



A Short Introduction to Jaspers' *Einleitung to The Great Philosophers*

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Abstract: In addition to his academic writings, Karl Jaspers also wrote popular books for educated laypersons about the importance of philosophy. He explains that studying the great philosophers well allows us to be in communication with the best company there is. I share Jaspers' tenet that the great philosophers become our contemporaries as we read and discuss them. They become teachers and companions, we live our lives with them, and they provide guidance for us to find and develop one's authentic self. My motivation for participating in this translation was to make Jaspers' illuminating and persuasive insights available to a broader English-speaking readership.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Arendt, Hannah; Wolff, Kurt; great philosophers; greatness; studying philosophy; sense of philosophizing; communication; history of philosophy.

Why Translate the *Einleitung*?

When Hannah Arendt was a visiting professor at several American universities, she extensively communicated in writing with Karl Jaspers (who had a professorship at Basel University) with regards to an English translation of *Die Großen Philosophen*.¹ Kurt Wolff, Arendt's friend and an esteemed publisher (*Verlegerpersönlichkeit*) who had founded Pantheon Books in 1942, had expressed interest in a translation, which Arendt mentioned in a letter to Jaspers dated 9/16/1957. She wrote: "It would be a big deal if the book were published here and if one were to succeed to establish it. It could mean some sort of revolution in philosophy-teaching" (B 358). Arendt goes on to say that she and Wolff agreed

about the need for shortening the book, especially the 80-page introduction. "The reason for this suggestion," Arendt explained, "has nothing to do with the scope of the book but with the reading habit that differs from Europe. Here one is used to get things more quickly one after the other" (B 358).

Jaspers did not agree with shortening other passages in the book, but acceded to Arendt's suggestion concerning the *Einleitung* and called it a "typical German preliminaries [and] self-vindication" (B 360). Yet, half a year later, on March 25, 1958, after successful and amicable negotiations with Wolff, Jaspers carefully went about the *Einleitung*'s cause once more:

The relinquishment of the *Einleitung* is perhaps good for America. The "German professor" always has to "introduce," justify himself, communicate his plan. I have always done that. In this case, I thought, it is about justifying the "mood" in which one studies great

¹ Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, eds., *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926-1969*, R. Piper Verlag: Munich, 1985. [Henceforth cited as B]

philosophers, about warding off counter sentiments against my project, about reinforcing deep respect for maximizing efforts concerning integrity and realism. Therefore the exclusion appears somewhat odd to me: as if the concatenation and as if the ground were taken away. But I do not object to you. Let the *Einleitung* be dropped. My only question is: could it not be simultaneously published in a different form? It is a unified whole in itself, isn't it? If it can't be done, I will find solace as well. The reader in America, upon reading my expositions, may perhaps by himself arrive at what is written in the *Einleitung*. [B 383-4]

In offering a translation now, it is my sole objective to fulfill Jaspers' request to see his *Einleitung* published and thereby to give it back its ground and concatenation, the glue that holds it all together. It is indeed a unified whole in itself and it expresses eloquently the purpose of studying great philosophy and likewise the mood in which to undertake its study. In my view, Jaspers' *Einleitung* serves as a call to get to know oneself by getting to know those who have achieved self-knowledge and greatness before us. The conversation with the great philosophers has the potential to elevate one to their level. In this sense, Jaspers acts as a mentor for someone who begins this timeless conversation.

A Few Introductory Remarks

This book aims at furthering the happiness that resides in the contemplation of great human beings and when tracing their thoughts.

Karl Jaspers, *Die grossen Philosophen*²

My introductory remarks are more personal than scholarly. Jaspers repeatedly stresses that the purpose of studying philosophy is to find out who we are and become the best we can be. The guides for this dialectic path are those who have walked it before—in their own way, in their own time, and at their own place. They light the way for us.

The Great Philosophers was Jaspers' attempt to point us to the many different, exciting, inspiring, and meaningful paths that lead us to truth, to fulfilling our potential, to being *Existenz*: responsible, serious, and good human beings. Whether we follow Aristotle or Kant, Jesus or Spinoza, Socrates or Buddha—or Jaspers—is ultimately of secondary relevance; yet that

we follow great examples is of primary importance, for "Man has history where greatness from the past speaks to him. Connectedness to divine depth, moral resolve, substance in viewing the world, clarity of knowledge all have their origin in great individuals" (E 14).

Greatness is thus a critical concept for Jaspers and he spent a lot of ink to "justify himself" in the *Einleitung* and to explain what makes an individual great and why we must begin our studies at the feet of those greater than ourselves. Much of his *Einleitung* defines and justifies his use of greatness as a valid category. In my attempts to translate yet another variation on the theme of justifying greatness it seemed to me as if Jaspers kept defending his project more than was necessary, but Jaspers wrote at a time when parts of Europe were leery of great men. Post-war Germany needed to reposition itself: The megalomania of the Third Reich made words such as "great" and "authority," rather suspect. Jaspers' call to subject oneself to great individuals seemed to require a lengthy defense.

In my opinion not much has changed in the sixty years since the publication of *Die Grossen Philosophen* concerning our willingness to follow great authorities on the way to one's true nature. Perhaps Jaspers' repeated justifications for learning from the past, especially from the great thinkers of the past, are not too exaggerated, and I have come to believe that they are still apropos today. We still have to learn to love philosophical greatness in ways that neither idolize nor disdainfully disrespect it. The greatness of the past illuminates the present.

What is greatness? is thus the first question Jaspers addresses in his *Einleitung*, and he calls it an "apparent secret." Greatness is revealed in history in obvious ways: The greatness of individuals such as Socrates and Jesus can hardly be disputed. They speak to us from the past, as they have spoken to millions, even billions, of our ancestors. Human greatness, according to Jaspers, is revealed quite simply by history's judgment: a traditional perspective, trusting the choice of the many. And yet, a an enigmatic dimension remains since greatness cannot be objectively quantified and each individual must make choices regarding what is to be considered as being great.

Jaspers calls on academic and non-academic readers to find the company of the great philosophers by listening to and learning from them in a loving disposition:

We would like to enter the world of the great and acquire a right of domicile as listeners, learners, and

² Karl Jaspers, "Introduction to The Great Philosophers," transl. Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 13-49, here p. 45. [Henceforth cited as E]

lovers to achieve in their company, which is the best we could ever find, what we can become ourselves. Access is open to all. When we know how to ask properly, they will answer willingly. They demonstrate what they were. They encourage and humble us. All great philosophers do not want disciples but great fellow human beings as they are themselves. In deep respect toward them we come closer to them only by philosophizing ourselves.³

Using metaphors like "realm," "room," "world," Jaspers shows: We can enter into the space of philosophy and meet Plato and St. Augustine there, because they are, like all the other great individuals from the past, there to meet us. In the philosophers' world we are all contemporaries, we all learn from each other, we all strive to find truth, we all want to live good lives, and we all can become who we are.

³ Karl Jaspers, "Foreword to The Great Philosophers," transl. Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 9-12, here pp. 11-2.

I, for one, agree with Hannah Arendt: Jaspers' ideas can "mean some sort of revolution in philosophy-teaching." Jaspers presents us with a vision of philosophy as the perennial dialogue between the past and the present about the good life. This philosophizing speaks to our existence, not just our intellect; philosophy taught in this way has the potential to change us and make us better; this is an instance of revolution in philosophy-teaching as it turns philosophy from an academic discipline into the practice of living philosophically. Simultaneously transcendent and personal, seeking God and seeking self, grasping and failing to reach the unity of all being, Jaspers' approach to philosophy matters to all who love wisdom, because it makes them better human beings: happier, more resilient, more connected to others, and even a little greater than they would be without philosophy. Philosophy, done in Jaspers-style, trains the mind and the heart. In the company of Jaspers and other great philosophers we can learn why and how to live well matters.