



Preface to *The Great Philosophers*

Karl Jaspers

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Abstract: Karl Jaspers introduces the idea of a timeless realm of the great philosophers and provides a brief rationale why a mere history of philosophy cannot do justice to the greatness of these pivotal philosophers. Jaspers explains that an objectifying historical account of philosophy will not transmit the depth and wisdom of the great philosophers, since philosophizing requires subjective involvement with the goal of challenging oneself for the purpose of becoming a fellow human being who strives to attain philosophical knowledge and to live by it.

Keywords: Philosophers; history of philosophy; philosophizing; greatness; existence; liberty; love; language; communication; subjectivity; objectivity.

Since half a century the neglect of philosophy seems to coincide with its liberation from academic bonds.¹ We seize a chance in the struggle to find our own, present-day substance within a random storm of anarchic arbitrariness in thought, as we can hear the language of historical substance breaking through encrusted philosophical conventions. It appears to me that with this book I participate in such process of transformation.

The world history of philosophy started consciously with Hegel, but it is today an element of contemporary philosophy in quite a different way than before.

On the one hand philosophy needs its history. Contemporary thought finds itself in its past. Its own characteristic reveals its relationship to the past. It can act like a mere echo and then becomes vacuous. It forms the history of thinking in images,

constructs, and logical orders. It is ultimately an appropriation of truth in exposing history as eternally present and thereby fulfilling its purpose.

On the other hand, history of philosophy is not possible without one's own philosophizing. For external orientation about facts and texts alone does not yet lead into real philosophy. The purpose of entering into the history of philosophy presupposes that one is already guided by philosophy. Only philosophy understands philosophy, as it was in the past and is now in present day.

The tradition of philosophy is like a sea for us, unmeasured and immeasurable in its scope and depth. Although never before have we known as much encyclopedically as today; never before have we known encyclopedically as much as today; never before had we at our disposal so many texts in felicitous editions; never before were there so many reports about what has been thought, so many indexes and references which quickly point to what one is looking for. These admirable accomplishments are indispensable for every realistic engagement with the history of philosophy. And yet, they do not bring philosophy to a living presence. More likely arises there a confusing knowledge about the variety of things next to and sequential to each other,

¹ Karl Jaspers, "Vorwort," in *Die Grossen Philosophen, Erster Band, Die maßgebenden Menschen: Sokrates, Buddha, Konfuzius, Jesus. Die fortzeugenden Gründer des Philosophierens: Plato, Augustin, Kant. Aus dem Ursprung denkende Metaphysiker: Anaximander, Heraklit, Parmenides, Plotin, Anselm, Spinoza, Laotse, Nagarjuna*, München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1957, pp. 7-14, transl. Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer.

or a misleading simplification through dogmatic views. In both instances we miss the point and even lose it in the mass of knowledge. It is astounding: despite the enormous increase of our historical knowledge it appears that never before was there such degeneracy of the effective tradition of philosophy proper as seen today.

Reducing large encyclopedias to smaller ones cannot abate this misfortune. Moreover the history of philosophy ought not to be pictured as the continuous narrative of the one and complete process, which for us does not exist anyway. It is impossible to see all of history. We are in it. We see it as participants, not from an external vantage point. Even by not seeing all of history, we nonetheless enter into it, but only under specific conditions and with certain goals. Consequently such entrance only gains clarity if initially certain aspects of the history of philosophy in and by themselves are methodologically developed vis-a-vis the facts. These are the following:

First the *historical aspect*: Using chronology and geography as guidelines, I envision the eras that history brings forth in ever so manifold ways, mysterious transitions whose reasons are barely understood, the changing existential conditions for the thinking human being within natural and societal environments and conditions. The typical conditions and ways of thinking for each era appear as the historical clothes of eternal questions.—Second the *thematic aspect*: I turn to the problems and systems of thought, listen to history so to speak, without focus on chronology, for the topics it asked and the answers it offered. I gain a system of that which had become ever a subject in philosophy.—Third the *genetic aspect*: I see the origin of philosophy, in the beginning and at all times, in myth, religion, poetry, language. The original source of philosophy is as it were brought about in a different other that nourishes or opposes.—Fourth the *practical aspect*: I see the realization of philosophy in lived practice, its consequences in real life, and how it is, in turn, conditioned by this practice.—Fifth the *dynamic aspect*: I become conscious of the range of "powers," a struggle of minds by means of philosophizing, without an end in time, pretending to come to an end in great and unifying systems, as it breaks through them again to present itself in new shapes. Since I cannot obtain a standpoint outside of it, I see myself struggling within, based on my interpretation of the powers and points of contention.

In their intermixture these aspects would not become clear apperceptions, but in their separation they complement each other. Each is limited in itself. They are on hand as means for each other. One should not play them against each other by way of demanding of one aspect what concerns the others. Conjoining the aspects together, however, does not form a complete picture. Any such picture is yet again designed from a particular point of view. It remains a moment of an unbound whole or an encompassing.

The manifold modes of interpretation when taken together are in their entirety a world history of philosophy. But such history is not enough for us. What really matters is not yet achieved by means of these

aspects alone. Just as human beings come together in love, not merely for a valid task, but through and beyond things meeting at the grounds of Being, so we seek the company with philosophers. They are the topic of our book. They are supposed to shine as themselves, as unique, grounded in what is common to all, but transcending it, as the marvel of greatness in memorable humans who, by means of their *Dasein* and actions, realized in thought what is possible in knowledge. Only through them do we get to the heart of philosophy. They offer more than what shows itself in those five viewpoints. They reveal the essence of philosophy, which shows authentic reality only through the philosopher as person.

The great ones must not be fragmented into problems, not be debased to teaching systems, not be moved into the distance as images, not merely being attractive in their diverseness. They want to help justifying our existence, not confounding it. We should be awakened by the language of their existence and arrive at reasoned insights.

Philosophers do have their say everywhere within the five aspects of the world history of philosophy. As such, when seen from the historical perspective, they become characteristic figures of their era. Through problems, questions, and answers they are associated in the context of developing factual possibilities. They are in a relation to myth, religion, poetry, and language. They show a realization of philosophizing in their own practice or in the historical consequences of their thoughts. They are as it were incarnations of the powers of human potential, repel each other, team up, pass by each other indifferently, or refer to each other. But those aspects of historical, topical, genetic, practical, and struggling perspectives—while indispensable means of understanding—recede once the philosophers themselves come to the fore. Tied to their times in which they appeared, they become timeless objective figures as they transcend the spirit of their era by shaping it. Subsequently they can have an effect for all times. They are of interest for the reason of being themselves and on grounds of their truth. In life and work each one is unique, unsurpassable at a certain indefinable point, even as each of them is subject to the common human fate and has personal limitations. In their trans-historical character they are like eternal contemporaries.

The idea of a realm of the great philosophers rejects the limitation to stay put with just one philosopher, as if it were unnecessary for the truth, that one can perfectly hear and learn in one place, does not exist. Integrity

demands from us that we also get to know even what we resist. Albeit it allows us to follow our love in a favoring manner to where we believe we belong. However it demands seeing the others, to accept even the most foreign ones in their own greatness, to sense what is true in them.

As no human can be everything, he can at least potentially advance into the infinite to understand it all, even what he is not and what he cannot be. Such understanding does not take place in indifference, but in the potentiality of partaking. Therefore my understanding is principally open also to what I myself have ruled out or what is denied to me. I would like to know and acknowledge it and only dismiss it when it seems to be trivial or malign.

Instead of the title *The Great Philosophers*, one could have expected the more modest title *Great Philosophers*. Whoever philosophizes forms an overall picture of the realm of great minds. It is true that no one can determine the actuality of this realm in its scope and hierarchies. Nonetheless, the idea is upheld: to gain a comprehensive view of all the great philosophers taken together and to increase a sense of their connectedness. Thus this book is not conceived as a loose list of some of the author's favorite thinkers. The selection has not been made by a single historian of philosophy. This selection has already been made in history through history. Wherever philosophizing takes place, there is—analogue to the canon of sacred texts—a recognition of the great ones and their works, unchanging at the core but in flux and undetermined at its boundaries. This idea should not be dismissed by way of pointing out the arbitrary nature of my choice, as it can never be entirely overcome. It must suffice to gain a reflection of this realm no matter how incomplete the appearance might be.

Since the understanding of this realm is grounded in each of its members by modes of thought issuing from comparative thinking, the idea of the whole cannot be realized through an anthology compiled by many historians, since it would be a composite of disconnected parts. To give consistency to a book about the great philosophers it must be ventured by one sole person, based on the model of our ancestors and that person's lifelong experience of and communication with the great.

The objection ventured, though, that such a task is impossible to fulfill for one individual is well founded. Whoever attempts it, must feel the limited philosophical experience granted to his own being. He must notice his

insufficient knowledge even after decades of experience in this matter. Owing to his own historically situated perspective he becomes conscious of an insurmountable limitation. Nobody can present all the philosophers with the same emotional involvement. The knowledge of one's limits is a cautioning reminder to resist an attempt that only leads to superficial communication by showcasing all philosophers in the same way.

However, all of this should not discourage us. What cannot be finished can still be a worthy task. Regardless of the extent the product might fall short of the ideal, the path that is indeed taken by all who philosophize must be pursued with full consciousness. Maintaining a tension of fair appraisal and critical appropriation the author wants to introduce his readers, in accordance to the best of his ability, to the company of noble minds and the communication with these distinguished and venerable figures.

The common objection of being subjective in one's presentation of the history of philosophy assumes the existence of a disconnected, generally valid objectivity. One tends to think: there were a lecture that showed the philosopher's thoughts in an abbreviated identical copy—that there were a scientific philosophy to whose advancing progress each philosopher made a contribution—, that there were thus a commonly recognized knowledge of the great philosophers, their truth and their errors. Such objectivity exists only in reference to superficialities or to scientific knowledge, which is also produced by philosophers and is a means of philosophizing, but not in reference to philosophy itself.

Philosophical objectivity emerges by way of a subjectivity that internally refines itself. The common phrase that an author merely presents his own philosophizing in the historical object deserves as an answer: it would only be good for the objectivity of his presentation if his own—that is, original, not necessarily novel—philosophizing led to it. Since any objectivity that claims to be absolute when in fact it is indifferent, as it believes to linger with philosophical ideas without contemporary presence, certainty, and creed can express in its presentation only a triviality of indifferent subjectivity, it resembles the worst form of subjectivity, which is common ordinary language. Deviation from the familiar, which renews the depth of tradition, appears to disregard one's seemingly objective tradition as subjectivity. Daring something seemingly new, which is in reality ancient, does shift the usual emphases. What had been barely considered,

now receives space; what stood in the foreground, now moves into the background.

We seek to enter the world of the great, to acquire a right of domicile as listeners, learners and lovers, to achieve in their company, which is the best we can find, what we can become ourselves. Access is open to all. When we know how to ask properly, they will answer willingly. They show what they are. They encourage and humble us. All great philosophers do not want disciples, but great fellow human beings just as they themselves are. In deep respect toward them, we thence only come closer to them by philosophizing ourselves.

It might seem as if the presenting author is claiming to assume a higher point of view than that of the presented philosophers from which he surveyed them critically. My stance is the opposite. We cannot venture beyond the great ones but can rejoice as we look up to them. We do not see through them. We educate ourselves in order to understand them, so that they may educate us and bring us to ourselves. They tell us what is in line with our questioning, and they speak to us according to the ways in which we seek their company.

They become role models, their thoughts preform our possibilities. It is an impetus for our own uprising getting to know the great ones, who are also the most original, attempting to accompany them in their thinking, seeing them before us. The philosophers we study pull us automatically into their orbit. We observe our initially unnoticed mimicry as we follow, as we incline to imitate our revered ones and even speak like they do, and when we consciously avoid such imitation, we are all the more seduced to follow their inner disposition as if we had a right to speak with their authority. Only through a critique of the inner actions of our existence can we differentiate between imitations in appearance and repetition of original foundations, or between an externally identical repetition rather than historicity in emulation. We reach this by ascertaining what the great philosophers had done.

The task for us as successors is to let them illumine the space in which we become real ourselves. Mere historical knowledge of past philosophizing is vain.

Such knowledge does not commit us and thus seduces us to masquerade the past but it does not produce its own life. I want to be in the company of those who walk together with the great ones into the future; humble because conscious of how little an effect we can have, but elated by this unheard-of task. Faced with a global catastrophe that might threaten the existence of humankind, we still have the opportunity today to appropriate the great thoughts on the basis of our historical knowledge and to translate them into the dynamics of our time. Today, we want to consciously know the intellectual baggage we have to bring along for articulating the powers of perpetual orders and primal images. We do not know whether owning this philosophy and disseminating it to the peoples will help to avert the catastrophe, or whether it will only enable individuals to suffer lucidly as it unfolds and persist in the dignity of transcendently grounded liberty. All we know is that philosophers had traveled the path to most profound reason for millennia and that we want to get onto this path with them.

I want to facilitate access to the truth of the great ones for the large circles of those who are philosophically-minded by following the philosophy professor's idea in my work, of which I will speak on the final pages of the final volume of this work. The task of the teacher in philosophy is the least one, but a necessary one. It demands to make the communication with the great philosophers as accessible as possible, but also not to deceive with seeming simplicity when there is profundity. The reader ought get in touch with philosophy itself.

Therefore this book may be an educational book as it informs about facts and concepts, but it may also be a philosophical textbook as it guides to the thinking of the great philosophers in order to meet them in person. During the exposition I hope that the reader will notice where closer acquaintance is desirable. This can come about only through the study of original texts. For this purpose I point out sources and texts.

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