



Some Remarks on New Translations of Karl Jaspers' Works

Michael Steinmann

Stevens Institute of Technology

msteinma@stevens.edu

Abstract: This essay gives a critical analysis of the terminology used in a new translation of Karl Jaspers' Prefaces to both the German and American edition of *The Great Philosophers*, and of the terminology employed in the first complete translation of Jaspers' *Introduction to The Great Philosophers*.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Burch, Ruth A.; Hild, Florian; Wautischer, Helmut; *The Great Philosophers* English translation; *Die Grossen Philosophen* English translation; *Gestalt*; *Dasein*; *Geist*.

Jaspers' language may not be overly terminological or peculiar compared, for example, to Martin Heidegger's philosophical style. But there is often a terminological and conceptual heritage hidden in what may appear at first sight as plain language in Jaspers' works. In addition, his philosophical arguments often rely on modes of expression that are specifically offered by the German language. Translating Jaspers is therefore not always an easy task. In the following, I want to offer some remarks on Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer's translation of parts from Jaspers' *Great Philosophers*, namely of the two Prefaces to the German and American edition,¹ and of its introduction, by utilizing an early translation draft that was provided by Florian Hild.² Burch, Wautischer, and Hild (in the

following: BW and BWH) have succeeded in providing a precise and highly readable translation of the texts. One hopes that their work related to translating Jaspers continues in the future. My remarks are limited to the two main problems that seem to arise in the translation of Jaspers' works: first, the idiosyncrasies of the German language and the particular ways in which it allows for philosophical thoughts to be formed, and second, the traditional terminology that is present in Jaspers without being always designated in its provenance.

I

German makes it possible to express thoughts in condensed and appellative phrases, and Jaspers makes ample use of this. Especially prepositions and prefixes allow for such phrases. At times, they can be a little bombastic, or at least emphatic, manifesting a certain tending toward the transcendent. English is a more analytic language, and sometimes it cannot be avoided to cut a German idiom into several elements and to

¹ Karl Jaspers, "Preface to the American Edition," transl. Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 6-8. [Henceforth cited as *PA*]; and Karl Jaspers, "Preface to The Great Philosophers," transl. Ruth Burch and Helmut Wautischer, *Existenz* 12/1 (Spring 2017), 9-12. [Henceforth cited as *PGP*]

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*]

spell out what is meant. Often, however, something is lost when that is necessitated. A few examples may serve to illustrate this point.

In the first lines of the preface to the American edition, BW translate Jaspers' opening regarding the nature of philosophizing as: "This reality is the encounter with the great philosophers" (PA 6). Jaspers' original proposition is shorter: "Diese Wirklichkeit sind die grossen Philosophen."³ The weight of philosophy's true reality lies on the German verb, *sind*, and in the simplicity of the sentence, which does not mention an "encounter." The reader is simply made to face the philosophers. There is probably no way to let a plain English "is" carry the same weight, but does this mean that additional words should be introduced? Speaking of an encounter makes for a very elegant solution, but it also seems to miss the tone of Jaspers' opening lines. As an alternative, one could double the subject of the sentence, saying, for example: "This reality, it is the great philosophers." Be this as it may: some additional qualification, it seems, is inevitable in the transition from German to English, and it is the choice of the translator to decide which one works best.

Another example shows the meaning condensed in prepositions. BW's translation reads: "True philosophy, however, is by virtue of being tied to science more than science" (PA 7). A different meaning is rendered by the first translator, Ralph Manheim: "True philosophy is bound by and yet transcends science."⁴ Which one is the true one? Mannheim indicates a counter-tendency ("yet") that is absent in BW's version. Jaspers' original is again deceptively simple. He says: "Wahre Philosophie aber ist in der Bindung an Wissenschaft mehr als Wissenschaft."⁵ Again, the formulation is condensed and in the original there is an emphasis on the German word *in*, which is hard to grasp as a preposition. In this context, *in* means both "by virtue of" and "yet." I would suggest that it also could be translated as "while" or even "despite." In some way or other, it seems necessary to capture in this phrase the tension that lies in the double mentioning of science: philosophy is indebted to it and

at the same time has to transcend science. One can see the heritage of German idealism in this formulation, a certain dialectical relation that recognizes philosophy's limitation by and dependency on science and at the same time states its negation, the tendency of the spirit to develop further and achieve a higher degree of freedom.

I shall provide one more example of this kind. In BW's rendition one can read: "Philosophical objectivity emerges by way of a subjectivity that internally refines itself" (PGP 11). Here, it seems that more would need to be said in order to capture the original meaning. Jaspers, I believe, articulates here a thought that follows the correlationist approach of German idealism: objectivity and subjectivity depend on each other and can only become clear through a mutual relation: "Vielmehr kann die philosophische Objektivität nur durch eine in ihr sich klärende Subjektivität rein herauskommen" (GP 12). Arguably there is no easy way to express this correlation. In English, the phrase seems to say the following: "Objectivity emerges purely only by way of a subjectivity who finds clarity about itself through it," which would also account for two crucial words ("only" and "purely") in the original. Admittedly, this way the translation does not sound more fluent either. In the same sense, the translation "original thoughts" in the *Introduction* (IGP 22) could be expanded to capture the important aspect in the original German, the "zu sich selber zu bringen vermögen" (GP 47), which refers to ways in which the subject finds itself. "Coming into one's own" would be a viable alternative, one could argue.

II

Each translation makes decisions regarding basic philosophical terms. A few choices shall be discussed here, not because the choices that BW made would be wrong but because it seems important to show a range of alternatives that exists in each case.

The great ones, we can read, "want to help justifying our existence" (PGP 10). The original has *begründen* (GP 9), which indicates a different relation toward existence, the laying of a foundation or a ground. "Justifying" introduces a moral dimension, while Jaspers believes that the encounter with the great philosophers will "awaken" individual readers, a term aptly chosen in the translation (PGP 10).

The German term *Gestalt* is no doubt difficult if not impossible to render in English. BW translate it

³ Cited from the typewritten original manuscript, Basel 1960, p. 1.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers. The Foundations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Karl Manheim. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, p. xii. [Henceforth cited as *GPF*]

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Die Großen Philosophen. Erster Band*, München, DE: Piper 1957, p. 38. [Henceforth cited as *GP*]

appropriately as "figure" (*PGP* 10). In one passage, however, they do not use it, which changes the meaning of the text. In the translation, Jaspers states that we can find the essence of philosophy as it "shows authentic reality only through the philosopher as a person" (*PGP* 10). The original talks about "in persönlicher Gestalt" (*GP* 9). The meaning of the translation is close, and perhaps no clear distinction between the alternative terms can be made. But one could argue that it is not the philosopher as an individual person who concerns us but a person who is simultaneously an intellectual and an existential *Gestalt*, a figure. The choice of words depends entirely on the interpretation of the text, and since the passage of the text does address the philosopher as a person, the translators' choice is equally warranted.

In the same way, one has to make a conceptual decision with respect to the metaphysical language in Jaspers. The various ways in which great philosophers can be approached remain but moments within, as BW translate, an "unbound whole" (*PGP* 10). The German has the formulation seemingly the other way around and refers to an "im ganzen Offenen oder Umgreifenden", to something that in its wholeness is open (*GP* 9). The original phrase is not entirely clear and becomes only explicable through the following reference to the encompassing. But if that which is open here is the encompassing, can it be a whole? This dilemma is explicitly discussed by Gerhard Knauss.⁶ In which way can the encompassing be a whole if it transcends radically those who are approaching it? Again, the translation follows a decision about the meaning of metaphysical concepts in the text. Analogously, one can discuss BWH's translation of *die totale Geschichtlichkeit der Wirklichkeit* (*GP* 52) with "the entire historicity of reality" (*IGP* 25). It seems that as quality, historicity cannot be entire but only total, which would mean that Jaspers' term could have been transferred directly into English. But this also implies an interpretive decision in the first place.

Another important translators' decision concerns traditional terminology. BW translate "reason can take each step only with the assistance of the intellect" (*PA* 7), in a passage that evokes the Kantian distinction of *Vernunft* and *Verstand*. While "intellect" is a fitting term, it seems that the more common term to render Kant's notion of *Verstand*, with "understanding," would

have been more appropriate because it would have shown the connection to the philosophical tradition. The present translation improves on Manheim's older one, though, which introduces, arbitrarily and wrongly, the term of "scientific thinking" (*GPF* xii). The choice of "intellect" is perhaps motivated by the attempt to distinguish Kant's *Verstand* from the hermeneutic act of understanding (*verstehen*). BWH use "understanding" in reference to the task of interpreting texts (*IGP* 28, *GP* 59). Still, the heritage of the Kantian terminology in Jaspers seems important enough to allow for the double meaning of "understanding," which could be addressed in the specific contexts in which the term occurs, although one can share the translators' desire to avoid any ambiguity that may arise.

Evidently, the decisions that translators make often have to remain controversial. One could, however, say that no terms should be used that introduce aspects of meaning which are foreign to the context in which they appear. In this sense, the introduction of the German term *Dasein*, which is used throughout the translation several times in German, needs further discussion. BWH have: "The realities of *Dasein*, of life conduct, of the surroundings, of the deeds and character of the philosopher become of interest" (*IGP* 29). The term is in fact used in the original German (*GP* 60), but only seems to denote the general conditions of existence, or of everyday existence, without any deeper philosophical meaning. One could argue that in English-speaking texts, the use of the German *Dasein* is limited to analyses of Heidegger's work. Heidegger understands *Dasein* terminologically, as *Da-sein*, which makes for a very specific, terminological use that scholars often prefer not to translate (although "being-there" is an acceptable translation). It seems therefore problematic to evoke a Heideggerian meaning in the translation of Jaspers. This is even more so when the word *Dasein* is not present in the original text (*IGP* 29, *GP* 60). Jaspers' term in the original passage is slightly archaic, *Menschentum*, but it could have been translated as "humankind" or "humanity" without the need for adding a foreign-language term to the text, although it must be noted that in the overall context of this passage, Jaspers discusses *Dasein* in reference to the great philosophers whose thinking is embedded in their personality and life. The translation of *Dasein* with "being there" (without hyphen) would have been possible in other passages, too (*IGP* 39, *GP* 80), yet one could argue that this choice could result in equally justified objections.

⁶ Gerhard G. Knauss, "The Subject-Object Division in Jaspers, Schopenhauer, and Nishida," *Existenz* 13/1 (2018), 12-18.

Finally, the German text poses the major problem of *Geist*, whose equivalent in English, "spirit," often carries a religious connotation. BWH have chosen several convincing solutions to avoid "spirit." On one page, several uses of the term *Geist* can be found: *Geist* becomes "mentality in the works" of humans, "mind" in comparison to selfhood (GP 79; IGP 38), and even vanishes entirely when "disposition of indecisiveness" is used to render the *Unentschiedenheit des bloßen Geistes* (GP 80, IGP 38). The translators also should be praised for having found "breadth of the realm of personal intellects" for the difficult German phrase *Weite des persönlichen Geistesreichs* (IGP 25, GP 53). In fact, the most convincing translation for *Geist* is usually "intellect" (see also IGP 34, GP 71). It may not be the most ideal solution, though, if one assumes that *Geist* echoes Hegel's use of the term, which can still be found in Nietzsche. One could ask whether it would be better to keep the term "spirit" in order to mark the connection to the philosophical tradition. On the other hand, it is unclear whether the text always carries a reference to Hegel, and if that is the case, then "intellect" seems to provide a good working term.

III

One last remark relates to what can perhaps be said of all translations: the inevitable loss of the graphic and descriptive quality of words in their translation.

The Preface to the German edition starts by Jaspers' lamenting the "neglect of philosophy" in the last half century (PGP 9). The German has a stronger term, *Verwahrlosung*, which can evoke even more than neglect, namely ruin, the getting into a bad state, and decay (GP 7). Some of the cultural critique that can be sensed in this idiomatic term was impossible to retain, it seems. In the following passage, Jaspers describes the human situatedness within history as a condition that humans are unable to see as a whole. Yet, they have to "enter" into it and provide an "interpretation" (PGP 10). Jaspers uses a more descriptive term, *Eindringen*, which suggests more of an adventurous advancing and penetrating into difficult environments (GP 8-9) than a mere entering.

Each translation is perhaps such a risky advancing, not just a peaceful entering into the foreign language of the text. Jaspers is aware that there are always several possible ways in which we can forage for the ungraspable immensity of history, in the same way in which a translation is always just one attempt among many possible ones. Each translation is precarious but at the same time praiseworthy as the terrain would not get discovered unless someone ventures into it. The translators have taken on the enormous task of providing the English-speaking reader with a newer and more precise rendition of Jaspers' works. The beginning is quite promising and one has to wish them well for the journey that lies ahead.