



Jaspers and Chichilnisky on Extreme Events and Liminality

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Abstract: According to Karl Jaspers a boundary situation is, on the one hand, a set of experiential types within the human condition. Such types include the struggle for survival, culpability, death, the degree of randomness concerning meaningful encounters in one's life, as well as the very reasons for an individual's existence. On the other hand, Jaspers argues that the concept of a boundary situation addresses a categorial pattern in human experience: concrete situations come and go, but the forms of boundary situations are recurring. In this essay, I focus on this formal aspect of the concept of a boundary situation. I call this aspect liminality, in order to better distinguish the empirical types from the categorial forms. I argue that cognizing formal boundary conditions, while not presupposing logics and formalized arguments, does not amount to a simple ideological dismissal of formal and formalized disciplines. On the contrary, Jaspers' idea of a communicative community entails, as a top priority, the critical assessment of scientific outcomes and their societal impact. This is especially the case when formal (quantitative) arguments have a prospective or immediate influence on a community's life and institutions. In order to show how an existential epistemology ought to deal with the social sciences (among others), I refer to Graciela Chichilnisky's work on expected utility theory. I further claim that the emancipatory project of Kantian public reason is within the scope of Jaspers' idea of existing.

Keywords: Chichilnisky, Graciela; Jaspers, Karl; Grenzsituation; boundary situation; limit situations; ideal types; philosophical logic; erotetics; risk; statistical life, value of.

Preliminary Remarks

Karl Jaspers' notion of limit situation or boundary condition (*Grenzsituation*) was first articulated in his 1919 book, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.¹ I shall develop my understanding of boundary condition so as to mean both, a type of experience that is empirical and a formal category or concept of a possible experience. My argument is in partial agreement with Alfons Grieder's position yet is not dependent on it. Grieder points to the fact that Jaspers

fails to distinguish clearly between (a) boundary situations (i.e. particular situations) and (b) certain necessary conditions of human life (which he misleadingly calls situations).²

² Alfons Grieder, "What are Boundary Situations? A Jaspersian Notion Reconsidered," *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 40/3 (October 2009), 330-336, here p. 333. [Henceforth cited as *WBS*] Besides, Grieder distinguishes particular situations and types of situations. While I find Grieder's critical approach compelling, I suggest that what he hints at as being a type should rather be addressed as the concept of liminality. By this I mean that it is not Jaspers' intention in *PW* to develop a descriptive psychology, but rather to develop a theory of the subject-object (*das*

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag 1971, chapter III, § 2, pp. 229-80. [Henceforth cited as *PW*, translations are mine]

Boundary conditions can be applied to two aspects regarding the debate on public reason: According to Jaspers, the boundary condition of guilt is applicable to the situation of the Germans living under the rule of the National Socialist regime, which creates the possibility, via a rational ideal of integrity, to develop a politics of non-domination and its moral correlate in order to counter totalitarian regimes. Jaspers writes,

Either the ethos of politics is the principle of a state in which all participate with their consciousness, their knowledge, their opinions, and their wills. This is the life of political liberty as a continuous flow of decay and improvement. It is made possible by the task and the opportunity provided by a responsibility shared by all.³

In this essay the concepts of "definite liability," "moral culpability," "political liability," and "participation" are synthetically referred to by the expression politics of non-domination in this essay. The non-domination concept of liberty rejects, in particular, the non-interference conception of freedom.

Right is the sublime idea of men who derive their existence from an origin which is secured by force alone, but not determined by force. Wherever men become aware of their humanity and recognize man as man, they grasp human rights and base themselves on a natural law to which both victor and vanquished may appeal. [QGG 31]

The correspondence between degrees of liberty and degrees of participation as it is outlined by Jaspers implies non-domination.

Language, nationality, culture, common fate—all this does not coincide but is overlapping. People and state do not coincide, nor do language, common fate and culture. [QGG 35]

The passages on "definite liability" sparked much confusion and many attacked Jaspers' approach as being opportunistic and indulging in forgetfulness. Hence, I find it to be important to point out that civic republicanism is not compatible with forceful assertion and aims at designing structural independence.

Leben des Geistes) in the wake of Friedrich Schelling's identity philosophy. A descriptive psychology is only one stage in the dialectical development of selfhood within spheres of the objective spirit.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Fordham University Press 2000, p. 29. [Henceforth cited as QGG]

A second boundary condition concerns the political realm insofar as mankind faces the possibility of self-destruction:

Either all mankind will physically perish or there will be a change in the moral-political condition of man.⁴

One problem with this remark is that the conditions of applicability of the concept of a limit situation, which is a category of existing and not an empirical concept, to the realm of historical and political events are not being spelled out. A limit situation, as Jaspers explains (*PW* 219-20), refers to objects of a possible experience, but not directly to concrete objects that are being experienced. To apply categories to concrete objects presupposes both the givenness of objects in an experiential context (intuition) and conceptual work (construction). In a particular case, the latter, as the determinate intellectual output of an interpretation, can also be observed and reconstructed in relation to historical facts. This is the case in narrative tragic poetry, when considered in its social functions within the cultural history of a community. Jaspers differentiates between redemption in the tragic condition and redemption from the tragic condition. Both are considered genuine possibilities of self-being, in which the aestheticization of the tragic leads to a paralysis of existence. These hints could help clarify the role that the concept of authenticity might play in the sphere of political accountability, thus leading to a pragmatic, or rather rational, existentialism.⁵

In this essay I argue that the notion of a boundary situation, when properly defined, can be used to determine in the context of public reason how engagingly in the context of public reason Jaspers' existentialist account regarding limit situations can be conceived. There are types of boundary conditions that are more and less relevant for the purpose of developing an individual ethics, Jaspers argues pointing to the fact that not all humans can access an experiential path connected to a boundary situation, thereby cognizing its conceptual forms. Therefore, there cannot be a theory of obligations based on types of boundary conditions. An ethics based on types of experience would be an elitist ascetic discipline

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961, p. vii.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit, Philosophische Logik, Volume 1*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1947, pp. 915-60. [Henceforth cited as *VW*, translations are mine]

(as it has occasionally been criticized in relation to Jaspers). On the other hand, in section 2, 6, and 7 of this essay I suggest another understanding of the very concept "boundary condition." According to my argument, a boundary condition is a category, not a type. A category is an abstract part of experience, namely, in the sense that a category does not subsist apart from experience. A category can be discovered only in reference to experience, but not in reference to a particular experiential episode. In other words, a method and methodology ought to be made explicit, in order for a category to be understood in its functions. The main import of the category of liminality, as I label the concept "boundary condition," when I intend it as a category and not as a type, is that the non-conceptual precedes the conceptual. A second important aspect of the formal concept "limit situation" is strictly relevant for the project of a philosophical logic, which Jaspers pursues in *VW*: what is relevant for a philosophical logic as distinguished from a formalized formal logic, is not the form of a concept, but the formal aspects of the transition to concepts. Here, Jaspers inherits the concept of a logic of concepts that is relevant in the tradition of German idealism. These two aspects constitute conditions of possibility of a transition to the concept in the sense of the self-emancipation of individual subjects, but also of collectivities. In other words, the gain of an insight is existential, rather than and prior to conceptual; transitioning to a concept is dependent upon an act of freedom. Clearly, the expression "liminality" is not Jaspers' coinage, yet he does hold the idea that existing does not coincide with experiencing (that is, using concepts as types and tools in order to describe experiential patterns and establish patterns of domination over others).

If understood in terms of a theory of categories, the notion of a boundary condition can help to clarify what a Jaspersian account of public reason can look like. Besides, conceived in the context of a philosophical logic, an account of public reason inspired by Jaspers' philosophy in general, and in particular with regard to the notion of a boundary condition, entails a critical assessment of how knowledge production interferes with society broadly conceived. In this sense, an epistemic community and an ethical community do not necessarily overlap. Moreover, in some cases these two communities ought to be strictly kept apart. There may be cases, when for the bearers of an epistemic dynamic (those commonly referred to as researchers or experts) the application of the category of boundary condition

to the results of research episodes triggers a positive conflict of interest. In this case, caring for the sake of and in the interest of the ethical community could have the consequence, for an expert, of suspending certain investigations and research (gain of function research is only one example among many others). A question that might induce a conflict of interest in this sense is the following: Could a set of foreseeable outcomes of applied research preclude a specific trait of human experience? An example relative to the boundary condition of finitude and dying is the inability, for a community, of mourning for their losses. This is an example of how the application stance for categories faces problems which cannot be dealt with at the level of discovering categories: A theory of categories cannot shut up shop once it has showed that human experience has a formal aspect and is a structured process. Applying categories to concrete objects (as opposed to merely possible objects of experience) is the next necessary step.

Considering the current debates on science-based policies with regard to how and to what extent science ought to shape communities and inform deliberative and voting processes, I investigate how an existentialist account of practical reason relates to scientific research outputs. To this end, I compare the work of environmental economist Graciela Chichilnisky with Jaspers' idea of a will to total communication. Jaspers oftentimes uses this concept (*totaler Kommunikationswille*), for instance,

the movement of reason displays its decisive feature with the resolution, never to call off or terminate communication. [*VW* 971]

Chichilnisky theorizes concerning the economic theory of the value of a statistical life, among other areas. A statistical life, as distinguished from an individual life, is a measure used in statistical representations and arguments relative to a population. The concept of a statistical life comprises the measure of mortality and life expectancy within a given population and quantitatively describes, for individuals of the reference population, the structured risk of dying within a certain time interval. The structure of the risk measure is weighted to age groups in the population, on the one hand, and to possible causes of death, on the other hand. The value of a statistical life is typically used in cost-benefit-analysis, when committees and political representatives debate over decisions of public interest. An example is arguing from the

risk of death of an urban population relative to the environmental pollution through diesel engines to the deliberation of a political body whether and to what extent to ban certain vehicle in an urban area. However, Chichilnisky stresses the fact that

expected utility theory values life in terms of the low probability of death someone would be willing to accept in order to receive extra payment.⁶

She argues that the insensitivity to extreme events postulated in classical expected utility theory implies counterintuitive results which, moreover, are falsified by controlled experiments. Being in an event means that rational agents, as they are modeled in the theory in question, allegedly discount a certain probability of death when strategically opting for a certain payoff. Thus, the theory is insensitive to rare extreme events, since real world actors do not behave as counterintuitively as it is predicted in the expected utility theory. The classical utility theory states the conditions of possibility of representing preferences with a utility function, that is, in order to represent preference orderings with a formalized computable expression (function), preferences are assigned a value from a continuous set (real numbers). Expected utility theory adds to the former the concept of a choice when facing risky outcomes. Preference orderings are weighted to a measure of future outcomes (probability).

On these grounds, Chichilnisky proposes a weaker version of continuity in the valuing of risks. One common goal of Jaspers and Chichilnisky is to broaden the notion of practical rationality: In Jaspers, the concept of "limit situation" helps to define attitudes of self-being when faced with the tragic, especially in the "moral-political condition." One such attitude is, for instance, the readiness to live within the tension triggered by unanswered questions (VW 959) or to bear unresolved contradictions, without thereby proclaiming their irresolvability or acquiescing to revelations or doctrinal explanations of events (VW 960).

The existential concept of truth has a performative aspect: it is the truth realized in participatory communication, which at the same time transcends

the limited exchange of a dialogue towards the realization of a public sphere for dialogues. Dialogues incarnate rather the pragmatic concept of truth, which is inclusive of lying, deceiving, and rational planning. In a dialogue, for the sake of a turn taking (in order to have the last say and to dominate), one could not care less to damage the other's face or reputation. Dialogues may take place under the sign of malice and tactlessness, where one or more participants insinuate motives and reasons of a participant to act in a certain way, in order to discredit his position. However, the situation does not exclude the fact that the banality of just living and the disgrace of limiting the intellect to managing this living is transcended, if an existential attitude that is an attitude toward self-being realizes an expansive interpretation of dialogical moves. Understanding and non-understanding are both sharp-edged, in the sense that they can be justified as a partial disagreement only if an interpretation succeeds in reconstructing both positions in a new constructive understanding. In this sense, existential truth is a reconciliation with the inauthenticity of presumption and pretension. An attitude is a cognitive or emotional mental state in relation to a state of affairs. I can understand the existential attitude in relation to so-called propositional attitudes. I can believe, suspect, hope, know or doubt, that something is the case, and so on. Based on such attitudes, I can resolve to take a course of action. I feel an urge to lecture someone and pontificate, based on my belief that things are such-and-such. If things turn out not to be as I thought they were, I come to think things should be as I think they are. Existentially, though, I resolve to act based on the insight that if I do not act and if I do not engage in a discussion, even at the cost of inauthenticity, and however destructive the participation in dialogues may turn out to be, the very possibility of transitioning from believing to knowing, from intellect to an encompassing rationality might never be discovered by a certain community.

According to Chichilnisky, facing extreme events, such as the probability of a large-scale conventional war, a nuclear war, or ecological crises (and, as one may add, a pandemic) is important for the type of existential assessment involved therein (ranking preferences). The consequences of classical choice theory, notably to allow for preferences in order to discount existential risk (when its probability is small enough), as well as taking into account what she calls the topology of fear, motivates Chichilnisky to include a formalization of

⁶ Olivier Chanel and Graciela Chichilnisky, "Valuing Life: Experimental Evidence using Sensitivity to Rare Events," *Ecological Economics* 85 (January 2013), 198-205, here p. 198.

sensitivity to extreme events in her axiom of choice. In this essay, I focus upon possible intersections between the two approaches.

Limit Situations and Liminality in the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1919)

On a first reading of the *Psychology of Worldviews*, the limit situations seem to be conceived along the lines of Weberian ideal types. However, when the overall argumentative structure is explicated, a methodological reading of the argumentative import of limit situations (and the reason underlying Jaspers' specific typology) becomes plausible. The concept of a limit situation ought to be understood in the context of methodological explications of the descriptive psychology Jaspers uses throughout his philosophical career. The first two chapters of *PW* are indeed descriptive expositions of the two sides of the subject-object divide, from the point of view of a clinically informed psychology, so to speak. Therefore, the concept of limit situations can be said to represent the hinge, as it were, connecting the first two parts of *PW* with the third. In particular, the typology of limit situations has the systematic import of rationally motivating the transition to "The Life of the Spirit" (being the third part of *PW*).

Once this sequence is made explicit, it should become clear that the limit situations are not a conceptual tool with the function of preserving a descriptive coherence through experiential paths, which is actually the function of Weberian ideal types. Grieder argues that the metaphorical meaning of "boundary" is misleading in this respect (*WBS* 333). In the first chapter, containing descriptions of subjective attitudes (*Einstellungen*), Jaspers focuses upon a kind of subjective naivety. The presupposition for this kind of psychological descriptions is, as has been said, the subject-object divide. As a consequence, Jaspers mediated the encounter with and acquaintance of forms of consciousness. The medium of the reflections is the intentional givenness of types of objects. Types are secondary intentional objects in introspective reflections. What is given here, is being given:

(1) As a conversion or discovery (*Umkehr*). Furthermore, a discovery has the character of an overview (*Überblick*) relative to a continuum of observations. Jaspers is careful not to presuppose too much of a Kantian experiential constructivism, he is rather focusing on the openness of the experience (*PW* 90).

(2) As active self-reflection. Within activity, one aspect of reflection is that types of self-objectification are constituted; that is, forms of self-formation as modes of learning, teaching, self-discipline, and so on, are shown to have here their genetical presuppositions in the contemplative attitude which supersedes active reflection. One interesting aspect is that education and training may be in a tension with the pursuit of knowledge itself (*PW* 81).

The difference between the naive, the contemplative, and the active attitudes on the one hand and the attitude of enthusiasm on the other hand becomes clear in the section *Formalisierung* (*PW* 88). All attitudes have a tendency towards formalization as a consequence of their being rooted in intentional opaqueness, which is the idea that consciousness is given for itself only through given intentional objects; however, in the enthusiastic attitude, this tendency has as its correlate the specific mode of committed comprehension (I prefer this phrasing to the rendering "loving comprehension"). The latter is to be sharply distinguished from the constructive understanding of psychological descriptions; the difference is qualitative, an abyss (*Abgrund*) as Jaspers calls it (*PW* 124). As a consequence, the descriptive method used by Jaspers in *PW*, cannot be given a full explication with reference to a system of objects (ideal types). Therefore, at least some of its objects represent a transcendence with respect to experience. On the other side, within the third type (the attitude of enthusiasm), the moment of formalization entails a whole set of relations in the thematical field of selfhood. Moreover, the object of the reflective mode of consciousness tends to dissolve and to reshape into a relational pattern. In the the mystical attitude, the subject-object divide as well as its correlation are suspended. The possibility of an objectual encounter, though, is not excluded at all. For now it is only an empty possibility, although it motivates

the self-efficacy and the concrete inner organization of a personality. [*PW* 88]

One consequence is that manifold forms of consciousness, including institutionalized scientific forms of enquiry and knowledge representation, presuppose emptiness (*Bewusstseinsleere*) as a pure form of intentional encountering. The latter can be a sphere of symbolic representation and rational discourse only to the extent that it is a sphere of activity as well. One cannot see, name, or analyze

the possible objects of empty consciousness, Jaspers says, but instead they become visible through the traits of a personality, as they become apparent in courses of action.

The most important insight of the subsequent section, *Weltbilder*, is what can be called the opaqueness of the objective spirit. On the one hand, since comprehension and the reconstruction of worldviews in methodical understanding is value-laden for it has the character of an appraisal, the aggregate of knowledge configurations entails contradictions, tensions, and oppositions. On the other hand, the manifold forms of knowledge, puts the self under stress (*PW* 182). In other words, the objective spirit is limitless, it does not constitute a space within the possibility of an extensional representation; for instance, representing a dynamic of knowledge with sets is not an option according to Jaspers.

It is not to be avoided, that the understanding of the manifold of possibilities transitions into limitlessness.
[*wird grenzenlos, PW* 182]

This has important consequences. Among others, the methodological import of the radical intensionality (incompleteness of extensional representations) of the aggregate of worldviews is that the insight in the subject-object divide has the character of or resembles a Hegelian phenomenology; pictorial forms of knowledge and knowledge representation can be surmounted in a more comprehensive form. This surmounting is not necessarily a leap. Rather, it can have a rational character. But this is the case only when the surmounting is being explicitly derived from another worldview: Under the condition that the more comprehensive form is shown to be implied by tensions of pictorial forms present in the presupposed (and, in this sense, preceding) worldview. This means that understanding presupposes comprehension.

This last point helps to explain why the typological (that is, still Weberian) exposition of the limit situations opens the third section of *PW*, *Das Leben des Geistes* (The Life of the Mind). In other words, crucial methodological aspects of the descriptions used as premises in the arguments of *PW*, can be explicated.⁷

⁷ Grieder gives a different reconstruction of the concept. From my point of view, the meaning and import of the conception of "limit situation" and the concept of "liminality" become clear only when the conception is related to the systematics of *PW*.

An explication is a specific ad hominem argument pointing to limit situations. To properly understand the concept of limit as it is used in Jaspers, one possibility is to think of ancient geometry and contrast its understanding of the point with a modern one. The Euclidean point is a limit. According to the ancient Greek conception, a limit situation would be, by analogy, the point at which subjectivity is tangential to the curve of self-being. In this understanding, authenticity is what Jaspers, in his *Philosophical Logic* (*VW*), calls the only-tragic (*das Nurtragische*), with its psychological correlates of self-destructiveness and indulging in meaninglessness (*VW* 959). In modern geometry, though, the point is no more a limit any more than it is an origin. Accordingly, the limit situation is the origin of existing or self-being, pointing not beyond but toward the concretions of a spiritual life as a system of opportunities of shared meaning and caring reciprocation. This is the positive balance of what Jaspers says about the impossibility, for subjectivity as leading a life, to establish itself as a subject of experience within a limit situation. A limit situation is, in other words, not the occasion to prove one's heroism and fortitude as it is sometimes being misunderstood. This reading overlooks that moral guilt, for instance, being a limit situation cannot result in a revival of a biblical culpability without responsibility (from father to son). The moral guilt of pursuing one's career under a totalitarian regime (for instance in the case of the German mathematician Helmut Hasse), cannot be equated with the historical consciousness of one's cultural background.

Authenticity and Authority

Grieder holds that "it seems quite unclear what could possibly qualify as 'self-being' or 'authentic existence'" (*WBS* 336). Regarding the existential threats that I have addressed at the beginning of this essay, one can say that existing authentically in the face of impending or prospective self-destruction (nuclear war or global warming, respectively) has to be explicated in the context of political accountability. Thus, one has to agree with Grieder's conclusion concerning self-being, namely that the idea of a planetary consciousness is yet to be articulated and yet to be given operative efficacy with reference to public reason. Human beings simply do not know what type of commitment is apt to the end of articulating the ideal of a coherent existence. From this point of view, Grieder's claim about Jaspers'

notion of authenticity is yet another way to address the scale problem: We live in a globalized world, many of the problems that we confront unfold on a scale of politics that does not map functionally to the political institutions we have, which should have been such ones with the capacity to actually make binding decisions. Is it even possible, one could ask, to design political institutions that have some kind of governance capacity given the scale of the problems that actually exist? And even if the answer to this question were affirmative, one would have to investigate whether those institutions could be rendered democratically representative? A big challenge when trying to answer these questions is how to enact smarter political decisions, smarter policies, that actually respond to the interests of those affected by the policies and how to make the agencies accountable to those affected by them. One model, namely deliberative democracy, proposes that one can cope with the problem of political irrationality by devising smart political institutions that bring together sources and forms of knowledge. But bringing together experts and the public as the best sources to define risks and evaluate risk policies involves, at least as one possibility, the exact opposite of authentic participation. Indeed, it favors information transfer from one group claiming expertise and authority for themselves to a large number of just-living individuals who are subordinated to and dominated by them.

Deliberation conceived along the lines of expertise and science-based politics (in order to use a popular phrase in the wake of the 2020 Pandemic) corresponds to what Jaspers calls immersion into the condition of "just living" (*Versunkenheit ins Dasein*, VW 982). An alternative view can be conceived based on the model of democratic communication: Not the best arguments but the broadest deliberative participation is the aim; not information transfer through a media conglomerate, but consent to political decision-making through building community trust. In the third part of his *Philosophical Logic*, Jaspers articulates his conception of public reason through the concepts of "authority" and "will to a universal communication." The German expression *totaler Kommunikationswille* contains the aspects of an utter, outright, and unlimited will to communicate with one another. Insofar as communication forms a public sphere of reason, it also means announcement and having the structure of an aggregate. Authority, Jaspers argues, has to be manifest in concrete, sensorial, carnal forms. However, such manifestations

are problematic. They hint at transcendence and tend to define self-enclosed sacrosanct districts, where authority limits the sphere of communication, but also of deliberation and accountability. This means that a rational interest in universal history, as the correlate of existential historicity, can help define egalitarian forms of aggregation and is presupposed by political communication. Clearly, a Jaspersian notion of self-being that is being projected onto the public realm favors a communicative participation over a deliberative one. In relation to a communicative community, how can the role of expert knowledge within politics be defined?

Aggregation and Transcendence

Model-thinking is what a *Klügling* recommends to the moral politician in order to commend himself to those in charge.⁸ Chichilnisky's topological choice theory is a critique of models for rational choice along the lines of a self-critique of mathematical reasoning. When the formal tools used to spell out the criteria for aggregation rules unnecessarily or ideologically impose strong assumptions on the rules for representing outcomes of collective deliberation, preference aggregation problems arise from within the theory of expected utility. In order to illustrate the problem of preference aggregation, consider the following example by John Pollock who argues that in order to evaluate plans, "a person must first be able to evaluate situation types"; he then continues,

after a strenuous hike into a beautiful mountain valley, being hungry and tired disposes me toward disliking the current situation, but being in a spectacular place disposes me toward liking it...The objective of practical reasoning is to render the actual situation token likable.⁹

The Chichilnisky approach to preference aggregation has the advantage of using formal tools within social choice theory which allow a smooth representation of change in taste. Topology adds meaningful properties that are tailored to social theory functions. This is the case with non-satiation;

⁸ The German word *Klügling* is being used by Kant, for instance in *Perpetual Peace*, in order to circumscribe the function of the expert as an advisor of implementing policies. It translates, by and large, as wiseling.

⁹ John L. Pollock, *Cognitive Carpentry: A Blueprint for How to Build a Person*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1995, p. 14.

that is, the axiom of classical theory is stating that the more one gets of something, the better off one is in a given situation. Applied to the example under consideration, this makes it difficult to formally encode one's being ill-disposed toward the scenery due to, say, tiredness and exhaustion. Expected utility theory would have me not getting enough of hiking in that valley, no matter how demanding the path. On the contrary, Chichilnisky suggests how one should represent preference squares with satiation. This means that rational preferences can be modelled weighed to relatively negative values, such as weariness, in the story above it is fanatical attitude toward physical exercise, or moral pedantry; further examples could be added. Whereas the main idea of social choice theory is to map preferences onto aggregation rules, also known as majority rules, the idea of topological social choice theory is that a feasible solution for a social ordering can be given by avoiding that restrictions of the individual preferences are being too artificial and non-substantial:

Anonymity requires complete symmetry in the treatment of voters, whereas nondictatorship merely eliminates the most extreme forms of asymmetry.¹⁰

One suggestion of this contribution is that what Jaspers expounds on formalization and on situatedness (in relation to limit situations), makes it possible to define existentialism in pragmatic terms. As a consequence, Chichilnisky's topological theory of preference aggregation can be used in order to spell out a comprehensive theory of universal communication. One motivation for such an attempt to conceive of a comprehensive theory shall be given right away. In other words, the aim of my essay is not just to parallelize two (at first sight) disparate thinkers. My claim is that an existential elucidation of formal arguments is possible in the framework of Jaspersian philosophy. The significance of this idea of an existentialist epistemology lies in the fact that, according to Jaspers, the existential is part of the moral-political sphere. In other words, a formal representation of preference change that stresses the aspects of continuity, learning, and epistemic diachronic coherence has, as has been pointed out

above, an existential justification in the fact that formal methods are constituted within the agential modes of an objectual empty consciousness. Given the fact that taking decisions by way of considering expected values is relevant both for individual behavior and for crafting explanative models in the social sciences, some considerations on the concept of risk are required.

Risk and Deference

Since the 1970s, the neutral technical term "risk" has replaced the more political, controversial, and ambiguous idea of "crisis." While the latter had been a major conceptual point of convergence in the pre-war debate on how science and scientific research ought and ought not to shape the lifeworld, the contemporary response to hazard considered under risk assessment always amounts to the same implication: more administration in place of policy. Within this framework of retrograde politics, social issues are dealt with only on a case-by-case basis via experts,¹¹ that is, episodes of scientific research are not being reflected upon in the context of and as parts of a comprehensive cultural horizon; rather, research is objectified as science and addressed as an oracular solution machine.

The administration of risk has its place within the everyday mode of consciousness. Limit conditions, within this framework, are being given a numerical cardinal value of a statistical life: one cannot but live with guilt and being haunted by death (one's own death, while the impending possibility of humans' self-destruction entails and is, in fact, announced by the vanishing of the very possibility of existing or authenticity, for instance the very possibility of mourning).

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, by mid-June, two physicians and public health experts, James E. Muller and David G. Nathan, published a short paper in the journal *The Lancet*. They put the ongoing pandemic into a perspective in which

¹⁰ Graciela Chichilnisky and Geoffrey M. Heal, "Necessary and Sufficient Conditions for a Resolution of the Social Choice Paradox," *Journal of Economic Theory* 31/1 (October 1983), 68-87, here p. 71.

¹¹ Since the 1970s, public management is based on public choice theory which axiomatically suggests that the creation of market agents in the public sector will lead to improvements in efficiency. This, in turn, helped shaping the cities after the model of the shopping mall. A tragic example as to what results this style of public administration can lead is the Grenfell Tower fire, 14 June 2017.

nuclear war and global climate change represent likely existential threats for humans and their environment.¹² The authors remind that existential threats like nuclear war and the climate crisis call for, not only organized efforts to prevent devastating impacts, but also for a change of mind:

In a city hit with a nuclear weapon, by intent or by accident, there would be no decisions about which patient to treat with the remaining ventilator...First, each threat must be recognised. Second, political leaders must respect truth and defer to expertise. Third, the threats are global and require global cooperation. Fourth, we all have to focus on our collective survival, and that includes care for the least privileged. [COV 1967]

In the above quote, "defer to expertise" is obviously meant to criticize the widespread negationist attitudes over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (which is still being the case, two years later). Nevertheless, in the light of what has been said above about risk and discounting reflections on a comprehensive scientific culture, the idea of deferring to expertise has an unpalatable aftertaste. At least from the point of view of a grand theory of cultural formations (*das Leben des Geistes* in the parlance of Jaspers), the plea for global cooperation coupled with deference to expertise is what Jaspers would address as a transformation of the tragic into an aesthetic social vacuum (*Verwandlung des Tragischen in ästhetische Unverbindlichkeit*, VW 951).

Scientific prose, doubtlessly, has a quality to it that makes it suitable for fragmentation and aestheticism. The narrative of scientific writing is never compelling, it feels like just-living, a way of organizing time, waiting to live again, always calling for an authentic embedding in the life of the people, an overarching narrative. The latter is expected to succeed in telling us how it feels and what it means to know such and such, to be able to tell this and that apart. When skillfully edited and collaged, pieces of knowledge arranged in suggestive aesthetic configurations may or may not succeed in eliciting a moment of clarity. Would this clarification issue a command and trigger "our efforts, our foresights, every ingenuity we can summon to protect

ourselves"?¹³ One possible answer to this question can be had from Jaspers' liminality.

Liminality as Negativity

According to Jaspers, liminality (that is, the negativity of all value creation) is grounded in the fact that value conflicts necessarily lead to a partial value annihilation. A positive resolution of a value conflict has, as its by-product, the destruction of some value (PW 229). Value conflict resolution is never only positive. The reason thereof is, according to Jaspers, that value creation presupposes and is grounded in the antinomic structure of the self: before the subject's eyes there extends itself the world of objectivity; beneath the individual there are the forces and tendencies of subjectivity itself (PW 237). Jaspers' examples are interesting, for they point to the interpersonal and political sphere:

I may intend to realize a sphere of shared values, spiritual culture, and human flourishing; in order to realize my intentions, though, I acquiesce, if not explicitly, to dehumanization and exploitation, as structural preconditions of my plans. I pursue (through aggression) the preservation of a political aggregate, and I factually help impose imperialism, unfreedom and destruction on others. I strive to be prepared to defend my belongings, and I step into an armed conflict. [PW 238]

Thus, liminality is the conceptual correlate of experiencing value annihilation as the very presupposition of value creation within a limit condition, when the subject is exposed to a consistent threat to its integrity. The pursuit of value in everyday life, seen from the point of view of the absolute, has the character of an ephemeral creation of valuables. The representants of the absolute are, at the same time, hints at the impossibility of surmounting the subject-object divide. They are identifiable as randomness, guilt, and death, that is, valuables under the perspective of randomness are ready-made *objets trouvés*; in relation to the condition of guilt, value bestowing is perceived as pretension and usurpation; finally, nihilism and oblivion are the axiological modes under the spell of mortality.

¹² James E. Muller, David G. Nathan, "COVID-19, Nuclear War, and Global Warming: Lessons for Our Vulnerable World," *The Lancet* 395/10242 (June 27, 2020), 1967-1968. [Henceforth cited as COV]

¹³ Don DeLillo, *Zero K*, New York, NY: Scribner 2017, p. 128. The first part of DeLillo's narrative is, in my opinion, quite a successful example of transformation of the tragic into vacuity.

Limit Situations and Existing

The trigger question above provokes another one, namely whether aestheticization is all that is to be expected from an existentialist reflection within and on the contemporary public realm? In other words, is a kind of jargon of appreciation all one can await from an existentialist reflection upon the role played by epistemology and scientific discourse in the public sphere? In order to answer this question, one has to consider what Jaspers says regarding limit situations, in his main work, *Philosophie*. For Jaspers, experiencing limit situations (*Grenzsituationen*) and existing (*Existieren*) are the same.¹⁴ As it has already been noticed by Grieder, this identity statement is in need of clarifications.¹⁵ In the text, three aspects of experiencing identity equaling existing can be reconstructed:

(1) Experiencing as existing has the character of a narrative; it means just living or waiting to live again, as *Dasein* may be rendered; this is the way in which humans try to make sense of vulnerability. In section 3, *Grenzsituation und Existenz*, Jaspers exhibits a peculiar instability of the narrative role when he notes, "in the end, nothing else is left than to surrender" (P2 204). That is, the possibility of existing is one-sidedly grounded in the narrative instability of limit situations, because these are encounters with aspects of otherness but not aspects of my own narrative identity. For instance, death as a limit condition is not my finitude, it's rather the very impossibility of even facing finitude in the eventuality of mass destruction. Another aspect of narrative instability consists in the fact that "real existence is historical reality that ceases to talk" (P2 207). This sentence can be taken to mean that the possibility of existing is enclosed within a radical *aphasia*.¹⁶ In other words, the transition from existing to *Dasein* is represented

by a phatic communion of radical silence.¹⁷

(2) Existential elucidation is a form of epistemic discipline. Jaspers writes that the three leaps from *Dasein* to existing have to be understood as standing in a mutual implication and not in an ascending scale. Concerning the reciprocal implication of the forms of consciousness in boundary situations, it is important to stress several implications. Each form of existential agency, taken in isolation and realized as a leap within one of the three forms (will to knowledge as epistemic gain, existential elucidation as to the possibility of self-being, and realization through a boundary condition), results in a deficient mode, a lapse or slide off (*Abgleiten*).

The leap, in each of its forms, leads its way through boundary situations from living to existing. [*aus dem Dasein zur Existenz*, P2 206]

(3) Historicity and epistemic import of the leap are a crucial aspect: I will label the mutual implication of the forms as "situatedness." Then one can say that situatedness is not meant by Jaspers to be an existential ontological category. It rather points quite explicitly at an epistemic option. The three forms correlate with distinct forms of epistemic organization and aggregation: the interest in universal history in the provisional solitude of the first leap; conceptual elucidation of the opacity in the limit situations; finally, the philosophical life corresponding to the leap from the mere possibility to the realization (full realization can be given only in a communicative community). If this reading is plausible in view of the text, then more questions arise. Firstly, concerning the interest for universal history: how does Jaspers' own realization of this interest fit in the aforementioned idea of an utter, outright, and total will to communicate? Unfortunately, this question cannot be dealt with here in detail; however, this much has to be said: Jaspersian axial civilizations are forms of cultural specialization and differentiation supervening upon the structural differentiation of the division of labor. A new aggregation form emerges within an axial civilization, with groups of experts referring to centers of power. The professional profile of the elites is conceived of as being grounded in an existential leap

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Zweiter Band: Existenzerhellung*, Berlin, DE: Verlag Julius Springer 1932, p. 204. [Henceforth cited as P2]

¹⁵ Alfons Grieder, "Further Remarks on Boundary Conditions, Boundary Situations and Jaspersian Grenzsituationen," *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 41/3 (October 2010), 319-324, here p. 322. [Henceforth cited as FRB]

¹⁶ In this sense, one cannot but agree with Grieder about the limits of a phenomenological description of boundary situations (FRB 323).

¹⁷ The phatic community is partially opposed to the communicative community that I describe above. Whether radical silence can be taken to be a (proper) part of communication, is to be asked.

toward existing, resulting from a tension between mundane, organized forms of learning and erudition, on the one hand, and the transcendence presupposed by those, on the other. Since living in an axial age is not a necessary evolutionary stage, one can ask what kind of historical form would have a communicative democratic society have as an alternative to the deliberating type of expert groups? Secondly, if Jaspers' situatedness is examined regarding its epistemic consequences, then elucidation and interpretation in universal history must also be possible for disciplines that use formal and formalized tools such as microeconomics and expected utility theory. Conversely, the differentiation, specialization, and mathematical construction of concepts are some of the crucial aspects of articulating the possibility, if not yet the realization, of existing.

One central idea presented in this essay is the possibility of defining a critical enquiry as pragmatic existentialism. From the previously developed considerations, a conclusion can be drawn: existentialism, at least as far as Jaspers is concerned, can indeed offer a model of rational agency. One final remark is due: for Jaspers, the process of planetarization, which is what Kant calls the common possession of the surface of the earth, exhibits dysfunctional aspects; the type of

consciousness correlating with man's interfering with natural causation is not a liminal axial consciousness, but foreshadows a provincialization of the human perspective leading to the obsolescence of humanism. It remains to be an open question whether this latter consequence coincides with a fate of de-humanization or whether it rather fosters the achievement of a global consciousness that can be conceived as a shift toward an ecological civilization.

Conclusion

In this essay I focused on the concept of limit situations. A limit situation is a setting for a free course of action. The setting can be conceived as the point of origin for something that an agent does; that is, what the agent brings about is necessary for the way in which the agent faces the situation and might not be the case apart from what the agent does and how the agent acts. The agent's realization of a state of affairs in the situation is, in other words, necessary for the agent's very possibility of acting in the given setting. Hence, some possibilities of applying the concept of liminality to public reason have been assessed here. An agent facing limit situations can be modelled as an interrogative game, where the situation, or the setting, is a device for scorekeeping within the game.