



Toward a Holistic Interpretation of Karl Jaspers' Philosophy

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Abstract: Of three typological characteristics that can be found in Karl Jaspers' thought, the first is the sequence of thorough transformations, if not revaluations, by which he changed existential thought. Jaspers separates into two parts the existential complex that traditionally has not only been unified but also constituted existential thought par excellence through its unity. By way of juxtaposing philosophical creation of meaning to existentiality, Jaspers goes beyond the boundaries of the fundamental self-identification of existential thought, for it is a trait of existential thought that it does not accept an assignment of extraneous meaning; in this respect the existential point of departure constitutes also a negative determination that heralds a provocative negation of any and all attempts for providing extraneous meaning. The second characteristic of Jaspers' philosophy that could hardly be integrated into existing philosophical typologies consists in the relation between science and philosophy. What is at stake here is not an exclusive primacy of philosophy at the expense of science. Both sides of the relation between science and philosophy are of a unique quality in the twentieth century, with equal relevance given to both. Additionally to the distinctive primacy of philosophy that is conspicuous, also the simultaneous and completely transparent normativity claim of this primacy is conspicuous. The third typological characteristic I would call perspectivism. At this juncture it ought to be already clear that this characteristic provisionally only shares the name with Friedrich Nietzsche's fundamental concept of philosophical perspectivism. This perspectival quality of Jaspers consists in the fact that his incessantly dynamic thinking opens up immediate new directions for reflection and inquiry. In the context of unfolding a thought process there are always new perspectives that open up, which Jaspers thematizes immediately, and builds on them with fruitful generosity.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Nietzsche, Friedrich; perspectivism; existentiality; meaning, creation of; epistemology; legitimating of semantics; philosophical typology; science.

A holistically conceptualized interpretation of Karl Jaspers' philosophy can be done only in sketches, albeit the monumentality of his life work stands in a transparent contrast with the term "sketch."¹

This philosophical oeuvre cannot be subsumed under any of the hitherto known philosophical typologies. This may be due to the (so far undetermined)

reason that the hitherto known philosophical typologies might have gaps. A further possible (equally undetermined) reason might be that Jaspers has joined the individual areas of philosophical science or of philosophy in such an ingenious way as it had never been done by any of the past philosophers. An equally possible further reason could be that Jaspers did not think of accounting for the important moments of his life work as an integral unity.

¹ A version of this essay was presented at the Eighth International Jaspers Conference, Beijing, August 2018.

The interpretation presented here is not an attempt to offer a new typological description of a typology that has already been sufficiently described in philosophy. Jaspers' philosophy is considered here in such a way that it assumes no position in any possible or already articulated typology. My understanding of a typologically determined description relates to exclusively philosophical attempts of using typologies; while differently conceptualized attempts to systematize, as for example the recent one by Albrecht Kiel, are significant examples for differently structured holistic conceptualization attempts (where all interests of Jaspers are presented as a unit).²

It is quite conceivable that it was the sovereign proceeding and the autonomy in thought that manifests itself in a variety of contexts that motivated Jaspers to not concern himself much with the typology of his own thinking.

Another dimension of this questioning consists in the fact that within it a new questioning concerning Jaspers' self-conception poses itself again and again. The aim of this question is to find out in which sense he understood himself to be a philosopher, or in other words, which kinds of encompassing systematic concepts he might have had in mind that would allow for a typological classification of his work within philosophy. With regard to this specific dimension of his conscious or perhaps non-conscious self-identification it is noteworthy that his appointment to join a renowned philosophy department was decisive on grounds of him being a physician and psychiatrist, from which one might conclude that already due to this fact he might not have given much importance to disciplinary boundaries and the otherwise professionally determining necessity of belonging to a typologically existing classification of thought.

When philosophies form systematic typologies—modes of thought—that cannot be classed into any schools, they usually do not get recognition. Jaspers is not alone when he addresses this issue, due to the fact that since the beginning of the 1920s an additional series of concepts arose that were hardly classifiable and ultimately formed an ontological orientation.

Yet this changes nothing concerning the necessity that the question as to Jaspers' philosophical self-conception can always be posed anew.

The fact that Jaspers did not want to build the usually pursued philosophical career might have significantly shaped his professional self-understanding that became even more prominent later in his life. His career path as physician and psychiatrist is widely known.

For better or for worse (actually: for better and for worse), this nonbiased characterization of Jaspers' mode of thinking that is shaped primarily not because of the demands of his own school of thought, but is shaped by the essential characteristics of the subject matter at hand, would not have been possible for Jaspers if his primary and formative training would have been solely philosophical. It goes without saying that this dilemma of the initial socialization of philosophers in the context of academic education remains until today a burning and delicate question.

In order to further discuss the typological issue in Jaspers, it is imperative for anyone who poses this question, to disclose one's own typological idea with regard to philosophical schools or systems.

This requirement also applies to the author of these very lines. Nonetheless, when executing this task, I do not believe that it would be necessary at this juncture, to adduce in great detail my own philosophical typology. It is sufficient for our purposes that certain aspects of my own typology will come into play in what follows.

The first typological characteristic of Karl Jaspers' philosophical thinking is that series of significant transformations, if not revaluations, by means of which he altered existentialist thought. Already the existential claim as a direct approach by itself can be seen typologically as an exceptional case (yet, of course, not as an isolated case).

Jaspers separates into two parts this existential complex that traditionally not only belonged together, but also in its unity seemed to have constituted existential thought *in toto*. In a distinctive way, Jaspers differentiates in a distinctive mode the instant of assigning meaning from a narrower existential dimension! And what is more: In some places he additionally contrasts these two instants to one another.

By juxtaposing philosophical assignment of meaning to philosophical existentiality, Jaspers goes beyond the fundamental self-identification of existential thought, for existential thinking is defined precisely by the trait of not accepting any external assignment of meaning; in this sense is the existential point of departure also a negative determinant that prefigures

² For example, Albrecht Kiel, *Fünf Kausalitätsformen zwischen Zufall und Wirklichkeit. Wege von den Naturwissenschaften zur Anthropologie*, Würzburg, Germany: Ergon, 2005.

the provocative negation of any external attempts to assign meaning.

The second characteristic of Jaspers' philosophy that could hardly be integrated into existing philosophical typologies consists in the relation between science and philosophy. The point here is not to presuppose an exclusive primacy of philosophy at the expense of science.

Both sides of the relation between science and philosophy are of a unique quality in the twentieth century, with equal relevance given to both. It is not only the distinctive primacy of philosophy that is conspicuous, but so is also the simultaneous and completely transparent normativity claim of this primacy. Generally, a normativity that is made transparent in such a way is a rare and exceptional phenomenon.

The third typological characteristic might be called perspectivism. At this juncture it ought to be already clear that this characteristic provisionally only shares the name with Friedrich Nietzsche's fundamental concept of philosophical perspectivism.³ In view of new ideas and insights, this perspectival quality of Jaspers consists in the fact that his incessantly dynamic thinking immediately opens up new directions for reflection and inquiry (above all for those directions that originate in the sphere of assignment of meaning and of *Existenz*). During the unfolding of a thought process there are always also opening up new perspectives, which Jaspers thematizes immediately, and builds on them with fruitful generosity.

On a general level it is necessary to also point out the fact that this kind of philosophy defines itself in the context of a crisis, the extent of which is not yet sufficiently known. This crisis of civilization manifests itself primarily in the arguably most encompassing instant of providing meaning.

³ Nietzsche's perspectivism is a generally accepted fact, even though given his stature this fact is analyzed surprisingly rarely and not at all exhaustively. For the purpose of indicating my position, see Endre Kiss, "Perspectivism in Epistemology and in the Sociology of Knowledge: On the Perspectivist Turn in the Philosophy," in *Images of Europe: Past, Present, Future, ISSEI 2014 – – Conference Proceeding, Porto, Portugal*, ed. Yolanda Espiña, Porto, Portugal: Universidade Católica Editora 2016, pp. 1166-73. (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318457941_Images_of_Europe_Past_Present_Future_ISSEI_2014_-_Conference_Proceedings_Ed)

This specific juxtaposition of the three major problematic areas (assignment of meaning/existentiality, respectively assignment of meaning/normativity; the relation philosophy/science; problem-oriented perspectivism) can also lead to the question whether or not this situation is about a gaining of independence of the function regarding the assignment of meaning in the context of a novel philosophical discipline that has not yet even been identified? This possibility I would not want to entirely exclude under any circumstances. On the one hand, the conspicuously intensive thematization of the assignment of meaning, but on the other hand also the elementary sovereignty and autonomy of Jaspers' philosophical personality would speak for this open approach, that beyond doubt would succeed to subvert the existing framework of philosophizing.

By placing with generous facility the point of view of assigning meaning into the center, there is certainly a moment of transcending the question or factuality at hand. Through this direct proximity to universalism, Jaspers' philosophy doubtlessly exhibits a similarity with religious thought, albeit this transcendence simultaneously might have been a characteristically immanent transcendence, which after Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, already had been a widely established mode of thinking within existential thought.

A further encompassing philosophical area is *Existenz*, in whose depth, or as I prefer to formulate it, in whose continually operating workshop the forces and motives, that is, the motivational forces of intellectual activity, are always generated anew.

In Jaspers, factual *Existenz* is perhaps the most profound and strongest workshop in all thinking. It is very important to me that "workshop" indeed is understood as an adequate space for production.

Assignment of meaning is in Jaspers' thought never an external demand. The various forms of externally assigning a sense that is imposed on a human being are known all too well; in comparison, Jaspers' solution to the question of meaning emphasizes a self-evident trait of freedom and autonomy in his philosophy.

The issue at hand may as well serve as a classic example for a protestant way of thinking that is directed inwardly—in place of patterns of meaning that are imposed upon humans externally, the question about and the need for inward meaning emerges.

Also out of the three encompassing philosophical areas, the assignment of meaning is of primary and determining nature. One could articulate this situation in such a general way that, for Jaspers, philosophy starts

where assignment of meaning comes into play.

No philosophy is without assignment of meaning—this sentence could also be reversed—no approach that could do without the direct, explicit, and assigned sense that is determined by content, can become for Jaspers philosophy in its fundamental meaning.

Jaspers also takes risks where appropriate in order to elaborate in a detailed manner the assignment of meaning as the fundamental function of philosophy. Through this, however, it becomes visible from a new perspective, that for him each accepted frame of thought also shapes in advance the various philosophical typologies.

Yet this upward revaluation and thereby expansion of the problems concerning the assignment of meaning also includes that assignment of meaning can be prior to the entire process of thinking. In this sense it poses not a truly noticeable problem for Jaspers to generate great philosophy, if not directly derive it from the context of human greatness taken in an aesthetic-moral sense.

Jaspers articulates philosophy inasmuch as he transfers into the field of philosophy the normative instances that are hidden in human greatness, without prior legitimization of his concepts in the sense of a typical ideal epistemology. Hence this also constitutes a paradigmatic example for the precise ways of his philosophizing.

This is to say that Jaspers consciously and purposefully bridges the deep chasm between normativity and positivity. By taking carefully executed steps, he does this above all as he transforms the subjective element that is present in normativity into object-subject and subject-object relations.

This confident movement between normativity and positivity—one must emphasize it again and again—is unparalleled in modern philosophy. The uniqueness of this approach consists in conjoining at a most fundamental level what is incompatible. The basic approach in the philosophy of the modern era is to legitimize the positive; great weight is given to semantically legitimizing such concepts for philosophically describing the world in this way.

This legitimization of semantics has to precede any thematization of assigning meaning, or of normativity respectively.

It appears that such an approach ends the discussion, even more so, as reflective philosophizing in the modern era must proceed in such a manner when it claims the name of being true philosophy.

Wherefrom stems the unique attraction of Jaspers' alternative point of departure? Formulated in a general (and fully Platonic) way: Jaspers embodies here a different optimal point of departure that ultimately was not much at variance at all with the mindset of the greatest philosophies and philosophers. The linking of normativity and assignment of meaning (instead of legitimizing in a positive manner the semantics of his philosophy) appears to him as being an immediate insight into the course of the world, like a new form of philosophical immediacy that only with regard to this specific trait is similar to Schelling's concept of immediate intuition. This approach is in that sense also a literary one, comparable with the rank of world-historical individuals such as for instance Goethe and Schiller, however it lacks the element of personal passion and of voluntarism respectively, as one is accustomed to at least since Nietzsche.

Jaspers upholds a point of departure (which in its actual depth comes close to religion) that in its direct form cannot (and ought not) be formulated in an unmediated manner, given the necessity of legitimizing his own semantics.

Jaspers seemingly does not explicitly take note of his own position. In this context he lacks the voluntaristic aspect.

This introducing of the philosophical person through whom his ultimate justification becomes possible allows for the seemingly impossible (namely, to omit the legitimization of his own semantics).

Jaspers chooses normativity as philosophical point of departure. Yet this does not at all make the problems disappear that come with the absence of a clear epistemological approach.

Jaspers' points of departure are thus not solutions but they are rather new beginnings in what seems to be a surprisingly traditional philosophical form.

For this approach to succeed, Jaspers needed an ability (possibly also philosophical charisma) to evoke in a reader the temporary acceptance of a point of departure that allows focusing on Jaspers' philosophical results, and to postpone the demand for legitimizing his semantics.

Jaspers' philosophy could successfully realize this approach in the first place only, since precisely at the transition from the early 1910s to the 1920s, expectations to formulate a direct ontology reached their peak, as did also the multifarious and world-historical-psychologically motivated frustrations regarding the unproductive epistemological approaches of

Neokantian provenance. In the philosophical context of Heidegger, Scheler, or Hartmann (in order to name just a few) this unique approach appears to be already quite embedded.

From this point of view Jaspers' Hegel interpretations can be comprehended in an optimal manner. He highlights from Hegel precisely these aspects that can evidence how Hegel attains an objective description of reality through his well-founded object-subject and subject-object relations. This description by Jaspers allows transcending the shortcoming of an explicit epistemology, even eliminating it.

Jaspers consistently substantiates the special positioning of normativity that reaches also into systematics. By doing so, the veritable polyhistor Jaspers comes surprisingly close to someone like a Fichte or Nietzsche.

This atypical systematic approach might very well be related also to his idiosyncratic and extremely interesting Nietzsche interpretation. For, although Nietzsche certainly does not neglect epistemology, Jaspers in his own terms reconstructs his massive Nietzsche interpretation also without it.⁴ His Nietzsche is also a philosopher who positions his entire philosophy under the aspect of philosophical normativity, without having epistemologically justified his semantics in advance.

Admittedly the assignment of meaning does not fill the space of existentiality, however it defines it in fundamental ways. *Existenz* is now and then also a product of the assignment of meaning, while conversely the assignment of meaning always comes about anew in the workshop of existence.

This peculiar difference between existentiality and the assignment of meaning is typologically relevant, above all, because in the philosophical tradition existentiality and assignment of meaning are more or less regarded as the same phenomenon. In this context, Jaspers' solution appears productive and creative indeed, for it is precisely the clear analysis of this difference that can present both aspects in a new light (*Existenz*, which no longer realizes itself in the assignment of meaning,

or the assignment of meaning, whose facilitation is critically suppressed by existentiality).

The creative trait can also be seen by the fact that philosophical existentiality, which is typologically relevant, obtains its positive determination inasmuch as it divests every concrete-factually-historically motivated determination in the operative determination of its attributes, until in the end only existence as such remains. *Existenz* in this sense is a reductive dissociation of subjectivity from any concrete determination; it is at any rate a product of divesting any other determination of man. For instance, the person who is confronted with the tax office can hardly be analyzed existentially in a philosophical sense.

The situation is entirely different with regard to the philosophical assignment of meaning. It is the opposite of an empty existentiality, as the former is richly determined with regard to contents.

The attributes of a human being are set aside when faced with the existential question, in contrast, in the case of assignment of meaning they ought to be taken up together with the attributes of the concrete meaning.

The entanglement of these two approaches raises further questions.

This proximity of existentiality and assignment of meaning provides on this basis the philosophically interpreted *Existenz* with new characteristics. For example, it becomes unavoidable that due to this proximity (for assigning meaning), philosophical existentiality can no longer uphold entirely unaltered its methodological and systematic indeterminacy. The assignment of meaning influences existentiality also in another tacit way, even if for this reason the original determination does not necessarily change. This means that this *Existenz* (in close proximity to the assignment of meaning) is increasingly shaped in content by way of our destiny, our knowledge, our experiences, and our thinking. This may well be a characteristic that makes it so difficult to find an adequate typological place for Jaspers' thinking.

It is an idiosyncratic, organized, and hierarchical unity of these three major philosophical realms (*Existenz*, assignment of meaning, scientificity) that defines Jaspers' philosophy in increasing complexity.

⁴ Endre Kiss, "Karl Jaspers' Auslegung Nietzsches als eines Metaphysikers der Immanenz," in *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy on the Way to "World Philosophy,"* eds. Leonard H. Ehrlich and Richard Wisser, Würzburg, GER: Königshausen & Neumann 1998, pp. 155-66.