



Volume 12, No 1, Spring 2017

ISSN 1932-1066

Translating Karl Jaspers on Greatness

Ruth Burch

Lugano Paradiso, Switzerland
burchru@hotmail.com

Helmut Wautischer

Sonoma State University
helmut.wautischer@sonoma.edu

Abstract: Translations of Karl Jaspers' work into the English language have so far not been uniform in their choice of technical terminology. This scholarly rendition of Jaspers' *Introduction* to his seminal work *The Great Philosophers* stays to the original German text as true possible by upholding its idiomatic cultural expressions, complex sentence structure, and nuanced particularities provided that clarity of communication can be maintained. The substantive contents and the significance of this text, whose principal topic is greatness, are outlined here. Communication with the great philosophers can bring insight into their thought and can enable humans to transcend toward possible authentic *Existenz*.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; history of philosophy; translation; greatness; *philosophia perennis*; realm of philosophy; reason; truth; existence; Transcendence, Encompassing; freedom; communication; language.

In his *Introduction* to *The Great Philosophers* Karl Theodor Jaspers addresses the topic of greatness. He is both against idolatry of man and also against the disputation of greatness or the denial of its existence. Jaspers is clearly in favour of democracy, and yet he writes against the levelling of greatness in mind on grounds of a wrongly understood democracy. He also discusses greatness in its questionableness. Work and personality of the great ones are inseparable. Like Friedrich Nietzsche and Søren Kierkegaard, Jaspers regards passion and personal involvement as necessary dimensions of philosophizing. Psychology and other sciences are too limited for the analysis of greatness. Nonetheless, Jaspers' credo reads: "Philosophy that is inimical to science and reason is erroneous philosophy."¹ Jaspers explains: "Today, no philosopher

can achieve a clear and truthful manifestation of his thinking merely from the origins of philosophizing and without the disposition of scientificity. The contempt for the sciences becomes an act that goes against truth. Without science, no one can have an impact favoring pristine reason, upon which our well-being depends, admittedly this reason can take each step only with the assistance of the intellect, but it is incomprehensible to intellect itself" (*AEG* 7). The creative mind is formed in a process of choosing between good and bad. Yet, good and bad are not entirely separable. A conscious decision between good and bad has to be made by each individual human being. As for Jaspers authenticity is of utmost importance, the virtue of truthfulness or honesty is a central concern to him.

In his *Philosophical Autobiography* Jaspers cites from his own book, *Man in the Modern Age*,

Existenz-philosophy is the way of thought by means of which man seeks to become himself; it makes use

¹ Karl Jaspers, "Preface to the American Edition of *The Great Philosophers*," *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 6-8, here p. 7. [Henceforth cited as *AEG*]

of expert knowledge while at the same time going beyond it. This way of thought does not cognise objects, but elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker. Brought into a state of suspense by having transcended the cognitions of the world (as the adoption of a philosophical attitude towards the world) that fixate being, it appeals to its own freedom (as the illumination of *Existenz*) and gains space for its own unconditioned activity through conjuring up Transcendence (as metaphysics).²

He understands the self as a process. It is transformed by the choices and decisions one makes in unlimited freedom.

Jaspers delineates with great care what constitutes human greatness in general, how it can be recognized in an individual, and which obstacles one might face by either denying the exclusive nature of greatness or by undeservingly claiming it for oneself. With his psychologically trained mind he guides the readers to a state of reflection that balances the prerequisite of a person's integrity that allows to recognize greatness with awe and respect while at the same time feeling inspired and motivated to seek one's own wisdom. Jaspers elaborates: Greatness does not call for idolatry, it is not quantifiable, and

when taken in an absolute sense...it now becomes dissolved into talents, attributes, and everything that can be determined objectively and quantifiably.³

He is very well aware of the fact that it is too ambitious for anyone to identify or group great philosophers in a fully satisfactory way. Any selection of philosophers will be arbitrary or according to a plan. "No historical conception may be considered as final in the way it decides and judges" (*IGP* 20).

Jaspers is interested in intercultural communication in order to reach mutual understanding on a global scale. Having an open horizon is indispensable for realizing it. At times in different parts of the earth and independent from each other similar ideas were developed, for example, during a period that Jaspers calls the Axial Age (880-200 BC) and in the course of which Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus lived

contemporaneously. Provided that there is a universal history, humans can work toward achieving unity based on a world philosophy that envisions a world at peace. In his 1958 acceptance speech on the occasion of being awarded The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Jaspers explains that world peace is unthinkable without the actuality of individual inner peace, freedom, and truth.⁴ For him, truth constitutes the precondition for freedom which in turn is the precondition for individual inner peace. He fosters philosophy as a discipline that is at variance with science and technology. Yet simultaneously it is borrowing from the insights and findings in science. While he is adamant that the pivotal role of the four paradigmatic individuals needs to be maintained, Jaspers admits that some of his choices for including a philosopher in his subsequent groupings in *The Great Philosophers* are based on his knowledge of these thinkers and his grasp of their philosophical depth. Some were left out simply due to his lack of familiarity with their thinking or for reasons of presentation. In the ultimate section entitled "The Functions of the Exposition" Jaspers states that comprehension transcends the intended meaning of an exposition. Great philosophers appertain to a trans-historical realm.

Jaspers desires to be widely received and especially the promotion of moral-democratic education is close to his heart. This is also an important motive why he was keen on having his *Great Philosophers* translated into English. The precise details of his negotiations with its editor Hannah Arendt, the translator Ralph Manheim, and the publisher Kurt Wolff can be found in the Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers correspondence,⁵ and also in the *Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe (KJG)*.⁶

Since there are unique and only partially comparable individual great philosophers, the history of philosophy is not a history of progression and *telos* (against Hegel), they can fluctuate in numbers even to the point of complete absence. Jaspers' idea of the eternal

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Dankesrede, Wahrheit, Freiheit und Friede*, Berlin, Germany: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 1958, pp. 7-13, here p. 7.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers: Correspondence: 1926-1969*, transl. Roberto and Rita Kimber, Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace and Co. 1992.

⁶ Karl Jaspers, "Ausgewählte Verlags- und Übersetzerkorrespondenzen," in *Karl Jaspers Gesamtausgabe (KJG) III/8-1*, ed. Dirk Fonfara, Berlin: Schwabe Verlag 2018.

² Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul A. Schilpp, La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company 1957, pp. 3-94, here p. 40.

³ Karl Jaspers, "Introduction to The Great Philosophers," *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 13-49, here p. 15. [Henceforth cited as *IGP*]

realm of the great philosophers is related to upholding the guiding ideal of *philosophia perennis*. Jaspers states,

what matters is to understand that philosophers thought and lived no less against as well as with their time, and above all within their time, and reaching beyond all time. All those methods of philosophic-historical comprehension make good, definite, yet secondary sense....the great thinkers, being humans in the world, help us coming to ourselves through the contemplation of perennial matters. [AEG 8]

Jaspers is a humanist. Hannah Arendt regarded him as one of the greatest interpreters of Immanuel Kant in the German tradition. Jaspers beholds his existential philosophy as "philosophy of reason" that is intent on seeking truth.⁷ He is greatly influenced by the post-Kantian thinkers Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Another significant influence in Jaspers' life was his wife Gertrud Mayer with whom he was in an ongoing exchange with regard to his philosophical ideas and who was the first reader and critic of his writings.⁸ Jaspers described her to Heidegger as being indispensable to him for being able to conduct his philosophizing activities at all.

Two-and-a-half decades before the publication of *The Great Philosophers* in 1957, the mature phase of Jaspers philosophy had already begun; in 1932 he published his key work in three volumes, simply called *Philosophy*.⁹ The subtitle of the first volume is *Orientation of the World*, of the second one *Illumination of Existence*, and of the third one *Metaphysics*. Jaspers sought to compose a "World History of Philosophy" and dedicated up to his death a quarter of a century to it. Doubtlessly, this project was of central importance to him. In this enormous research project he had planned to elaborate six distinct approaches to the history of philosophy. Jaspers wants us to seek out "the company of the philosophers," above all the company of the great ones. With respect to this approach his principal publication is *The Great Philosophers*.

The objective of his philosophy is moral and political change and above all to build a bulwark against

totalitarianism. The responsibility of the philosopher is to seek his or her authentic self. Jaspers draws on Immanuel Kant for explaining his idea that there are two realms in reality, the realm of *Dasein* and the realm of *Existenz*. The freedom to seek *Existenz* needs to be actively chosen otherwise the individual remains in the realm of *Dasein*. Therefore, Jaspers defines philosophy as the elucidation of *Existenz* (*Existenzerhellung*). Freedom can be experienced through existence and action. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jaspers aims to understand existential reality from within and objects to all attempts to bring thought into a unified total system. *Existenz* is subject to the contingencies of a constant and situated becoming. For Jaspers, all humans are able to philosophize and to enter into communication with the great philosophers. Thus, the most important task of *The Great Philosophers* is to facilitate access to the oeuvre of the great philosophers. Yet he goes out of his way to stress that no course book and no amount of secondary literature will ever be able to replace the direct study of the original writings of the philosophers themselves.

The *Introduction to The Great Philosophers* consists in a discussion of human greatness: its justification as a philosophical concept, its definition, characteristics, and how it can be identified in contradistinction to concepts of non-greatness. Jaspers aims at establishing an ordering and ranking of the philosophers, a work which remains always incomplete and provisional. The idea behind it is comparable to Karl Popper's fallibilism: the truth can only be approached, yet never be reached, for all humans and their minds have imperfections of some kind. Fallibility is part of all human endeavors.

Jaspers links intellect with science and reason with philosophy. He understands reason in terms of "movement and enablement." Dynamic reason elucidates individual existence in philosophical communication. In Jaspers reason and truth are close if not identical. He elaborates that "philosophical thinking of reason is indeed an expression of unconditional truth; however, it is not straightforward in the manifestation of what is already thought. Unlike the sciences it is not universally valid and will never be equally accepted by all. While intellect seeks the universally true as the one, and also finds it within limits, reason is the one but only as movement and enablement, and not as the content of a sole truth....The results of knowledge in scientific discussion are substituted in philosophical communication by the elucidation of one's existence" (AEG 7). Jaspers aims to bring philosophy to "a living presence" and in this way to facilitate personal

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time*, transl. Stanley Goodman, New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1952.

⁸ Hans Saner, *Karl Jaspers in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt 1970, p. 130.

⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 3 Vols., Berlin: Springer 1932.

encounters with the great philosophers.¹⁰ They thereby "become role models, their thoughts pre-form our possibilities. It is an impetus for our own uprising getting to know the great ones, who are also the most original, trying to walk with them in their thinking, seeing them before us. The philosophers we study pull us automatically into their orbit" (*PGP* 12). Nonetheless Jaspers reminds the reader,

in contrast to a historical totality it is necessary to behold the encompassing originality of these great ones together with whom we step out of history and into a presentness of being human. [*AEG* 7]

The great philosophers assist us in expanding the boundaries of our possibilities in being human.

They want to help justifying our existence, not confounding it. We should be awakened by the language of their existence and arrive at reasonable insights. [*PGP* 10]

Against Martin Heidegger's tenet that "language is the house of being,"¹¹ Jaspers holds that the relation between being and language is tense or burdened with conflict and constitutes rather a bridge (*Brücke*) than a house. In a letter to Heidegger dated August 6, 1949 he writes: "When imparting, language is to be brought to revocation in reality itself by way of deeds, presence, and love."¹² For Jaspers, indirect communication takes place in language and is made possible through it.

Jaspers is masterfully suggestive of layers of content that are implied without being explicitly stated. Acquiring philosophical insight requires methodological rigor, similar to the rigor known in the sciences, but it is not reducible to diligence in methodological perseverance. For Jaspers, to claim objectivity in philosophy resembles at best a "triviality of indifferent subjectivity" (*PGP* 11). Instead, philosophy requires authentic participation in knowledge; knowing

one's place in the larger scope of universal events and recognizing the infinite quality of one's finite path to wisdom when pondering about the human condition. As a trained psychiatrist, Jaspers had a passion for humanity in its various forms of appearance, yet he was also aware of the drives and motifs that bring about human action, and of the temptations that come with social, economic, and political strength. Since Jaspers believed in the value of communication he also made himself available to larger audiences outside of universities, most notably by way of his many radio broadcast lectures. These inspirational talks are reflective of the human condition; they are meant to encourage self-reflection and to stimulate philosophical curiosity in the listener or reader. The occasional choice of suggestive and vague concepts that are embedded in historically sound observations come to fruition with an audience whose cultural horizon is inclusive of timeless wisdom and as such notices its absence in the presumed inevitability and necessity of a so-called progress.

In their edited collection of selected translations into English of writings by Jaspers, Edith and Leonard Ehrlich and George Pepper observe: "Masterful as was his command of the language and committed as he was to expressing his thought in the most precise and limpid terms he would never have sacrificed, in his writings or in conversation, the breadth and depth of what he meant to say to facile and hence more easily to understood formulations."¹³ Therefore they did not do it in their rendering of his thoughts either. And neither did we. In this collection, the Ehrlichs and Pepper published the translation of a few short excerpts taken from Jaspers' *Preface* and *Introduction* to *The Great Philosophers*. We also retranslated these excerpts in an attempt to translate Jaspers' terminology in both an accurate and consistent mode, always mindful of rendering the sense in a way that is suitable for English diction. In contrast to Manheim, E. B. Ashton, and to other Jaspers translators we abstained or refrained from tacit omissions and textual rearrangements of his perceptive and dense writing. We have kept the small and large print size as we want, whenever possible, to also stay true to the original German text in regard to its formatting. We attempted to keep as close as

¹⁰ Karl Jaspers, "Preface to the Great Philosophers," *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 9-12, here p. 9. [Henceforth cited as *PGP*]

¹¹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanismus,'" transl. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 239-76, here p. 254.

¹² "Die Sprache ist doch im Mitteilen zur Aufhebung in der Wirklichkeit selbst zu bringen, durch Tun, Gegenwärtigkeit, Liebe." Martin Heidegger/Karl Jaspers, *Briefwechsel 1920-1963*, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann 1990, p. 179.

¹³ Karl Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. and transl. Edith Ehrlich, Leonard M. Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper, New Jersey: Humanities Press, second edition 1994, p. xiii.

possible to Jaspers' wording. Regarding punctuation we mostly followed the original German text, and only changed it if otherwise it would have compromised the comprehensibility of the meaning of a given sentence or passage.

Translating these suggestive and vague concepts has been a challenging task, since it does not form part of the translators' privilege to determine a preferred mode of interpretation when it appears that the author was intentionally vague as a mode of subtle inspiration that might prompt original thoughts in a reader with the aim of introducing the constitutive aspects of great philosophers, and does this in such a compelling manner that a reader comes to appreciate the depth and innovative quality of these thoughts. At times this will mean that a sentence needs to be read several times so that the subtleties of its philosophical relevance become noticeable. And at times this means that a translation ought not to emulate and impose stereotypical images onto such vague concepts, thereby giving into superficial cultural bias or prejudice. Today's extent of gender awareness was not on the horizon at his time. Following the original text, we uphold in the translation the use of male pronouns when referring to great philosophers and to philosophers in general. Similarly, we do not use the definite article when translating *der Mensch*, but instead we consistently use "a human being."

A few additional remarks on translation: Ralph Frederick Manheim, translator of *The Great Philosophers* and of many twentieth-century literary pieces, compares translation to acting. In his view the function or the role of the translator is "to impersonate his author,"¹⁴ to speak as if the author himself were speaking. This is laudable as long as it is regarded as being merely the general direction to take, namely to empathize with the author. Yet simultaneously one needs to make at all times a maximum effort to clearly distinguish between the translator's and the author's voice. The sociological and

political conditions of any given time have an impact on the composition of a text. The translator needs to take into account the total thought of an author such as it is expressed in the previous work of the author. He ought to be a philosopher himself in order to avoid simple sentence-after-sentence translation without taking into consideration the context of its production and without distinguishing to the greatest degree possible between comprehension and translation of what is being said in the original text and its exegesis.

In contrast to Manheim's approach the translation project presented here is the result of a collaborative effort. Florian Hild had produced a first-draft translation which on its way to publication was elaborated on, heavily edited, and refined by Burch and Wautischer. Both of us independently reworked Hild's preliminary rendition, afterwards exchanged these revised draft translations and critically discussed them, in a first round by improving the rendition of nuances in the text and by weighing the applicability of established translations of Jaspersian concepts such as Being, Encompassing, Transcendence, Existenz, and so on, all of which are discussed at length, for instance, in Schilpp's edited collection on Jaspers. In a second round of editing, both of us revisited conjointly again the translation, now with a focus on English composition, and we made final adjustments to it. We accepted the occasional linguistic irritation that the English reader might experience when for the nuanced precision of the original German text no suitable equivalent could be found. We would like to emphasise that no translation can ever substitute the reading and study of a philosophical text in the language in which it has been originally written in, regardless of how well its execution is and how close or faithful a rendering of the original it is. Thence, we agree with Jaspers' dictum that "the full seriousness is felt only at its source" (*IGP* 47). A translation can always only introduce a text, facilitate and assist its reading, but never fully replace it.

¹⁴ John Calder "Obituary: Ralph Manheim," *The Independent*, 27 September 1992.