



Comments on the Translation of Karl Jaspers' Introduction to *The Great Philosophers*

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Abstract: This translation of Karl Jaspers' *Introduction to The Great Philosophers* closely follows the German original and skillfully upholds Jaspers' complexity of expression. The text elucidates how Jaspers was coming to terms with the German and European experience during the times of war, dictatorships, and nihilism, while remaining faithful to values in German culture and philosophy as well as to his own philosophy. By making this translation available to a broader readership, the value of recognizing and appreciating individual greatness is treated in the context of Jaspers' philosophy to remind readers of the necessity not to confuse greatness with fanaticism.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Burch, Ruth A.; Hild, Florian; Wautischer, Helmut; *The Great Philosophers* English translation; *Die grossen Philosophen* English translation; greatness; freedom; nihilism.

Fifty-five years after the launch of Karl Jaspers' work *The Great Philosophers* in the United States,¹ Ruth Burch, Florian Hild, and Helmut Wautischer present the first complete English translation of Jaspers' extensive introduction that has been omitted from that edition.² One can understand the editor Hannah Arendt and the publisher who in the late 1950s were reluctant to include it in a book that aimed to reach a new audience in the United States. Not only gives Jaspers his criteria for identifying philosophers and including them into the historical canon, but he also assesses what it takes

to be a great person and a great philosopher, and he reflects on themes from his previous and contemporary writings. Comprising all of this makes the *Introduction* a very dense piece of scholarly work.

It is worth recalling that Jaspers is writing in the 1950s. This means that he develops his arguments for the existence of greatness and he claims the possibility to define it in the aftermath of a period marked by totalitarian ideologies in Germany, Italy, and elsewhere that stressed the role of a leader. Jaspers is an explicit defender of democratic ideals, yet simultaneously he also proclaims the existence of great individuals in history. Unsurprisingly, he puts great effort into exploring what true greatness is, as well as into delineating its limits. In short, totalitarian leaders are excluded from Jaspers' great men; this underlines the fact that choosing a great philosopher to be one's companion is not the same as subscribing to a charismatic political leader or to a

¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962.

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

dictatorship. Nevertheless, this does not exclude states men from the circle of the great ones; Jaspers counts both Marcus Aurelius and Frederic the Great to the great philosophers. The point is: "Revering the great includes regard for each individual. He who has regard for fellow men is also capable of seeing personified greatness" (*IGP* 15) in the contemporary world.

One conclusion of Jaspers' exposition on greatness regards how we read and learn from great philosophers, which is not something that is easily done. For instance, Jaspers emphasizes that one needs to stay critical toward them, which means developing the ability to establish a distance and to evaluate them from an outsider-perspective. In stressing this, he adds that one ought not to fall into the trap of mystification, intoxication, fanaticism, or nihilism. Nihilism is undoubtedly an important notion for Jaspers who in his *Psychologie der Weltanschauung* identifies it already in 1919 as an essential feature of being human.³ Raymond Langley argues that in general for Jaspers the antidote to overcome nihilism is to be found in philosophical faith.⁴ However, in *IGP* nihilism is portrayed in a political context, much like its use during the war (for example by the philosopher Karl Löwith) or in the aftermath of the explosions of the atomic bombs (for example by the novelist Stephen Spender), where the destructive forces of fanaticism and warfare for mankind are being emphasized, as well as the great dangers when blindly following a leader. At the same time, a trait of seduction is to be found in Jaspers' descriptions of the exchanges with the great ones. From the great ones comes strength to improve and even realize one's self, to provide guidance into freedom and to safeguard from nihilism: "Only with the presence of the great comes a guarantee against nothingness. Beholding them brings in itself incomparable satisfaction" (*IGP* 15). Jaspers is balancing on the sword's edge. He finds high rewards in the interaction with great philosophers and asks the readers to accept their status without engaging in a defense of totalitarian leaderships. Like much of his postwar writings, this is a politically infused text.

In Jaspers' selection of great ones, German philosophers are the most frequent ones being mentioned. Also included are a few French and British

philosophers, and some are from the classical period. Despite the fact that all of them are white and male, one can recognize Jaspers' ambition to transcend Eurocentricism by adding a few thinkers from China and India. In accordance with his broad definition of philosophy that goes beyond the boundaries of academic disciplines, amongst the great philosophers he also includes poets, for example Johann W. von Goethe and Fyodor Dostoevsky, natural scientists such as Albert Einstein, and a few historians such as Jacob Burckhardt. Alexis de Tocqueville is mentioned together with a few political theorists, and Heinrich Heine is one of his examples from the field of literary criticism. Indeed, Jaspers covers a large intellectual realm. An evaluation of his complete work shows that while it has much resemblance with the canon one can expect from a representative of German intellectual life of the first half of the twentieth century, nonetheless Jaspers demonstrates in it the ambition to bring in thinkers from the Chinese and Indian tradition, and throughout the discussion of his choices of great individuals he takes a stand against authoritarian ways of thinking by attaching himself to a tradition of *Bildung* that is putting trust in each individual's creative potentials. Thus, he explains that the enduring philosophical books speak to the reader and that these books set in motion "the inherent capacity of each human being to think originally" (*IGP* 29).

One can understand this approach as a plea for the idea of an original individual that Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill presented in the nineteenth century, or José Ortega y Gasset in the Interbellum years. On a similar note, one can interpret Jaspers' plea as a way to treat the emerging electrifying conjoining of belief in the individual with democratic ideals. Even so, Jaspers rejects the claim that all individuals are the same and he stresses the importance of recognizing the greatness of the few. Still, there are obvious limitations to such a comparison. While these aforementioned philosophers want to explain the progress of society by focusing on extraordinary individuals, Jaspers is focusing on the development of the individual. Therefore, Jaspers is more radical by underlining the prominence of the great ones, by claiming that we find those in history who transcend their individual lives and acquire a mode of thinking that is trans-historical. They are important not only whilst living and writing, they continue to be present also once they have died. Continuously, subsequent generations turn to them as searchers of truth in reality.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag 1971, pp. 285-304.

⁴ Raymond Langley, "Affinities Between William James and Karl Jaspers," *Existenz* 6/2 (Fall 2011), 1-10, here p. 4.

The translators successfully rendered the high concentration of ideas in Jaspers' *Einleitung* where the philosopher recalls themes from his earlier writings. I have already touched upon his critique of nihilism and upon his claim that individual growth comes from having freedom. The importance of philosophy in comparison with other disciplines is another one of his familiar themes that appears when he addresses the limits of psychology and the social sciences, or when he emphasizes that philosophical reading is more than mere historical understanding. At the time of writing the *Einleitung*, Jaspers was greatly concerned with critiquing scientific approaches as a pathway to comprehend the realm of being. For example, in his book on the atomic bomb, the responsibility of scientists with respect to the results they have accomplished is treated as being a significant issue.⁵ The conviction that philosophical insights and achievements transcend both historical studies and the natural sciences is a reoccurring theme in the *Einleitung* to *The Great Philosophers*.

Reading this text today and considering its theme of greatness, the question arises whether this text is still relevant for current scholarship? The goal of the *Introduction* is to convince its readers of its importance and to elevate the status of philosophy. Jaspers eloquently shares his vast experience of reading philosophers and presents a manifold assessment of greatness. On a personal level, it is neither the general presentation of the book nor the problem of defining greatness that intrigues me. However, I admit to find myself being seduced by passages that stand out, such as this one:

The handling of the dead ones is the source of the truth of our own being, so as to not lose what already has been clearly grasped, do not fall for phantasmagoria that are long since seen through,—so as to not impoverish us by letting those powers subside which are contending within time for a human being and lead to his highest possible potentialities,—so as to fulfill

our responsibility toward the great ones by giving renewed voice to them to the best of our ability,—so as to realize ourselves in the bright space of already formed thoughts, and to educate us by acquiring knowledge of history. [IGP 28]

This passage is beautifully rendered, as it conveys Jaspers' nuanced modes of expression. We find ourselves through reading great thinkers who have died long ago, they help us to identify the best of human thinking, and through them we can find guidance. They can help us keep to truths that withstand falseness. We may appropriate insights obtained by them, which means by implication that we should not only look toward the future or think that the ideas of our own time are always new or better, as much has already been accomplished in the past.

This *Introduction* does not resemble Jaspers' public lectures; instead, its complexity amounts to his academic writings. It is definitely a challenging task to render original texts by Jaspers into English, a fact that is well known to readers of Jaspers. A translator will have to make a myriad of subtle decisions regarding concepts or sentences of high complexity. For example, let us consider the use of "handling" from the quote above. Jaspers has used in German the word *Umgang*, which apart from "handling" could also be translated as "treatment," "interaction," or "dealing." Considering that Jaspers wants us to read philosophers of the past with a critical eye and not merely passively adopt their thinking without reflecting on it, "handling" denotes in a better way his quest for a productive and dynamic reading of his text that includes the making of critical judgments. Throughout the text, the translators successfully follow the German original, thereby preserving Jaspers' own presentation to the greatest extent possible. This is a most adequate choice that brings the reader close to the philosopher's thoughts.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963.