



## Jaspers on the Question of Free Will

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**Abstract:** This essay offers a novel interpretation of Karl Jaspers' philosophy of freedom. Central to this interpretation is the claim that Jaspers' account of freedom has three main motivations (phenomenological, existential, and therapeutic), which lead Jaspers to identify and articulate two distinct but closely related concepts of freedom: existential freedom and authentic freedom. In addition to defining these two concepts of freedom, this essay explores how these concepts are related to the traditional notion of free will (the ability to do otherwise) and how they fit into the contemporary analytic debate over the compatibility of free will and determinism.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; freedom; existential freedom; authentic freedom; free will; authenticity; phenomenology; existentialism; determinism; compatibilism; incompatibilism; analytic philosophy.

Karl Jaspers' philosophy of freedom has received little attention in recent years despite the fact that it plays such a central role in his philosophy as a whole. Moreover, what little attention it has received has failed to connect it to mainstream discussions of free will, whose participants are almost all—for better or for worse—analytic philosophers. This essay attempts to remedy these two shortcomings. In what follows, I offer a novel interpretation of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom and show how it is connected to the contemporary analytic debate over the compatibility of free will and determinism. My goal is to pique an interest in this central component of Jaspers' philosophy, both among Jaspers scholars who have recently ignored it, and among analytic philosophers who are open to novel approaches to the timeworn topic of free will.

### The Basics

This essay focuses on Jaspers' philosophy of freedom as it is articulated in Volume 2 of his three-volume

work *Philosophy*.<sup>1</sup> Jaspers may have held substantially different views about freedom either before or after this time, but such possible developments and discontinuities will not be addressed in this essay. What follows is simply a snapshot of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom circa 1932, and all further references to his philosophy of freedom should be understood with this restriction in mind.

Jaspers discusses freedom in Part Two ("Self-being as Freedom") of Book Two ("Existential Elucidation"). Part Two comprises two sections, titled "Will" (P2 133-53) and "Freedom" (P2 154-74). Within these, the most relevant portions for the purpose of this essay are "The Question of Free Will" (P2 145-50) and "Elucidating Existential Freedom" (P2 155-63). The following discussion will focus almost entirely on these two sub-sections.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970. [Henceforth cited as P2]

A central and fundamental idea in Jaspers' philosophy of freedom is that there are different kinds of freedom. Most of these are what Jaspers calls "objective," and he provides three examples of them: (1) the Scholastic *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae* (liberty of indifference), which is acting without a cause (P2 145); (2) psychological freedom, which is acting without outside disturbances (P2 146); and (3) sociological freedom, which comprises personal, civil, and political liberties (P2 147). Jaspers does not deny that these kinds of freedom exist, but he does say that they are not kinds in which he is ultimately interested. The kind of freedom that he cares about is not objective and cannot be objectified. He calls this *existentielle Freiheit* (existential freedom).<sup>2</sup>

Existential freedom—the kind of freedom that Jaspers cares about—is logically independent of the objective kinds. In other words, the existence of the objective kinds of freedom has no bearing whatsoever on the existence of existential freedom: showing that the "liberty of indifference" is incoherent would not undermine the latter's existence, and neither would its existence be supported by giving proof of the existence of either psychological or sociological freedom. In fact, Jaspers says that existential freedom cannot be refuted by philosophical arguments—including arguments based on determinism (P2 150). By the same token, existential freedom cannot be proven by philosophical arguments, either. Existential freedom is "neither demonstrable nor refutable" (P2 150). And yet, despite all that, according to Jaspers, the existence of existential freedom is certain (P2 149, 162).

According to Jaspers, existential freedom involves various elements, which he identifies as knowledge (*Wissen*), arbitrary act (*Willkür*), law (*Gesetz*), idea (*Idee*), and choice (*Wahl*). To be sure, these elements are not to be identified with what these terms denote in their everyday usage. Rather, they are unfamiliar elements the contents of which are provided by Jaspers' descriptions of them.

I have said that existential freedom "involves" these elements, but what does that mean? How, exactly, is existential freedom related to knowledge, arbitrary act, and so on? Sometimes Jaspers treats these as conditions of existential freedom (P2 162); at other times he treats them as parts (*Momente*) of it (P2 158).<sup>3</sup> Either way, these

items seem to be individually necessary and jointly sufficient for existential freedom. To keep things simple, I shall hereafter refer to these items as "elements" of existential freedom and the latter as the "sum total" of the former. However, nothing I say hereafter requires taking this mereological language literally.

One more detail I want to mention before wading into less certain waters is this: existential freedom, according to Jaspers, is in some sense unknowable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible (P2 162). Jaspers is unequivocal on this point. However, it does not follow from this that the main purpose of this essay—namely, to provide a clear and coherent interpretation of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom—is doomed from the start. Whatever he has in mind when he says that existential freedom is unknowable, Jaspers cannot mean that it is completely ineffable. After all, Jaspers himself talks about it at some length. If Jaspers can talk meaningfully about existential freedom, then so can I. That being said, any complete account of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom should address this undeniable aspect of it, and I will do so later on in this essay.

### The Big Picture

In this section, I offer an interpretation of what Jaspers is trying to accomplish with his account of existential freedom. As I understand him, Jaspers has three primary motivations, namely a phenomenological motivation, an existential motivation, and a therapeutic motivation. Let it be clear that what follows is an interpretation. Nowhere does Jaspers explicitly say that his account of existential freedom is driven by these three particular concerns. To find it, one has to read between the lines, so to speak. The strongest evidence that Jaspers has these motivations, however, lies in how well this hypothesis adds clarity and coherence to his discussion of existential freedom.

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translating this word as "parts," I am following Einar Øverenget, who discusses this and other mereological terms in the works of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. For Husserl and Heidegger, *Momente* are inseparable parts of a whole, such as the qualities of an object (Husserl) or the structures of *Dasein's* being (Heidegger). Parts in this sense are not to be confused with *Stücke*, which are separable parts—like the head of a horse. See Einar Øverenget, "The Presence of Husserl's Theory of Wholes and Parts in Heidegger's Phenomenology," *Research in Phenomenology* 26 (1996), 171-197.

<sup>2</sup> Jaspers refers to this also as *ursprüngliche Freiheit* (original freedom, P2 147) and *eigentliche Freiheit* (authentic freedom, P2 149).

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Ashton translates *Momente* as "elements." In

### *Phenomenological Motivation*

The first motivation I attribute to Jaspers is phenomenological, by which I mean that he aims for an account of freedom that is faithful to lived human experience. Jaspers is interested, not in an abstract account of how freedom ought to be conceptualized, but in a concrete account of how freedom is actually experienced and expressed in human life. Such an account can be discovered only through careful observation and reflection. An important implication of this motivation is that Jaspers' account of existential freedom cannot be evaluated abstractly – or objectively, as he puts it. The only way to confirm or confute his account is by checking his descriptions of freedom against one's own lived experiences of it. This explains, at least partially, why he thinks that existential freedom cannot be proven or disproven by philosophical arguments: the content of existential freedom is derived from careful observations of what is involved in putatively free human actions, so it is no more amenable to philosophical argumentation than the results of other phenomenological observations (for example, Husserl's phenomenological investigation of a cube).

Since existential freedom is the sum total of its various elements (knowledge, arbitrary act, and so on), Jaspers' phenomenological account of existential freedom as a whole takes the form of specific descriptions of each of these elements. Of course, these elements are interrelated, and in his discussion of any one of them, Jaspers often mentions or even partially describes some of the others. But existential freedom as a whole nevertheless consists in the sum total of its parts (or the conjunction of its conditions, if one prefers that way of talking about it). Hence, once Jaspers has provided one with complete and accurate phenomenological descriptions of its elements (or conditions), he will have given one a complete phenomenological description of existential freedom as a whole.

### *Existential Motivation*

The second motivation I attribute to Jaspers is existential, by which I mean that he wants an account of freedom that is existentially relevant. More specifically, he seeks an account how humans can use their freedom in order to achieve authenticity. It follows that Jaspers' account cannot be purely descriptive, inasmuch as the phenomenological motivation would require it to be. It must also be prescriptive, or normative. In other

words, Jaspers' account must tell one not only how one's freedom is experienced, but also how one can use one's freedom properly in order to become an authentic individual.

This raises an important terminological issue. At times, Jaspers' discussion of existential freedom seems to focus on a kind of freedom that all humans share. This kind of freedom he identifies and articulates phenomenologically, and anyone who takes the time to read and reflect on his descriptions should be able to recognize it. But at other times, Jaspers' discussion seems to focus on a kind of freedom that is properly expressed – that is to say, authentic. These two kinds of freedom are different, for all humans have the former, simply by virtue of being human, whereas only some individuals – namely, the authentic ones – possess the latter. In order to avoid this ambiguity, I shall hereafter use "existential freedom" to refer to the kind of freedom that all humans share, and "authentic freedom" to refer to the kind of freedom that an individual must possess in order to be authentic. Using this terminology, Jaspers' account of existential freedom is given in response to his phenomenological motivation, whereas his account of authentic freedom is given in response to his existential motivation.

If authentic freedom is distinct from existential freedom, then how are they related? In my view, existential freedom is a genus of which authentic freedom is a species. More specifically, I think that each of the elements composing existential freedom (knowledge, arbitrary act, and so on) has a variable dimension with respect to which it can be tuned one way or the other. Tuned one way, these elements are conducive to authentic freedom; tuned the other way, they are not. In order for a person to have authentic freedom, all of the elements that make up that person's existential freedom must be tuned in the right way. Moreover, since the variable dimensions of these elements can be tuned in degrees, as I shall argue below, the more these elements are tuned in the right way, the more authentically free that person becomes.

If this interpretation of the relationship between authentic freedom and existential freedom is correct, then Jaspers' account of the former should appear within his account of the latter. More specifically, his phenomenological descriptions of the various elements that make up existential freedom should contain identifications of multiple variable dimensions (one variable dimension per element), and these should be such that each can be tuned in a way that is conducive

to authenticity. Thus, Jaspers' account of authentic freedom will consist in the complete identification of the variable dimensions of these elements, together with an identification of how each can be tuned in the proper way.

### *Therapeutic Motivation*

The third motivation I attribute to Jaspers is therapeutic, by which I mean that he wants an account of freedom that will help an individual make difficult choices. Examples of such choices include Søren Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham's dilemma over whether or not to sacrifice his son Isaac, and Jean-Paul Sartre's story about a student who came to him for advice on whether he should go to fight in the war with his friends or stay home to take care of his ailing mother. These are extreme cases, but ordinary life is full of hard choices: Should I go to college? Which career should I pursue? Where should I live? Whom should I marry? Should I have children? And sometimes even mundane choices—such as whether or not to attend the company party—can seem in the moment in which they have to be made to be extremely difficult. Jaspers' therapeutic motivation, then, is to offer an account of freedom that will help one resolve such dilemmas.

While Jaspers' phenomenological and existential motivations require two different accounts of freedom, Jaspers' therapeutic motivation does not require a third. Rather, Jaspers' account of authentic freedom does double duty. In other words, I think that Jaspers' account of authentic freedom, in addition to being an account of what is required for becoming an authentic individual, is also an account of how to make difficult choices. The secret to making hard choices is simply to choose authentically, where choosing authentically consists in—as stated above—properly tuning the various elements of existential freedom. Whether authentic freedom actually fulfils this function remains an open question that cannot be decided until one understands what is involved in this kind of freedom.

### **The Details**

Since existential freedom is the sum total of its elements, and authentic freedom is the sum total of these elements tuned in the right way, I will proceed by discussing each of these elements, following the order in which Jaspers discusses them: knowledge, arbitrary act, law, idea, and choice.

### *Freedom as Knowledge*

First and foremost, existential freedom involves knowledge. Jaspers mentions knowledge of myself, of the world around me, and of my own actions. In his words: "I am not just a sequence of events; I know that I am. I do something and know what I am doing" (P2 156). Furthermore, I am aware of alternative possibilities. "Knowing, I see a realm of my possibilities. I can choose among the several I know" (P2 156). And finally, as his later discussion makes clear, knowledge also involves awareness of a range of possible reasons, motives, and principles for action.

This is the descriptive aspect of knowledge. What is its normative dimension, the proper expression of which is necessary for authentic freedom? In short: the more knowledge there is, the greater there is the potential for authenticity. As Jaspers puts it:

I become free by incessantly broadening my world orientation, by limitlessly visualizing premises and possibilities of action, and by allowing all motives to speak to me and to work within me. [P2 157]

The more I broaden my world orientation, by acquiring more knowledge of myself, alternative possibilities, possible reasons for action, and so on, the more authentically free I can become.

### *Freedom as Arbitrary Act*

According to Jaspers, "Where several things are possible for me, the cause of what will occur is my arbitrary act" (P2 156). The German word that here gets translated as "arbitrary act" is *Willkür*, which means arbitrariness, capriciousness, or spontaneity. Jaspers is not suggesting that existentially free choices are random; rather, he is drawing our attention to the fact that one's choices between alternative possibilities seem arbitrary, for nothing apparently forces a person to act one way or the other. When one is presented with alternative possibilities, which possibility one actually chooses seems—in a very peculiar way—up to that person. Of course, not all actions have this quality; sneezing, for example, does not. But any voluntary decision one makes between alternative possibilities seems to bear this peculiar mark.

That being said, Jaspers thinks, one can—and often does—try to hide this feeling from oneself. He mentions a few strategies for doing this. I can, for example, try to see my actions as causally determined

by my beliefs and desires, the latter over which I have no ultimate control. Or, I can try to avoid this feeling in particular cases by, say, committing my decision to the result of a coin toss or the roll of a die. According to Jaspers, such attempts are both futile and harmful. They are futile because such attempts ultimately fail in removing this feeling – at least for very long. No matter how hard I try to suppress it, this feeling will always reemerge. And such repressions are harmful because authentic freedom requires embracing this feeling rather than fleeing from it. Regardless of whether one really has the ability to do otherwise, Jaspers thinks that the feeling of having this ability is essential to authentic freedom. Authentic freedom requires owning up to this feeling – that is, embracing it, not repressing it. And this is the normative dimension of this element of authentic freedom: embracing the feeling of one's voluntary actions being up to oneself.

#### *Freedom as Law*

According to Jaspers, every action I take is an accord with some principle. He does not mention Immanuel Kant in this context, but I suspect that he has in mind Kant's idea that every action is an instance of a maxim. Be that as it may, Jaspers' point seems intuitively plausible: everything one does is done for a reason, and every reason for action is an expression of some sort of general principle. Of course, which principle one acts upon in any given instance is not always obvious, but that is beside the point. One needs not be transparently aware of the principles underlying one's actions in order for there to be such principles.

Jaspers makes the normative dimension of this element of freedom perfectly clear:

Suppose I decide...in accord with a *law* I recognize as binding. I am free, then, since I am bowing to an imperative I found within myself, an imperative I might as well not bow to...To me such norms are manifestly binding, and in recognizing and obeying them I am aware of my free self. [P2 156]

According to Jaspers, one finds some principles to be "self-evidently valid," and one becomes authentically free by acting according to such principles. This is not always the case. I can, by contrast, adopt principles given to me by another person or by society, or I can lack the strength to act on my own convictions. While I always act according to some principle, it is not the case that these principles are always self-evidentially valid

to me. Authentic freedom requires acting according to such principles, and the more self-evident a principle seems to be, the more authentic one can become by acting on it.

#### *Freedom as Idea*

According to Jaspers, humans are constantly trying to make sense of themselves, the world, and their activities in the world in a more comprehensive and integrated way. In his words:

Out of the endless diversity of accumulated motives and elements of orientation, the idea I have in mind creates order and a structure. [P2 157]

This element of freedom is different from the first – freedom as knowledge – insofar as it is fundamentally integrative. In freedom as knowledge, one is constantly expanding one's awareness of oneself, the world, alternative possibilities, and different reasons for action; in freedom as idea, one is constantly trying to integrate these various elements into a coherent whole from which one can act in the world.

This is the descriptive dimension of freedom as idea. What can be said about its prescriptive dimension? How does one exercise this element of freedom authentically? The answer to this is simple: through ever greater levels of integration. As Jaspers puts it:

The more the totality, without forgetting a thing, determines my visions and decisions, my feelings and actions, the freer I know I am. [P2 158]

In other words, the more one can integrate these various elements – knowledge of oneself, the world, alternative possibilities, and principles for action (especially the self-evident ones) – the more authentically free one can become.

#### *Freedom as Choice*

According to Jaspers, the ever expanding, constantly integrating freedom as idea never generates a single, definite course of action. In his words:

My actions do not simply result from my boundless orientation in the world and from the expansion of my possible self-being in infinite reflection. I am not the stage of a general idea from which the temporal events of my existence would necessarily flow. [P2 158]

There is always room for choice, even after considering alternative possibilities in light of one's integrated

principles. The final element of existential freedom is simply this: making a choice.

What is the authentic expression of this element of existential freedom? How can one choose something authentically? By doing so intentionally. One cannot avoid making choices—such is the human condition—but one can avoid the full weight of these choices by deferring to other people, pretending to oneself that there is just one obvious choice, or delaying a choice so long that it is effectively made by others. All of these are instances of what Jaspers would call "flight from freedom" (P2 160). Authentic choice means avoiding these temptations, which is to say that an authentic choice must be intentional.

Jaspers adds one important qualification to his account of authentic choice: such a choice must involve resolution—that is, commitment. As he explains, "the import of resolution is that once I have made a choice I will unconditionally *stick to it*" (P2 159). In fact, Jaspers seems to think that resolution is implied by the very nature of any intentional choice, in which case this is not so much a qualification as it is a correlate. But this aspect of authentic choice is so important to Jaspers that I will treat it as distinct element of existential freedom. Thus, in addition to being intentional, an authentic choice needs to be committed.

### *Interpretation*

Here ends my exposition of the various elements of existential freedom on Jaspers' account of it. Since existential freedom is the sum total of its elements (or the conjunction of its conditions), I am now in a position to give a complete account of this concept. And the same holds for authentic freedom. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that the terms used in the following definitions derive what meaning they have from Jaspers' expositions of them, not from common sense or ordinary usage.

Existential freedom is a species of choice, in the same way that knowledge is a species of belief. What additional conditions are required of a choice for it to be an expression of existential freedom? In light of the foregoing, one can say that existential freedom is expressed in any choice that is informed, seemingly up to the person, in accord with some principle, and integrated. Authentic freedom, as a species of existential freedom, includes all of these elements while adding some further conditions. More specifically, authentic freedom is expressed in any intentional

and committed choice that is sufficiently informed, embraced as seemingly up to the person, in accord with some self-evidently valid principle, and integrated to a sufficient degree.

Note that the elements of authentic freedom all come in degrees. Accordingly, acting authentically is a matter of degree, and there is no easy way of telling, even from the inside, whether these elements are present to a sufficient degree for a given choice to count as being authentic. But this is not a problem with this definition so much as it is an unavoidable feature of authenticity itself. It is no easy matter to determine whether or not a person is acting authentically, and any account that did make this easy would be suspect. Moreover, this ambiguity does not imply that Jaspers' account of authentic freedom lacks relevance. What ultimately matters is acting authentically, not knowing that one is acting so. Jaspers' account of authentic freedom can help one with the former, even if it cannot help one with the latter.

### **Two Objections**

Scholars of Jaspers' work might bristle at the idea of attributing to him a definition of existential freedom. Surely this treats existential freedom as an objective notion, and surely it runs afoul of Jaspers' claim that this kind of freedom is unknowable.

Let me start with the latter objection—that existential freedom is unknowable and so any attempt at giving a definition of it is fundamentally misguided. As noted earlier, whatever Jaspers means in claiming that existential freedom is unknowable, he cannot mean that it is ineffable and thus cannot be discussed. Sufficient proof of this is given in the fact that Jaspers himself talks about it. But in that case, if "unknowable" does not mean "ineffable," then what does Jaspers mean by it?

I think that he means that existential freedom cannot be grasped completely cognitively. It is unlike the concepts of mathematics, geometry, and logic, which can be discovered *a priori* and communicated effectively and completely through language. Unlike these, existential freedom must be experienced in order to be fully understood. More specifically, since existential freedom is the sum total of its elements, it cannot be grasped unless its elements are grasped through phenomenological reflection. Anyone who reads Jaspers' account and does not spend time reflecting on his or her own lived experience in order to see

whether his descriptions make sense simply does not understand what existential freedom is. To use a clichéd analogy, consider love: nobody can fully understand what love is without experiencing it personally. And in the same way, nobody can fully understand what existential freedom is without consulting one's own lived experience.

None of this implies that existential freedom cannot be discussed. To continue with the analogy of love: love can be described through stories or poetry, and the fact that a person cannot fully understand this complex phenomenon without having had it does not imply that these descriptions are false. They are simply incomplete unless their contents are filled out through phenomenological reflection. So, one can admit that freedom—like love—is unknowable yet simultaneously also insist that it can be given a definition. What this means is simply that the definition cannot be fully grasped abstractly, the way the definitions of mathematics and logic can be grasped. One must fill out the contents of the definition through one's own careful and patient phenomenological reflection.

Does Jaspers' claim that existential freedom is not an objective notion imply that my proposed definition is inappropriate? Again, I do not think so. I think that an objective notion is one that can be fully grasped cognitively, without the need for careful introspection or phenomenological reflection to confirm it or to expand on it. Thus, in my view, saying that something is knowable is to say that it is objective, and the same reply I gave to the former would also apply to the latter. Existential freedom is not objective because it cannot be fully grasped cognitively, in the way mathematical truths and logical relations can be grasped. But this does not mean that one cannot give a definition of it, as I have done above.

### The Analytic Debate

I turn now to how Jaspers' discussion of freedom connects to the contemporary analytic debate over free will. There is, of course, no such thing as "the" contemporary analytic debate over free will. The contemporary debate, like the historical one, comprises a large number of sub-debates. Chief among these, however, is the debate over whether free will is compatible with determinism. Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, references to "the contemporary analytic debate over free will" will refer to this one

debate in particular.

In asking whether or not free will is compatible with determinism, much hangs on the meanings of "free will" and "determinism." Sometimes, determinism is defined as the view that everything has a cause, or that every event is caused by prior events. The standard definition nowadays is that the past and the laws of nature determine a unique future. In other words, everything that happens must happen given the past and the laws of nature. Far more crucial to this debate, however, is what is meant by "free will." While there are many possibilities, the traditional definition is simply the ability to do otherwise. According to this definition, one acts freely just in case one can do something (call it "A") and one can do something else (call it "B") but one cannot do both of these things (both A and B).

It is not hard to see why determinism apparently precludes the ability to do otherwise: if everything that happens must happen given the past and the laws of nature, and I have no control over the distant past (say, before I was born) or the laws of nature, then how can I have any control over anything that happens right now—including my own actions? The contemporary analytic debate over free will is largely an attempt to either defend or diffuse arguments of this sort. Philosophers who find this sort of argument convincing are called "incompatibilists," for they hold that free will and determinism are incompatible. Philosophers who do not find this sort of argument convincing are called "compatibilists," for they hold that free will and determinism are, in fact, compatible. The latter philosophers offer a variety of replies to such arguments for incompatibilism. One of the simplest, and most common, of these is simply to deny the traditional definition of free will as the ability to do otherwise. If free will is something else, such as acting on your own desires without being coerced or compelled in any way, then it might very well be compatible with determinism.

Where does Jaspers stand on this debate? As mentioned earlier, Jaspers says that existential freedom is not threatened by determinism, and he also offers a non-standard definition of this kind of freedom. From these two considerations, it seems reasonable to infer that he is a compatibilist who opts for the strategy of offering an alternative definition of freedom—one that is compatible with determinism. But this is not, I think, the correct way of understanding him. Jaspers sharply distinguishes existential freedom from objective

kinds of freedom, such as the ability to do otherwise. His definition of freedom is not meant to replace the traditional notion, but to stand alongside it. With regard to the contemporary analytic debate, I think that Jaspers is neutral. Freedoms of the objective sort, such as the ability to do otherwise, might be compatible with determinism, or they might not be. That is for philosophers fixated on such objective notions to decide. For someone whose concerns with freedom are phenomenological, existential, and therapeutic in nature, this debate has no significance.

How does this relate to the compatibility of determinism and Jaspers' own conception of freedom? How can he be so confident, without offering any arguments, that determinism does not threaten it? The answer to this can be found in understanding where the content of existential freedom comes from, namely from a phenomenological reflection on what it is like to be free. Proof that one has existential freedom is given immediately through observation and introspection, which reveals (putting it crudely) that one is aware of alternative possibilities (knowledge), one seems to have the power to do otherwise (arbitrary act), one acts in accord with principles (law), one tries to integrate principles and alternative possibilities into a coherent whole (idea), and one makes decisions (choice). Since existential freedom, so understood, is an undeniable fact, it must be compatible with whatever metaphysical theories happen to be true – including determinism.

To make this point clear, consider an analogy with Berkeleyan Idealism – roughly, the idea that everything humans experience is mental in nature and depends for its existence upon the mind of God. Right now, I seem to be seeing a table in front of me. This is obviously true. Therefore, if Berkeleyan Idealism is true, then it must be compatible with the fact that I seem to be seeing a table right now. And the same holds for the denial of Berkeleyan Idealism: if Berkeleyan Idealism is false, then its denial must be compatible with this experience. Similarly, if determinism is true, then it is obviously compatible with existential freedom (since existential freedom obviously exists). And the same holds for the denial of determinism: if determinism is false, then its denial is obviously compatible with existential freedom (since, to repeat, existential freedom obviously exists). It simply makes no difference to existential freedom whether or not determinism is true, just as it makes no difference to my present experience whether or not Berkeleyan Idealism is true.

### *The Ability to Do Otherwise*

At this point, someone might object that Jaspers begs the question with regard to a central issue in the analytic debate. The first element of existential freedom, knowledge, involves an awareness of alternative possibilities; and the second element of existential freedom, arbitrary act, involves the power to choose among them. This is precisely what analytic philosophers mean by the ability to do otherwise. Jaspers is certain that one has this ability for it seems that one has it. But this inference is invalid. Analytic philosophers are as keenly aware as anyone that one seems to have the ability to do otherwise. This is not at issue. What is at issue is whether or not this ability is real. By insisting that one really does have this ability, based merely on its appearance, Jaspers is guilty of a crude logical fallacy (moving from appearance to reality) and, as a consequence, begging the question with regard to a central issue in the analytic debate.

The error in this objection lies in thinking that existential freedom requires the ability to do otherwise. It does not. The first element of existential freedom, knowledge, requires that one is aware of alternative possibilities, but such possibilities might be merely apparent; the second element of freedom, arbitrary act, requires that one seems to have the ability to do otherwise, but such an ability might not be real, either. For all we know, there is only one genuinely possible future, and one cannot do anything different from what one does in fact do. All that existential freedom requires is the appearance of such possibilities and of such a power.

This admission – that existential freedom does not require the ability to do otherwise – might strike some readers as bizarre, so allow me to elaborate. Recall Jaspers' three motivations for offering an account of freedom. The phenomenological motivation is to offer an accurate account of what it is like to be free. As such, this motivation does not require anything other than appearances. One really does seem to be aware of alternative possibilities (knowledge), and what one chooses to do really does seem to be up to that person (arbitrary act). These are appearances, and perhaps mere appearances, but Jaspers' phenomenological motivation does not require them to be anything more than this.

Next, consider Jaspers' existential motivation. This motivation calls for an account of the conditions necessary for acting authentically. It does not require



that one has any control over these conditions. In other words, whether or not being authentic is genuinely up to a person is a separate issue from which conditions a person must satisfy in order to be authentic. By way of analogy, consider knowledge. An analysis of knowledge requires an account of the conditions for knowing something, but such an account need not imply that one has any control over these conditions. A person can know something without having any control over this fact. The same is true of authentic freedom as a response to Jaspers' existential motivation, for according to Jaspers, a person can be authentic without having any control over this fact.

Finally, consider Jaspers' therapeutic motivation, which calls for an account of freedom that enables one to make difficult choices. As I have shown, this account is precisely the same one Jaspers gives in response to his existential motivation, namely an account of the various conditions required for authentic freedom. According to Jaspers, satisfying these conditions will enable one to make hard choices even if one has no ultimate control over these conditions. This might sound strange, but consider once again the analogy with knowledge. One can offer an account of the conditions that must be satisfied in order for a person to know something without this account implying that the person has any control over these conditions. Likewise, Jaspers' account of authentic freedom tells one how to make hard choices, but this account does not require that one has any control over this. It goes without saying that nothing in Jaspers' account of authentic freedom precludes having the ability to do otherwise. As far as Jaspers is concerned, one might have this ability. The point is simply that nothing in his account requires this ability, either.

To sum up: I have argued that Jaspers' account of freedom is logically independent from the contemporary analytic debate over free will. Jaspers is primarily concerned with what it is like to be free, how to be authentic, and how to make hard existential choices. None of these require free will in any traditional sense, including the ability to do otherwise, and none of them are threatened by determinism. But where does this leave the analytic debate? Does Jaspers' account of existential freedom reveal this debate to be fundamentally misguided?

On the contrary, the analytic debate is left completely untouched by Jaspers' account of existential freedom. Just as his account is logically independent from the analytic debate, so is the analytic debate

logically independent from his account. Whether or not the ability to do otherwise is ruled out by determinism remains an open question, and showing that there are interesting questions about freedom that are logically independent from this one does not render this question pointless or uninteresting. Some philosophers, myself included, want to know whether or not humans have the ability to do otherwise. The fact that this ability is irrelevant for a person whose motivations are solely phenomenological, existential, and therapeutic is beside the point, for one can have other motivations besides these—such as the motivation to know whether the world really is as it seems to be. Furthermore, one cannot even conclude from our discussion that the analytic debate is unimportant, for one apparent consequence of this debate is whether or not we have genuine moral responsibility. Surely that matters, and so surely the analytic debate matters, too. In short, we seem to have two logically distinct sets of issues related to free will: Jaspers is concerned with some; analytic philosophers (at least traditionally) are concerned with others. But neither group of concerns invalidates the other.

This conclusion—that Jaspers' account of freedom is logically distinct from the analytic debate over free will—might be taken as reinforcing the so-called "analytic-continental divide" and justifying the negative attitudes, ranging from inattention to contempt, that analytic philosophers often hold toward continental philosophers, and vice versa. That is not my intention. In arguing that Jaspers' discussion of existential freedom is logically distinct from the analytic debate over free will, I do not wish to encourage Jaspers scholars to continue ignoring the contemporary analytic debate, or to encourage analytic philosophers of free will to continue ignoring what continental philosophers, like Jaspers, have to say on the issue. On the contrary, I hope to convince both sides that the other side is engaged in a legitimate philosophical enterprise that is worth taking seriously. Jaspers scholars should acknowledge that his account of freedom leaves open the question of whether we have the ability to do otherwise, so they should admit that the analytic debate over this question is legitimate, worthwhile, and perhaps even interesting. Likewise, analytic philosophers should acknowledge that the question of whether humans have the ability to do otherwise leaves open a number of other questions to do with freedom—such as what it is like to be free, how freedom can be authentic, and how to make difficult choices; that these questions are just as interesting and important as their own ones; and

that, since he raises these questions and has interesting things to say about them, Jaspers' account of freedom is worth taking seriously.

### Conclusion

I have offered an interpretation of what motivates Jaspers' account of existential freedom, what this account is, and how this account is related to the analytic debate. But I have not yet said with complete transparency what I think about this account.

Assuming my interpretations of the various elements that make up existential freedom are accurate, the existence of these elements seems to be undeniable. Humans do seem to be aware of alternative possibilities (knowledge), they do seem to have the power to do otherwise (arbitrary act), they do act in accord with principles (law), they do try to integrate their principles and their alternative possibilities into a coherent whole (idea), and they do, on the basis of all this, make decisions (choice). That being said, I wonder why Jaspers is so certain that these five elements of existential freedom are the only ones. I could imagine someone insisting that careful reflection on the experience of freedom reveals that our choices always involve an implicit awareness of one's past, or are always an expression of one's inner character, or always aim at some sort of goal, or are always driven by some sort of lack, or always presuppose a commitment to some kind of value. I am not proposing that any of these are really involved in one's inner experience of freedom, but I see nothing in Jaspers' account that precludes them, either.

I have similar worries with regard to authentic freedom. Why should one think that the conditions Jaspers identifies—namely, the elements of existential freedom tuned in the right ways—are sufficient for authentic action? In fact, why think that each of them is necessary? Putting these worries aside, however, I confess that I do find the details of Jaspers' account of authentic freedom to be quite promising. Exploring new alternative possibilities, embracing the feeling that what one does is up to that person, acting according to principles that one finds to be self-evident, trying to integrate one's knowledge and one's principles into a coherent whole, and then, on the basis of this, acting intentionally and resolutely—all of this strikes me as being excellent advice for how to act authentically and how to make difficult decisions. So, even if Jaspers' account of authentic freedom is wrong or incomplete in some of its details, it strikes me as being largely on the right track.

The main value of Jaspers' philosophy of freedom, however, lies not in these specifics but in the motivations that lie behind them. Contemporary analytic discussions of free will, for all their value, have done little to address what it is like to be free, what is required for acting authentically, and how to resolve existential dilemmas. These are important issues; Jaspers deserves credit for raising them. Furthermore, analytic philosophers can benefit from taking them more seriously. To drive this point home, let me say a few additional words about the last of these motivations before I end this essay.

The issue of how to make difficult choices is independent from any of the questions being discussed in contemporary analytic philosophy of free will. Sartre's student, asking for advice about whether to join the war or stay home with his mother, would not have been helped in the least by hearing a long discourse on whether or not he has the power to do otherwise. Of course, other debates in analytic philosophy are more relevant, such as debates over normative ethics, the good life, and the meaning of life. But even these discussions have limited value in this context. How does one choose between two competing ethical theories? How does one choose between two competing accounts of value or of meaning? And even after adopting one of these, the issue is far from being settled. Specific moral theories leave room for choice, and so do theories of value and of meaning. More philosophical reflection can help, but ultimately a choice must be made. Jaspers is right to draw our attention to this crucial and underexplored aspect of the human condition. I am not sure that his solution is the right one, but this issue is an important one, and it deserves more attention from philosophers of all traditions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This essay is a radical rewrite of a paper I presented at a meeting of the Karl Jaspers Society of North America held in conjunction with the 2019 Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Vancouver, Canada. Thanks to Dane Sawyer for inviting me to present a paper at this meeting. Thanks also to my fellow panelists (especially Pierre Keller), the chairperson, and the audience for the lively discussion that followed my presentation. Special thanks are due to Helmut Wautischer for his detailed comments on my original paper and for his incredible patience as I slowly reworked it into the present form. Helmut's enthusiasm for Jaspers is as refreshing as it is contagious, and Jaspers scholars are lucky to count him among their number.