



## Sixteen Perspectives on Karl Jaspers' Orientative Knowledge

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**Abstract:** The essay addresses a significant omission found in Jaspers scholarship, namely the recognition of the importance of Jaspers' seminal work on logic in the context of philosophical anthropology that has the power to provide conceptual frameworks for addressing social and psychological challenges in modern societies. Sixteen different thematic approaches are introduced to place Jaspers' logic into a contemporary setting.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; Kant, Immanuel; logic; *Existenz*; ontology; philosophical anthropology.

In an unpublished text from 1942 entitled "The Order of Reality," Werner Heisenberg states four levels of reality where human practice unfolds.<sup>1</sup> This largely echoes the anthropological section of Karl Jaspers' philosophical logic, which the latter prepared at about the same time. Jaspers, in turn, was familiar solely with Heisenberg's "Recent Changes in the Foundation of Exact Science," whose second edition was published in 1936.<sup>2</sup>

According to Heisenberg, the human condition is marked by its integration into a set of higher orders, where conscious awareness has its assigned place. So awareness is nothing more than the next stage based on organic reality. Beyond that, there exist gateways leading from the area of mere awareness to the space of mental correlations. These include, above all, symbols

and aesthetic configurations. Only on the level of the mind, Heisenberg continues, it is possible to adequately grasp the totality of symbolic communication, science and art (such as language, scripture, gesture, symbolic code, and the law). The highest layer of reality, he concludes, is accessible only through allegories of the creative and religious faculties of humankind. Just as in quantum theory, here everything depends on the extent to which the observer alters the observed by way of his intervention.

This work relates to Jaspers' anthropology not only at a level of "complementary aspects." Heisenberg's aim was to prepare the intellectual foundations for the reconstruction of Germany following its expected defeat. Nevertheless, after 1945 he had left this work unpublished.

It had fallen into oblivion just like Jaspers' overall concept of logic,<sup>3</sup> which for a long time received hardly any attention. Yet he was sure that his logic contained the *clavis clavium* (master key) to a new, differentiated

<sup>1</sup> An earlier German language version of this essay is in Albrecht Kiel, *Jaspers, Jung und Jünger – Drei Lebenswege ins Wunderland der Metaphysik*, Nordhausen, DE: Bautz-Verlag 2015, pp. 169-73. [Henceforth cited as *JJJ*]

<sup>2</sup> See Albrecht Kiel, *Von der Geschichte der Logik und der Logik der Geschichte – Historische, soziale und philosophische Logik*, Würzburg, DE: Ergon-Verlag 1998, pp. 271-5. [Henceforth cited as *GL*]

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Nachlass zur Philosophischen Logik*, eds. Hans Saner and Marc Hänggi, München, DE: Piper & Co. KG, 1991. [Henceforth cited as *NPL*]

idea of humankind that would enable philosophy to leave all enchanting ideology behind. There are sixteen reasons that may explain such enthusiasm.

(1) The most important one is that he was the first philosopher who attempted to substantiate Immanuel Kant's general definition of philosophical orientative knowledge with a comprehensively systematic representation of specific developments within the Post-Kantian history of ideas. The key structural concept traces back to Kant who used this originally geographical metaphor for the first time in an essay from 1786 with the title, *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientieren?*<sup>4</sup>

Kant posits that, analogously to mathematical and geographical orientation, there must be an orientative logic also in philosophical thought, where

taking leave of known objects (of experience), it seeks to extend its sphere beyond the frontiers of experience and no longer encounters any objects of intuition whatsoever, but merely a space for the latter to operate in. It will then no longer be in a position, in determining its own faculty of judgment, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only with the help of a subjective distinction. [OT 239-40]

Thus, already in Kant, there is a distinction between objects and the spaces beyond them, that is, between an object-oriented and subject-oriented focus of the reality levels created by cognitive activity.

Kant further argues, "To orientate oneself in thought means to be guided, in one's conviction of truth, by a subjective principle of reason where objective principles of reason are inadequate" (OT 240).

In modern theory jargon one might say, that a perspective on the world focused on the truth of objects additionally raises the question, to what extent such perspective is a subjective requirement in the human quest for meaning. In other words, the truth of objects needs to be complemented by the truth of meanings.

Heisenberg, too, centered his essay around Kant's fundamental idea of a distinction between object-orientation and subject-orientation in cognitive activity. Hence, philosophical orientation results in an expanded coherence of meaning, whereby it remains to be defined at which point thought leaves the realm

of objective scientific universality. This is to say, that all reasoning is about delimiting the boundary between philosophy and science. Philosophical logic attains the quality of orientative knowledge when there is an adequate differentiation between the various levels of reality of the psychic functions in human practice. These are common to all cultures.

In contrast to the ancient world, modern European history identified in the concept of the nature of human beings multiple critical abysses that had traumatic impacts on one's awareness of the self. Prior to that shift, Kant had attempted to establish a new ethics and metaphysics with a view to a belief in rationality, which was to be based on his epistemological view on theoretical and practical reason, and the faculty of judgment. Within the contexts of their respective epochs of enlightenment, one may interpret Kant's philosophy, as well as Plato's, as culminating in the endeavor to challenge the sophistic and rationalistic excesses of their respective times.

In the nineteenth century, however, the dynamic of disintegration was incomparably stronger than in ancient times, producing the most divergent concepts of human nature. All of a sudden, individual psychic categories rose to become governing fundamental categories. For Kant, the mind used to play a minor role in terms of a particular gift (genius). In German idealism, the mind metamorphosed into the subjective, objective, and absolute *Geist* and was thereby signifying anything within the realm of the soul.

The idealists, though, were soon to face hostile opposition from positivism with its orientation towards a rationalistic, scientific, and materialistic worldview. This environment provided fertile grounds for theories that gave priority to other psychic faculties: the will to power (social Darwinism), desire (the libido in psychoanalysis), or political economy and its material interestedness within the context of class and production relations (Marxism).

These differences, however, were bypassed by a much wider one: the philosophy of Existenz and life. For Søren Kierkegaard, *Existenz* as religious strife went far beyond the morality and ethical substance propounded by Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, and, as such, was graspable only by categories of its own. In Friedrich Nietzsche's writings, this idea is represented in the shape of the creative will to life. The result was a seemingly irreconcilable confrontation between a "violent Christianity" entangled in categories of guilt and repentance, and a "violent anti-Christianity"

<sup>4</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What is Orientation in Thinking?" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans S. Reiss, transl. H. Barry Nisbet, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 2002, pp. 237-49. [Henceforth cited as OT]

invoking a Neopagan, non-transcendental "innocence of becoming" (with a requirement for pure immanence).

Jaspers, however, was convinced that even such opposites may converge as otherwise they appear to burst all limits of ancient and modern tradition: The sincerity of an unconditional will to truth, and the concept of knowledge as a mere interpretation of reality (and, again, the interpretation of an interpretation) inspired both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard in a similar way to reject naive forms of a scientific worldview. They were both preoccupied with a hypertrophic awareness of crisis against the background of increasingly nihilistic trends of their time. The similarities reach as far as to the contours of their biographies: Polemics against contemporary authorities, solitude, an early death and a high self-esteem as diagnosticians of cultural crisis.

For Jaspers it was important to make a precise comparison of the work of these thinkers before starting to map his *Logic*.<sup>5</sup> His challenge consisted in harmonizing the extreme differences between the various concepts of the nature of human beings in their contexts, to add this content to Kant's abstractly true definition of orientative knowledge, and thus to regain a reasonable contemporary self-awareness—grounded on a new layer of mind, and standing in contrast to the theories of Marxism, social Darwinism, and psychoanalysis that had emerged in the context of the prevalent scientific positivism.

Generally speaking, among philosophical abstractions quite a few are ambiguous and therefore useless in terms of their applicability to popular knowledge. This is illustrated by a number of momentous examples:

- \* the blanket term of "soul," which in the writings of Hegel and Nietzsche is still in use to denote the totality of psychic functions (*NPL* 73ff);
- \* in the same vein: "the mind as the antagonist of the soul" as used in Ludwig Klages;
- \* the "nihilism of weakness" (decadence, degeneracy, ethics of compassion), "nihilism of strength" (creative destruction) identified by Nietzsche, concepts which are presented without any accountability for concrete psychic dysfunctions, such as greed, hate or religious

hysteria, and the corresponding anti-social behaviors such as corruption, organized crime, unregulated finance, or totalitarian theocracies—in other words: of the rapid decay of a society (Jacob Burckhardt);

- \* by the same token: Ernst Jünger's dead-end reflections about "The Age of Nihilism" as being a necessary phase of transition;
- \* Martin Heidegger's "tale" about the "being" of the existing, brought forward with the depreciative comment that "until now, all metaphysics has signified the obliviousness towards the being";<sup>6</sup>
- \* Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which resulted in a vacuous anthropology determined by fear and disgust (*JJJ* 63, 194f);
- \* last, but not least, Jürgen Habermas with his throwing together of a "cognitive-instrumental," "moral-practical" (normative) and "aesthetic-practical rationality" into a single category of "Rationality," with the result that, within a one-dimensional theory of discourse, different stages of communication are perceived either as a rational or as an irrational discourse.<sup>7</sup>

In the absence of a viable orientative knowledge, philosophical abstraction tends to generate discourses of disorientation with a lot of empty rhetoric. Current examples of that sort of pseudo-orientation are notions such as "Postmodernism" or the "New Order" of the 1989 Germany reunification; even more recent ones include florid descriptions of the revolutions in the overpopulated countries of the Near East as "Arab Spring" or as "Democracy Movement."

Carl Gustav Jung's strong point was in the way he handled the therapeutic theme regarding how human obsession with archetypes, masks, and the shady sides of humankind concretely determines the dialectics of the preconscious and the conscious. He assails the reader with an overabundance of historical material and thus contributes a lot to philosophical anthropology. Against this backdrop, Jaspers' passages on the (preconscious) *Dasein* seem strangely abstract.

The larger the scope of historical knowledge about our ancestors' tale of woe, the more menacingly human history seems to shadow the present and the future

<sup>5</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vernunft und Existenz*, München, DE: Piper Verlag 1987, pp. 8-32. See also Albrecht Kiel, *Das Menschenbild von Karl Jaspers und C. G. Jung – In neuer Vermittlung. Eine differenzierte Anthropologie der leibseelischen Potentiale*, Münster, DE: LIT Verlag 2012, pp. 7ff. [Henceforth cited as *MJJ*]

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, DE: Martin Niemeyer Verlag 1984, pp. 2, 8, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Albrecht Kiel, *Die Sprachphilosophie von Karl Jaspers: Anthropologische Dimensionen der Kommunikation*, Darmstadt, DE: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2008, p. 208. [Henceforth cited as *ADK*]

of the rapidly growing humankind. Against such a backdrop, philosophical orientation is prone to lose its virtue, unless it devotes itself to a concrete recognition of psychic structural elements and functions, and psychotherapy turns blind (and methodically aimless, arbitrary, and interminable), unless backed up by formative philosophical orientative knowledge. For it is a fact that any human activity, medical work in particular, proceeds in an environment of immeasurable suffering and the related blaming allegations.

Hence the contemporary anthropologist remains indebted to a tenet propounded by Paracelsus: "Where the physician leaves the room, the philosopher should come in...hence the philosopher emerges from the physician—not the physician from the philosopher."<sup>8</sup> For a philosophy proper, the single resource of orientative knowledge exists in social practice. Philosophical abstractions make sense only where they are satiated with expertise and vital themes.

Accordingly, self-awareness in the current layer of mentality must include the insight, that orientation that has been hitherto merely geographical—the mapping of the world—has become dynamic. Contemporary geography must account for the energetic forces in the demographic and the related ecological processes, namely, the centers of massive population growth that, despite high infant mortality, double in ever-shorter intervals—in contrast with the developed regions with vastly shrinking, over-aged populations; the destitute starving masses contrasted against the affluent regions with their financial centers and trillions of dollars circulating without any connection to the real economy; the collapsing ecological system in debt-ridden regions shaken by financial crisis, and confronted face-to-face with a land-grabbing financial industry; the still somewhat stable government systems contrasting with fragile or failed states; regions abounding in water or being arid, and regions with fertile temperate soil contrast with the ones afflicted by environmental disaster.

Such areas of conflict, on the one hand, determine the psychodynamics in individuals and collectives and, on the other hand, substantially depend on the ensemble of psychic functions, their balanced equilibrium, as well as on their failure. Today's population geography will need to focus on a reason-guided correlation of space, population density, and energy.

The subtitle to Jaspers' *Von der Wahrheit* is *Philosophische Logik*, for him this meant to be aware of the extremes of human behavior and to respond to them reasonably, in accordance with the motto: "You cannot talk to religious warriors, yet you should always try to do so!"

For an orientative knowledge that aspires to provide structure to the sciences and the humanities, this is the only way to capture, like in a prism, the totality of psychic phenomena and functions: from a preconscious vitality through complex mental functions up to existential decision-making in boundary situations. "Function" means to perform a task appropriately; dysfunction is given, when there is a failure to perform a task, or when it is perceived as being performed rudimentarily (for example, in an unscientific way) and therefore gets stunted or completely rejected.

The first and fundamental achievement of a logic perceived as holistic anthropology was, that it succeeded to include all of these functions. Other than the earlier system philosophies, ontologies, and *Existenz*-ontologies (Heidegger), Jaspers' logic established new differentiations for the various levels of reality of human activity. They are significant not only as formative basic knowledge in everyday's political or scientific work, but also as instruments in the philosophical criticism of belief systems, ideologies, and theory constructions in the human sciences. This is what intercultural communication should focus on, if it is not to be confined to an exchange of polite but empty phrases.

Distinguishing his holistic anthropology from the specialized, largely culturally oriented knowledge in methodology and the theories of categories and in science, Jaspers endowed it for his project of a world philosophy with intercultural significance. This project was based on his axial age theory he had published in 1949. According to this theory, the first millennium BCE saw a new layer of mentality that, with an intrinsic purpose to overcome magical thinking, was created autonomously in each of the then existing advanced civilizations in China, India, and the Eastern Mediterranean, and it remained powerful up to the present time (*MJJ* 173ff).<sup>9</sup>

(2) As a first special logic, Jaspers established, apart from his philosophical logic, a novel methodology that allowed distinguishing universal and particular

<sup>8</sup> Pirmin Meier, *Paracelsus: Arzt und Prophet*, Zürich, CH: Unionsverlag 2013, pp. 295ff, 386.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Zürich, CH: Piper Verlag 1988, pp. 76ff.



scientific methods from those of philosophy (NPL 285-372, GL 118-47).

(3) This logic formed the basis for a theory of science as a second special logic, which draws the line between the sciences proper with their particular topics, and the universal sciences, which continuously move toward and border on philosophy (NPL 373-90). These two special systems of logic are inseparably linked.

(4) Jaspers introduced into philosophy the notion of communication.<sup>10</sup> His philosophy of language, however, was only completed by means of a second special logic, namely, his own theory of categories. This logic deals with the relationship between language, thinking, and categories; the distinction of the universal categories of the object, particular categories of reality, and other categories encompassing the latter; as well as with the signa of the existential awareness of freedom (NPL 2-284, ADK 265ff). Altogether, this is a broad field of study for today's philosophy of language.

(5) The context of this philosophy of language generates a new type of semiotics that, for the first time in the history of philosophy, differentiates between words as definite or indefinite notions, signs with a rationally unambiguous content, multi-layered mental symbols, signa of *Existenz*, and ciphers of transcendence (ADK 202-37).<sup>11</sup>

(6) Another specific achievement of Jaspers' philosophical anthropology was, that it yielded a more precise determination of the, until then, imprecise notion of mind. This has primarily a practical significance for the theory of science—which is, the question how to delineate the boundaries between the natural sciences and the humanities. In his *Logik*, Jaspers confined the mind to its immanent functions, such as providing identity, allowing creativity, being the faculty of judgment or enthusiasm, and thus he freed it from all its magical and theological connotations.<sup>12</sup> While Jung struggled throughout his life with the problem of how

to clearly distinguish "mind" from "self," Jaspers, in his *Logik*, sought to put the mind back on its anthropological feet by setting it apart from the sphere of personal existential activity.

(7) Jaspers' broad idea of reason, which consists in overcoming the various differences between mental abilities, went far beyond Kant's (faculty of ideas) and Hegel's (dialectical reason) concepts of reason. Ultimately, it constitutes the "organ of equilibrium" for the divergent mental functions of humans. As such, it provides the only way to adequately deal with the core issues in Kant and Hegel: the contrast between rational understanding and all-encompassing reason.

(8) The project of philosophical belief builds on Kant's idea of a belief in reason intended to supersede the historical forms of belief in revelation and their specific concepts of god (deism, theism, pantheism, and panentheism) with their inherent potentials for conflict.<sup>13</sup> His intention here was to offer new opportunities for philosophers and theologians to discuss such ciphers of transcendence in a dialogue going beyond the exchange of politely distanced respect.

(9) The context of Jaspers' anthropology of psychic functions also includes a concept of vital social orders, which is set against unstable, randomly thrown together patchwork populations (aggregates) and, in this regard, appears to be an improvement against Kant's respective ideas (VW 672ff, 1086).<sup>14</sup> Social orders are distinguished by the fact, that they constitute themselves slowly and organically, by creatively resolving their inherent conflicts. Here, the reforms by the Athenian statesman Solon served as a guiding example for the Western world. Aggregate populations, in contrast, gathered incidentally or involuntarily, for example through the impact of imperial coercion or uncontrolled mass migration. Aggregate populations tended to be unstable and conflict-prone, which is why they had to depend on violent domination structures.

<sup>10</sup> First published in 1932, the relevance of this concept for Jaspers' Existenzphilosophie clearly comes to the fore when one pays attention to the related key word, "Kommunikation," in Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie Band III: Metaphysik*, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag 1973, p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit: Philosophische Logik: Erster Band*, München, DE: Piper & Co Verlag, 1947, pp. 108ff, 401ff, 1030ff. [Henceforth cited as VW]

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion about the five meanings of "mind" in the German language, see GL 310ff.

<sup>13</sup> These ideas are being addressed in Karl Jaspers, "Offener Horizont: Ein Gespräch mit Thilo Koch (1960)," in *Provokationen: Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Hans Saner, München, DE: Piper Verlag 1969, pp. 47-62. See also Karl Jaspers, *Der Philosophische Glaube*, München, DE: Piper Verlag, 1948.

<sup>14</sup> See also Albrecht Kiel, *Nihilismus und Weltstaat: Katastrophen, Krisen und Lebensordnungen im 21. Jahrhundert*, Nordhausen, DE: Verlag Traugott Bautz 2010, pp. 71ff, 108ff.

(10) It was only in organically developed societies, where spheres of freedom could grow step-by-step (ADK 98ff, 105-16). Analogous to this situation, the different stages of freedom become discernible only on the levels of reality of these spheres of freedom: from the irrational spontaneity of caprice, through rational decision-making which is prerequisite for rational planning, freedom of the mind to choose one's social identity, up to biographically relevant decisions with orientative significance for individuals and communities alike (VW 114f, 139f, 770f, 825, 950f; MJJ 105ff).

(11) The interplay between coincidence and reality within the diversity of psychic functions and on four reality-levels appears to be governed by five principles of causality: material and formal causes, moving and final cause determine the dynamics of nature; causality through freedom (Kant) or, respectively, one emerging from free spaces for human activity advance human history. This could be an appropriate approach to overcome the chasm between natural sciences and anthropology.<sup>15</sup>

(12) These stages of freedom connect with different types of ethics: naturalistic ethics aim at meeting the "requirements of life," positivistic ethics derive morality from communal life, idealistic ethics thinks in terms of identities with communities, existential ethics of strive, beyond them, seeks the personal way to the self (MJJ 196ff).

(13) This is also the basis for identifying a hierarchy of learning stages and the corresponding educational goals: obedience, exchange of rewards, conformity (in order to gain recognition instead of humiliation), takeover of duties, legality principle, adherence to the law, guidance for adopting principles culminating in the right to resist (MJJ 160ff).

(14) Also, when reflecting on the status of love in patriarchy or matriarchy, there is no harm in being able to distinguish between such different life themes as sex, gender (family structure), Eros (phantasy),

and love.<sup>16</sup>

(15) The antinomy between authority and exception bears significance not only in the histories of religion and philosophy, where, for instance, it is about evaluating prophets and exceptional figures such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but also in the social sciences.

(16) For Jaspers, the tragic is a particular stage of truth in poetry (in addition to the ones found in art and religion). He considered it to be a form of knowledge that discerns both the psychopathic tendencies in humans as well as the elemental political powers that are linked to the allurements of the masses. These different levels of reality offer a variety of interpretations (VW 915-59), which might serve as new topics in literary criticism.

Considering such an abundance of thematic approaches that are being addressed mainly to psychologists, scientific and philosophical anthropologists, social and humanities scholars (as of recently: cultural scientists), it is astonishing to see that this central work of Jaspers has not yet been drawn on regarding its profound contributions to these fields of study.

The sixteen reasons described above may suffice to provide an understanding for Jaspers' enthusiasm. Two work-and-livespheres "lent him wings": the quadripartite structure of his philosophical anthropology (*Dasein*, self-awareness, mind, and *Existenz*), and his equally quadripartite *Logik* (the logic of general anthropology, special theories of method, science, and categories).

The energizing language Jaspers employed in his works from 1935 onwards is comprehensible only against the background of these two sources of inspiration, for example in the passages where he talks about a "transcending method" or the "rise" of philosophical thinking. Readers unfamiliar with his *Logik* are likely to remain puzzled by this. His rhetoric was often criticized as being aloof or cloudy – above all by those colleagues, whom he had blamed for deviances or prevarications.

<sup>15</sup> Albrecht Kiel, *Fünf Kausalitätsformen zwischen Zufall und Wirklichkeit: Wege von den Naturwissenschaften zur Anthropologie*, Würzburg, DE: Ergon Verlag 2005, pp. 73ff.

<sup>16</sup> Albrecht Kiel, *Sexus, Genus, Eros, Liebe: Aspekte einer Familienanthropologie*, Würzburg, DE: Ergon-Verlag, 1994, pp. 50ff.