangerous moment in German educational history.

A somewhat final note on this matter—in philosophy, I have come to realize over the years, nothing is finally final: we are perhaps very well served by noting Ernst Mayer's description of Jaspers' *Philosophy*, provided by Kirkbright later in her book (p. 231). He refers to it as "independent of time." It may be a stretch, but such independence, in some ways geographical as well, contrasts perceptively with the charming description of Heidegger given in a letter written by Jaspers to his parents in 1928 (p. 235). "He is totally rooted in his home turf and near to nature. His most prized thing is the *Hütte* that he built for himself high in the mountains. From there, he looks across the whole of the Black Forest onto the chain of the Alps." This quotation Kirkbright also helpfully provides.

Have we here an insightful and concise contrast between enlightenment and counter-enlightenment, the cosmopolitan and the more naturalistic, the timeless and the time-intoxicated? To be sure, this is to some considerable extent an overdrawn comparison. Jaspers, after all, was timely in what were often very courageous ways, and the deepest aspirations of the brilliant Heidegger included the hope for a recognition and placement that would significantly transcend historical footnoting. And yet...when one reflects on "existence" in twentieth century philosophy, one will invariably give central consideration to Jaspers and to Heidegger. These two thinkers stand apart and, at times, stood together. They are both close and distant with respect to each other—in contestation and in agreement, in fragile friendship and in decisive alienation from each other. It is one of the numerous and considerable virtues of Suzanne Kirkbright's perceptive Jaspers biography to have untangled and sorted so much of this out for us.

I find Kirkbright's account of Jaspers' presence and participation in the Geneva conference of 1946 of especial interest. Not only is it important in itself as an effective means of shedding further light on the depth and breadth of Jaspers' thinking. It is also worthy of our urgent consideration as 21st century thinkers in a world under rapid, unpredictable and,

almost certainly, irreversible reconfiguration, economically, politically and soon, one hopes, philosophically. As Kirkbright indicated, Jaspers' speech was guided by the theme of the conference, the European Spirit. From his remarks it is clear that he understands Europe far more as idea than as geography, as spirit than as location. Not only is this significant to register as a further confirmation of Jaspers' own inclusive and communicative mentality. It can also be taken as a caution and a hope it is incumbent upon us to nurture as we move into a most uncertain future.

Following closely Jaspers' statements and underlying motivations, Kirkbright elucidates the axial underpinnings of Jaspers' thought at this important historical and intellectual moment in 1946, directly after the Second World War and in a conference setting that prominently included the participation of Georg Lukács. Jaspers expressed in his remarks in Geneva a concern for greater communication between the religions of the world. He was also able to ground this concern in something well transcendent of geographical placement, *viz.*, fundamental ideas of human self-understanding and development that had their origins in what Jaspers referred to as the axial age.

The envisioning and investigation of a purported axial age, we well know, is one of Jaspers' seminal contributions to our thinking. Kirkbright notes Jaspers' deployment of this notion in a most helpful and illuminating way. She notes as well Jaspers' oppositional stance toward the Christian tradition, based in part on its own opposition, in turn, to any genuinely open-minded and receptive stance towards spirituality.

I have said nothing in this short commentary about Gertrud, and this is unfortunate, for in her biography of Karl Jaspers, Kirkbright presents Gertrud perceptively and the relationship between husband and wife very well. That Gertrud greatly influenced Jaspers' advocacy of truth as intimately related to a process of continuing inner renewal and requiring constant self-improvement is surely the case. Kirkbright accounts for this influence most helpfully. I hope to have conveyed a few of the many accomplishments to be appreciated and explored in Kirkbright's biography of Jaspers. There is much more to explore, and I recommend that anyone who has not yet done so take up this fine study.