



# Existenz

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## Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* Introductory Remarks at the Review Session

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**Abstract:** In this brief introduction at the review session the author reflects on the systematic position of *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* in the oeuvre of Karl Jaspers and argues that this book is a work of transition, which distinguishes Jaspers' psychopathological phase from his philosophical one.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; *verstehende Psychologie*; interpretative psychology; existential philosophy; psychopathology.

Karl Jaspers published his *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* in 1919, six years after the publication of the first edition of the *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* in 1913. In the years following 1919, primarily slightly revised new editions of these two books had been published, in addition to a few book reviews until the end of 1921, a short study on Strindberg and van Gogh in 1922, and then in 1923 the first, very brief presentation of Jaspers' *Die Idee der Universität*. Thereafter, Jaspers did not publish anything until 1931. Even if this publication activity were to be regarded as being quite considerable for regular scholars, for Jaspers it had been an unusually long, unusually silent publishing phase. In particular, in the years between 1919 and 1931, when few new works have been published by Jaspers just as in the years of Germany's *Drittes Reich*.

To the participants on this panel it is well known that in the years after the appearance of the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* Jaspers broadened his education in philosophy, or as he himself once has put it, that he started studying philosophy at a time at which he was already professor for philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In the twelve

years after the publication of the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* Jaspers developed his philosophical genre, that is, his philosophy of existence, which had been published in the early 1930s in three volumes with the title *Philosophie*. Hence, Jaspers was in the 1920s not inactive at all, rather he reoriented himself during this period both scientifically and academically.

It is in my humble opinion very appropriate to call the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* a book of transition—namely, the transition from Jaspers, the physician and psychiatrist, to Jaspers, the philosopher. As a physician and psychiatrist, Jaspers was initially primarily interested in the pathology of human mental life. Jaspers wrote his dissertation and his first scientific work at the beginning of the twentieth century—that is, in a time when psychology was establishing itself as an independent, experimental, empirical science. At that time the dispute about psychologism, which was actively waged from the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, had not been completely settled. It was not yet clear, whether the psychologistic position would prevail; and if it were to do so, this could have resulted in the end of philosophy as a primary methodological science.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Erster Band: Philosophische Weltorientierung*, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag 1956, p. XXI.

Jaspers did not take part actively in this debate—especially as at the beginning of the twentieth century he did not even define himself as philosopher. Yet he observed this debate with great interest.

In particular, he was interested in the methodology of psychopathology. His *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* represents the attempt to establish psychopathology as a systematic science. As Jaspers points out in the preface to the *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, from his point of view it is important to learn "to think in psychopathological terms,"<sup>2</sup> and not to learn psychopathology merely as an accumulation of facts.

Considering this perspective, it was no surprise, that after 1913 Jaspers started to work on a comprehensive book regarding *verstehende Psychologie* (interpretative psychology), a term, that he had introduced in his *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*. As part of this work, Jaspers also addresses the topic of worldviews, which was very popular at the beginning of the twentieth century. He himself gave lectures on this topic in the latter half of the 1920s. However, in 1916 and 1917 he abandoned the project of writing a book on interpretative psychology; instead, he focused his research on the topic of worldviews.

This turned out to be a good choice: When in 1919 a position of associate professor for philosophy was vacant at Heidelberg University, Jaspers, who until then was merely authorized to teaching classes in psychology, took this opportunity and applied for this professorship by using the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*—in spring of 1920 he was appointed Associate Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg University.

This means that for Jaspers, the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* was his ticket to an academic career as a philosopher. The eminently philosophical impact of this book, however, is not due to strategic considerations. In the foreword to the fourth edition of the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, which Jaspers wrote in 1954 in Basel, he retrospectively comments on the hybrid nature of this book, which he calls his "first philosophical utterance."<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing the book, it was important for Jaspers to deal with the

problem of worldviews in a manner, that was clearly distinguished from what he has called "prophetic philosophy" (PW x). He argued against prophetic philosophy, as from his point of view, the normative intentions of such a philosophy are against the very nature of philosophy—which should enable self-reflection and helping with living an autonomous life. Consistent with the idea of his interpretative psychology, Jaspers' goal was to only to provide "clarifications and possibilities as a means of self-reflection" (PW vii). He also points out: "Anyone who wants a direct answer to the question of how he should live his life, will look in vain for it in this book" (PW vii).

The philosophical impetus of the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* thus consists in a program that Jaspers develops in his period of silence in the 1920s, which was later published with the titles *Philosophical World Orientation*, *Enlightenment of Existence*, and *Metaphysics*, as Jaspers has subtitled the three volumes of his *Philosophie*. It is well known, that one very important part of the second volume, *Enlightenment of Existence*, the analysis of limit situations, was first published in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*.

As Jaspers wrote about his early work in 1954, all of this happened with philosophical naivety and "fruitful obscurity" (PW x). Some thoughts, which Jaspers later enhanced with great philosophical detail, have already been presented in a perhaps not crystal-clear, but fresh and colorful way in the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, which, by the way, was Jaspers' first book written not only for a scientific audience, but for everyone with a certain degree of general education. So almost right from the beginning of his philosophical career, Jaspers intended to reach out beyond the limited audience of the scientific community.

The new edition of the *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, published in 2019 by Oliver Immel as part of the complete edition of Jaspers' writings, is preceded by a very informative introduction from the editor and provides extensive comments and annotations, which give useful insight into the historical and philosophical significance of this work of transition. The fact that this work is now at the center of this conference can be considered a seminal opportunity for the research on Jaspers—and I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributes to this conference in these difficult times of the pandemic. Thank you.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, transl. J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1963, p. x.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, Berlin, DE: Springer Verlag 1954, p. viii. [Henceforth cited as PW, all translations are by the author]