



Transcendence in Karl Jaspers, Kant, and Plotinus

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Abstract: Karl Jaspers addresses the topics *Existenz* and transcendence in the three volumes of his 1932 work *Philosophy*. Each volume describes one specific aspect of being in the world, namely, orientation, existence, and metaphysical transcendence. Humans discover orientation in the world through scientific fact-finding. In this context, one comes to grips with one's existence in the world through subjective reflection upon the boundary situations of one's life and through interpersonal existential communication. We confront the transcendence of *Existenz* through our reason when discovering the limits of its autonomous functioning. In this essay, I discuss the nature of *Existenz* and transcendence in Jaspers' philosophy and compare it on the one hand with the Kantian view of the ideas of autonomous reason, and on the other hand with Plotinus' view of the Transcendent One.

Keywords: God; *Existenz*; transcendent; transcendental ideas; reason; regulative principle; nothing; the One.

Karl Jaspers on Existenz and Transcendence

Existenz for Karl Jaspers is transcendent. He writes:

If by "world" I mean the sum of all that cognitive orientation can reveal to me as cogently knowable for everyone, the question arises whether the being of the world is all there is. Does cognitive thinking stop with world orientation? What we refer to in mythical terms as the soul and God, and in philosophical language as *Existenz* and transcendence, is not of this world. Neither one is knowable, in the sense of things in the world. Yet both might have another kind of being. They need not be nothing, even though they are not known. They could be objects of thought, if not of cognition.¹

These remarks clearly imply that, for Jaspers, reality is not exhausted by all that there is in the world,

although one cannot have knowledge of what the mythical terms "soul" and "God" refer to, or what the philosophical terms "*Existenz*" and "transcendence" denote. They are not things in the world, but they need not, for that reason, be nothing. Jaspers clearly states here that one cannot know them, but one can think them; they can be objects of thought in some sense.

Jaspers uses several terms to characterize this *Existenz*. The key sentence is:

I am *Existenz* if I do not become an object for myself.
[P2 3]

So *Existenz* is that aspect of me which I, as a subject, cannot turn into an object for myself. It is in this sense a possibility and not an object. As a possibility which can never be objectified, it is freedom. It is my own self that is independent of my cognitive grasp. It is there for itself and for other *Existenz* but never uncoverable through reflection. It is not my existence as a human being but, as a human, I transcend my existence, and

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Volume 2, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1969, p. 3. [Henceforth cited as P2]

my *Existenz* is this transcendence. In Jaspers' words:

Existence exists empirically, *Existenz* as freedom only.
Existence is wholly temporal, while *Existenz*, in time,
is more than time. [P2 4]

My *Existenz* detaches me from the world of my existence by not letting me become prey to it. It appears, judging from Jaspers' use of language, that my *Existenz* saves me from becoming an object among objects in the world of my existence. This is what he seems to call attention to when he writes that

to *Existenz*, the condition of its reality in existence is that it comprehends itself as unconditional. If I merely want to exist, without qualifications, I am bound to despair when I see that the reality of my existence lies in total foundering. [P2 4]

Such an eventuality involves despair. The possibility of transcending my existence is what saves me or what is my *Existenz*.

I still crave the world as a condition for the joy of living, but my *Existenz* detaches me from the world and keeps my craving for the world from becoming an absolute impulse, which is self-destructive. Jaspers describes this situation as follows:

It is against this impulse that my possible *Existenz* warns me to detach myself from the world lest I become its prey. Or, *in the world* that is so close to me, so much my kin, I may set out to *transcend* the world. Whether seeing it, thinking about it, acting and loving, producing and developing in it—in all that, then, I deal with something else at the same time, with a phenomenon of the transcendence that speaks to me. [P2 5]

Hence, this raises the question, what is transcendence for Jaspers, and how does it relate to *Existenz*? Jaspers writes: "Whenever I try to grasp being *qua* being, I fail."² This implies that being *qua* being transcends. Given this, the key thing is to understand his use of the term "transcendence." His characterization of transcendence is complex and can occasionally appear paradoxical. Some of the ways in which he tries to get at transcendence are the following:

- i. "Transcendence must be present where I seek it" (P3 5).
- ii. In transcending, one has no objective knowledge.

- iii. One does not become aware of it as one does of oneself, "in the elucidation of *Existenz*" (P3 5).
- iv. One knows about it through an inner action which lets one connect with transcendence—this intrinsic being—even as one fails to grasp it.
- v. *Existenz* can be informed by transcendence to uplift itself in existence.
- vi. *Existenz* rises to itself and to transcendence in a single movement. "The modes of this search for being by possible *Existenz* are ways to transcendence" (P3 5).
- vii. *Existenz* can either deny it, or oppose it, or go along with transcendence. In other words, transcendence remains the ceaseless question to be answered for any possible *Existenz*.
- viii. *Existenz* is absolutely independent of anything else. In temporal existence, unconditionality is a feature of it. This independence or freedom drives one to despair. One is aware that as a being based on self alone, one sinks into the void.
- ix. How do I realize myself? My fulfillment comes to me. I am not fulfilled if I fall back into the default position. Hence, the test of my fulfillment as *Existenz* (freedom) is the knowledge that my *Existenz* rests on transcendence (P3 6).
- x. "Existenz cannot say of itself that it is finite, or infinite, or both" (P3 7). It is the insurmountable discontent or despair of *Existenz* that brings forth the search for transcendence. Therefore, *Existenz* exists in relation to transcendence; otherwise, it does not exist. Its discontent as well as satisfaction by voiding temporal existence lies in this relation.
- xi. Jaspers also characterizes Metaphysics in terms of transcendence. For him, metaphysics is philosophical thought about transcendence. It originates with "transcendent experience," and it serves as a "means of elucidation" for *Existenz* (P3 11).
- xii. Transcendence is at the borderline of the worlds of being and non-being. To me as consciousness, only the empirical object is real. To me as *Existenz*, the empirical object becomes unreal on grounds of transcendence (P3 17).
- xiii. As *Existenz*, one grasps one's transcendence. However, transcendence is not grasped as one's own alone: It is more than one person's transcendence. Hence, transcendence as universal and as the One is not conceivable

² Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Volume 3, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press 1971, p. 4. [Henceforth cited as P3]

objectively. "The paradox of transcendence lies in the fact that we can *grasp it only historically* but cannot adequately *conceive it as being historic itself*" (P3 21).

- xiv. Jaspers seems to elaborate on this paradoxicality when he says that transcendent being is inconceivable and indefinable, and in this sense, it is nothing: "Of nothingness I could think only by not thinking. If I do think of it, I am thinking of *something* as the correlate of nothingness" (P3 39).
- xv. For Jaspers the intrinsic meaning of *Existenz* is freedom, but not that of transcendence. It is the ground for the freedom of *Existenz*, as well as intellect and idea. It compels us to transcend them all. But then founders on its own unthinkability (P3 58).
- xvi. In relation to transcendence and God, Jaspers writes, "God as a personality with the planning, guiding will of perfect wisdom and goodness is an all but unavoidable conception. But this too is a symbol, a vanishing image, to be voided in transcending thought" (P3 59).
- xvii. There is no such thing as knowledge of God. However, the power of transcending is at work in the theological effort to cognize God. This transcending does not come to an end simply by declaring God's unthinkability. Rather, "it takes a wealth of approaches to find the intrinsic unthinkability and to make sure of it in all its modes" (P3 60).
- xviii. Man as *Existenz* comes to his sense of freedom through becoming "a part of the divine world." In this freedom lies his sense of incomprehensible guilt. This is where his worth and greatness also lie—in defiance (P3 65).
- xix. For Jaspers human consciousness is not a part of a historic/objective substance. As free possible *Existenz* humans will continue to doubt their freedom as well as transcendence. In reflecting dialectically, one's consciousness suffers the impossibility of finding answers to its unending questions. In mythical theodicy, the solutions to its problems are believed, not known (P3 69).

It can be plainly seen from the above characterizations and remarks that transcendence is fundamental to Jaspers' existential philosophy, along with *Existenz*, which itself involves transcendence. Neither transcendence nor *Existenz* are objectifiable. Humans come to grips with them by thinking the unthinkable. They founder in the very act of trying to

think them for they are not a thing, they are nothing. But that does not make them unreal. Without them, one can be voided as a free human being and reduced to existence or to the world of objects. Humans hover at the border of being and non-being as *Existenz* through transcending objectivity or the objective world. Transcendence as universal and as the One is not mine alone, although it is involved in my possible *Existenz*, or freedom. The One or soul are not knowable objects; they transcend, and their transcendence is all that we can get a sense of. Going beyond such a sense of transcendence is meaningless. Theology becomes mythical and dogmatic when it makes such an effort at objectification of the One or the soul.

Kant on Autonomy of Reason and its Transcendental Ideas

Is autonomous reason also transcendent in some sense, or is it only the source of the transcendental conditions of knowledge and morality as theoretical and practical reason?

In an attempt to answer this question, I will first explore the concept of autonomy of reason. The key idea in this regard is that reason is the only human faculty that is entirely free, by its very definition, to accept or reject something as rational or irrational. It cannot be coerced into accepting an idea or a principle as rational. If it accepts it as rational by its own independent lights, only then the idea or the principle is rational. In addition, reason itself is the only and the sole judge of the rightness and wrongness of its own judgments on an agent's beliefs and actions as well as the standards used in formulating such judgments. It is both the source and judge of all its judgments and standards. It is self-sufficient as a source and as a judge of the rationality of beliefs and morality of actions. It helps humans form beliefs and make practical choices. In both cases, its ideas, principles, and standards are its own at all levels.

Beliefs and actions that it helps form or decide are its objects. It is directed at them. But the question that needs to be asked is: can it completely objectify itself? The short answer is, yes, it can. Reason that creates ideas or evaluates them functions as a creator or evaluator. The ideas are its objects. In the process of creating them or evaluating them, it functions as a thinking subject. This subject-object distinction cannot be obliterated. Hence, the subject aspect of reason, that ever escapes becoming an object in the

process of creating or evaluating ideas, remains a subject in a given act of reason, and, hence, it escapes the grasp of reason upon it. In other words, reason cannot be reason without functioning as a subject directed at its objects. But once it has performed its act of judgment of a belief or recommended choice, it can then turn upon its judgment or choice and evaluate it as right or wrong. It can objectify all its judgements or choices, or, in other words, it can always evaluate them. In so doing, it does not obliterate subject/object distinction, but, later, it can evaluate itself as subject. Not in the moment, but later on. As I will argue below, this role of reason as a subject is based on the reason's idea of soul or Ego as substance, which, in Kant's view, is its own creation.

In the domain of knowledge, no action or belief escapes the purview of reason. Therefore, its ability to be autonomous and self-sufficient in its rationality presupposes that its rationality has no limits as far as the evaluation of beliefs and actions goes, and it is itself the author of all its rules.

What has been said by Kant about reason as creator and evaluator of beliefs applies with equal force to its practical aspect. Practical reason also functions as a supplier of maxims of conduct for the choice of actions. It determines one's will or choice. Insofar as it determines human will, it functions as the subject whose object is the maxim of choice of conduct. In all such determinations, practical reason can evaluate its maxims as being rational or non-rational.

This autonomy is rooted in the very nature of reason in its capacity of being creator and evaluator of ideas and principles, as well as determinant of the maxims of conduct. Autonomy of reason rules out the possibility of any judgment or choice falling outside the purview of reason, although in all its judgments and choices it functions as a subject that transcends objectification at any given moment.

By further elaborating on these thoughts, it becomes apparent that, in Kant's view, reason has been given to humans by nature for the purpose of determining their will. Kant writes:

Now in a being that has reason and a will, if the proper end of nature were its *preservation*, its welfare, in a word its *happiness*, then nature would have hit upon a very bad arrangement in selecting the reason of the creature to carry out this purpose. For all the actions that the creature has to perform for this purpose, and the whole rule of its conduct, would be marked out for it far more accurately by instinct, and that end would

have thereby been attained much more surely than it ever can be by reason...the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is...*good in itself*.³

But such a good will that is good in itself and, not good just as a means toward an end, can be produced by reason only by determining the will through maxims that are based on universal law, that is, maxims that are universalizable. This is how Kant states the third practical principle regarding human will,

as supreme condition of its harmony with universal practical reason, the idea of *the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law*. [GMM 81, Ak4:431]

But being universal in character is not the characteristic of only the practical reason. Speculative or theoretical reason is also non-discriminatory, and its correctness in applications and standards is completely a matter of its universal character. Logical inferences, for example, are valid deductively if and only if they fit a universally valid form. Valid individual inferences are valid because they fit a universal form or pattern of valid reasoning.

This unity of practical reason and theoretical reason based on the universalizability criterion embodied in the Categorical Imperative has been well argued in recent literature by Onora O'Neill and others, as noted by Garrath Williams:

as Onora O'Neill points out...Kant's claims about practical reason imply a further claim about reason's "common principle." Kant has argued that the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of practical reason. He has also argued that practical reason has primacy over theoretical reason. It follows, therefore, that the Categorical Imperative is the supreme principle of reason.⁴

Williams notes in this encyclopedia entry that the most explicit statement of Kant regarding this unifying principle is found in a footnote in his 1786

³ Immanuel Kant, "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785)," transl. Mary J. Gregor, in *Immanuel Kant, Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 37-108, here pp. 50-2, Ak4:395-6. [Henceforth cited as GMM]

⁴ Garrath Williams, "Kant's Account of Reason," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2024 Edition)*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/kant-reason/>. [Henceforth cited as KAR]

essay, "What is it to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" where Kant writes:

To make use of one's own reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground or the rule on which one assumes it into a universal principle for the use of reason. [KAR]⁵

In the context of our discussion here, it means that reason is characterized by its universalizable character in all its applications, judgments, and choices (that is, determinations of will). Otherwise, it is not reason.

Its autonomy consists in its being a law unto itself. This idea is implied in Kant's argument:

On the presupposition of the freedom of the will of an intelligence, however, its *autonomy*, as the formal condition under which alone it can be determined, is a necessary consequence. [GMM 106, Ak 4:461]

The rational will results from the universal character of reason if it is based on a universalizable maxim internal to it. Otherwise, it loses its autonomy. In his reading of Kant, Shelly Kagan argues cogently that autonomy of will (and reason) is based on the universality of reason. Therefore, it is the universal character of reason that makes it autonomous and self-sufficient. It is a law unto itself in this sense. As a result, it can sit in judgment on all our beliefs, actions, and all levels of standards that we may use in the evaluation of beliefs and actions.⁶

But, as one knows, in Kant's epistemology, reason has a regulative role as well. Kant writes:

all human knowledge begins with intuitions, goes from there to concepts, and ends with ideas.⁷

Intuitions belong to sensibility, concepts to

understanding, and ideas to reason in its regulative capacity. These ideas are a result of reason's drive to unify everything. As Kant puts it, the transcendental ideas of reason

have to do with the unconditioned synthetical unity of all conditions in general...all transcendental ideas will be brought under three classes, of which the first contains the absolute unity of the thinking subject, the second the absolute unity of the series of conditions of appearance, the third the absolute unity of the conditions of all objects of thought in general. [CPuR 405-6, A334]

These transcendental ideas of reason play a fundamental role in systematically uniting all human knowledge of the objects as well as our inner world of consciousness. They provide teleological unity to the world of humans, their consciousness, and moral actions. These ideas are produced by the regulative principle of the function of reason.

Kant defines the term "idea" in relation to pure reason as follows:

By the idea of a necessary concept of reason, I understand one to which no congruent object can be given in the senses. [CPuR 402, A327]

The transcendental ideas are a product of the proper function of reason, which is to produce "unity *a priori* through concepts to the understanding's manifold cognitions" (CPuR 389, B359). Kant outlines the principles that govern the production of this systematic unity by reason. These are the principles of homogeneity, specification, and continuity of forms (CPuR 598, B686). Under the first principle, reason subsumes the empirical conceptions of understanding under increasingly higher genera. Under the second, it uncovers "the variety of what is the same in kind under lower species" (CPuR 598, B685). The third one is a combination of the first two, and it

offers a continuous transition from every species to every other through a graduated increase of varieties. [CPuR 598, B686]

Kant argues that

all pure concepts have to do generally with the synthetic unity of representations, but concepts of pure reason (transcendental ideas) have to do with the unconditioned synthetic unity of all conditions in general. [CPuR 405, A334]

In my reading of Kant, the transcendental ideas

⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793)," transl. George Di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press 1996, pp. 39-215, here pp. 3-14, 8:146n.

⁶ Shelly Kagan, "Kantianism for Consequentialists," in *Immanuel Kant, Groundwork For The Metaphysics Of Morals*, ed. Allen W. Wood, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 2002, pp. 111-156, here pp. 112-22.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 622, A703. [Henceforth cited as CPuR]

come down to three ideas. Firstly, human actions and feelings are subsumed under the idea of a simple substance with a personal identity, the Ego, which persists. The internal and external states of this substance keep changing, but the substance itself remains permanent. In the second place, reason brings all internal and external natural phenomena under the idea of the world. In the third place, reason takes the whole system of possible experience as forming one absolute unity based upon the thing that contains

the supreme condition of the possibility of everything that can be thought (the being of all beings). [CPuR 406, A334]

This absolute unity I understand to be the idea of God.

Kant insists that these ideas do not have any real objects corresponding to them. He uses the phrase "ideal" for the self, God, and the world. Kant explains:

The transcendental deduction of all the ideas of speculative reason not...as *constitutive* principle for the extension of our cognition to more objects than experience can give, but as *regulative* principles for the systematic unity of the manifold of empirical cognition in general, through which this cognition, within its proper boundaries, is cultivated and corrected more than could happen without such ideas, through the mere use of the principles of understanding. [CPuR 606, B699]

One must keep in view that for Kant, these ideas of reason are transcendental conditions for all our empirical cognitions. Humans can have determinate ideas of things in the world only as unified minds (souls) with the things belonging to a systematically unified world, which is based upon an ultimate ground for all experience (God). In Kant's words:

It is the transcendental *ideal* which is the ground of the thoroughgoing determination that is necessarily encountered in everything existing, and which constitutes the supreme and complete material condition of its possibility, to which all thinking of objects in general must, as regards the content of that thinking, be traced back. [CPuR 556, A575]

Therefore, the ideas of reason are of the highest importance in Kant's epistemology, although there are no real objects corresponding to them.

Not only do one's determinate conceptions of things depend on these transcendental ideas, but our actions, in their morality, also are linked with them. The idea of God is the greatest systematic unity under

which reason brings all experience. As per this idea, the world is grounded in a supremely good perfect intelligence. That basically means that the world has a teleological unity. Hence, insofar as reason brings the world under this teleological unity, it is playing a legislative role. It points to the condition under which we need to organize our actions. Reason, thereby, directs humans to the Moral Law that should govern their actions. As and when one chooses in accordance with the Moral Law, reason is thereafter put to a practical use. This practical reason has the *summum bonum* or the highest good as its goal.⁸ The highest good has two elements to it: being a will determined by only rational maxims and, hence, free (act only on universalizable maxims), and being happy (treat everyone, including yourself, as an end and never as a means). One must act rationally as a matter of duty, and one must also act to ensure that one does not get exploited by others. The latter constitutes one's duty to protect one's own happiness.

Now, practical reason can achieve these goals only if it unifies our actions and feelings under the idea of a supremely good being who will, in the end, ensure an appropriate and just reward (happiness) deserved by moral agents. This normally does not happen in the world. Often, people do not get rewarded or punished in this world according to their actions. The ideas of God and the immortality of the soul ensure that such rewards and punishments eventually do take place. These ideas provide a teleological unity to our moral life without which practical reason cannot sustain its *summum bonum*, that is, the union of a rational will and happiness.

Without the idea of this teleological unity under the ideas/postulates of God and immortality of the soul, the conditions for choosing under the Moral Law cannot exist. The ultimate hope for reward for living under the Moral Law and the ultimate threat of punishment for violating the Moral Law would vanish.

Hence, although one cannot know God, and there is no object corresponding to this idea of reason, humans can, on moral grounds, believe in God. However, in relation to morality, this idea of God is not to be understood in terms of God providing divine commands to human beings. Kant's position on the sanctity of moral law is as follows:

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, transl. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2015, pp. 89-90, Ak 5:110-1.

So far as practical reason has the right to lead us, we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God's commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them. We will study freedom under the purposive unity in accordance with principles of reason, and will believe ourselves to be in conformity with the divine will only insofar as we hold as holy the moral law that reason teaches us from the nature of actions themselves, believing ourselves to serve this divine will only through furthering what is best for the world in ourselves and others. [CPuR 684, A819]

So, the moral law is binding upon us because it emerges from within the practical reason. The idea of God plays a regulative role by way of ensuring that the highest good is attainable.

As noted above, reason is completely autonomous or free and self-sufficient. This autonomy of reason makes it possible for our will to be autonomous or free, which constitutes a precondition for all morality. This means that we humans function as moral agents due to the autonomy of our reason and because of the teleological unity of our actions and feelings guided by the ideas of reason.

This teleological unity, under which reason subsumes human consciousness as well as the world, also implies that nature is a systematic unity and, hence, functions uniformly. Such a uniformity, of which one cannot have any knowledge that it really exists, helps humans to study nature in a systematic fashion guided by the empirical conceptions of understanding. Therefore, this teleological unity produced by the ideas of reason has both moral and scientific implications. In a Kantian interpretation of nature, the Humean problem of induction does not arise, for uniformity is supplied by the transcendental ideas of reason.

It is plain from the above analysis that the ideas of reason are not transcendent in Kant's view. They are the transcendental conditions for the possibility of our knowledge of the world and the possibility of our morality. Hence, in relation to self or God, where Jaspers sees transcendence, Kant sees only the regulative transcendental role of reason.

Plotinus on the Concept of Transcendent One

The central concept in Plotinus' philosophy is that of unity. Plotinus identifies unity with being or reality and argues that things have being or reality according

to the measure of unity they possess. The greater the unity, the greater the reality of a thing. Hence, the most real or the Ultimate is pure and complete unity with not a whiff of manifold to it. In the sixth *Ennead* Plotinus writes:

It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings. This is equally true of things whose existence is primal and of all that are in any degree to be numbered among beings. What could exist at all except as one thing? Deprived of unity, a thing ceases to be what it is called: no army unless as a unity: a chorus, a flock, must be one thing. Even house and ship demand unity, one house, one ship; unity gone, neither remains thus even continuous magnitudes could not exist without an inherent unity; break them apart and their very being is altered in the measure of the breach of unity.⁹

Unity, therefore, is the hallmark of reality. Since the greatest unity or ultimate unity must be absolute, it cannot have any complexity to it. In Plotinus' metaphysics, this is the One that transcends all concepts and comprehension. He writes:

Generative of all, The Unity is none of all; neither thing nor quantity nor quality nor intellect nor soul; not in motion, not at rest, not in place, not in time: it is the self-defined, unique in form or, better, formless, existing before Form was, or Movement or Rest, all of which are attachments of Being and make Being the manifold it is. [E 355, VI.9.3.63-70]

This Unity, which is above everything, is the First. All else emanates from it in a specific order. Yet,

when we speak of this First as Cause, we are affirming something happening not to it but to us. [E 355, VI.9.3.80-82]

It is completely "Self-Enclosed." The soul or mind finds it impossible to reach it. There is nothing that bounds it. It cannot be grasped at all because its reality is diffuse. The human mind "in sheer dread of holding to nothingness" (E 355, VI.9.3.9-10) slips away from it.

The concept of knowing cannot apply to this ultimate Unity. Knowing involves coming to grips with the object of knowledge. But this transcendent Unity is not an object. No process of knowing

⁹ Plotinus, *The Six Enneads*, transl. Stephen MacKenna and B. S. Page, Chicago, IL: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. 1955, pp. 353-4, VI.9.1.1-13. [Henceforth cited as E] <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.460836/page/n3/mode/2up>.

or intellection can reach it. It is a presence that is overpowering all knowledge. As soon as our mind comes to know something, it no longer remains a simplex. It becomes a manifold and, hence, is removed from absolute unity. The One, the ultimate Unity, slips away from such a process of knowing.

All that is good emanates from the One, from the absolute Unity "as from the sun all the light of the day" (E 356, VI.9.4.16-17). This ultimate Principle, the One, Plotinus notes, is absent from no one and yet it is present to none. Only a select few who have been disciplined in the proper way can receive this Presence. This discipline involves attaining likeness to the Ultimate as well as the power that the Supreme has given to the souls in eternity.

The One is prior to all, including being whose unity comes from something else. No terms can be applied to it. One can call it the Unity with the understanding that it is not the unity of something other than itself. Being is its offspring. It is the Cause of the Intellectual-Principle which contains all the Forms. All is derived from the One. However, it is not one of its derivatives (E 356, VI.9.5.48-62). This Prior, this Supreme, has no Otherness to it. As such, it is present to the one who puts Otherness away.

Man, so Plotinus explains, can outgrow Being and one's essence can become one with the Transcendent:

The self thus lifted, we are in the likeness of the Supreme: if from that heightened self we pass still higher – image to archetype – we have won the Term of all our journeying. [E 360, VI.9.11.59-61]

Therefore, Plotinus, does believe that the Transcendent, while beyond all conceivability, can be present to humans in very special moments – moments that can be characterized as mystical. This journey of going beyond all Being, all objects of knowledge, and all conceptions is the ultimate journey for human beings and the apex of all our journeyings in life. It happens when one outgrows Being and attains some likeness to the One. It is possible for humans by virtue of the power they received from the Supreme in Eternity. It is a moment for humans to become identical with the One by shedding all otherness.

Comparison

For Kant, ideas of reason are the transcendental conditions for the determinate conception of all things.

There is no object corresponding to these ideas. One can believe in God, immortality of the soul, and the world on the basis of the teleological unity that they bestow upon nature as well as our practical and moral life. However, Kant does not seem to believe in any mystical experience of God or soul, as taking them as objects of any kind of knowledge is simply an illusion of speculative reason against which humans must guard. The soul or Ego, for example, cannot be objectified, except its empirical states, and ever escapes one's efforts to turn it into an object, yet that is not because it has a being that transcends our knowledge. For Kant, this is the case because human reasoning has created the idea of this soul, this substance, this Ego, this unity of apperception, under its regulative function to help humans unify their experiences as known by them through the lens of the intuitions of sensibility and the concepts of understanding. Itself, it is not a real thing that transcends.

However, Jaspers uses the human failure to overpower the subject-object distinction as evidence that the subject transcends objectification forever. He seems to agree with Kant that this subject is not an entity; rather, his concept of *Existenz* as possible freedom is based on this transcendence. Humans experience this *Existenz* as transcendence and nothing more, nothing less. In boundary situations and communication with other *Existenz*, one experiences this transcendence with greater intensity. For Jaspers it is this transcendence which saves one from becoming a void – an object among objects in the world. Humans are authentic insofar as they grasp this transcendent aspect of themselves. Transcendence, however, is not exhausted by my individual experience of it in my *Existenz*. It is not mine alone insofar as I cannot conceive it or know it as an object. It is universal and its power is reflected in theological efforts to cognize God, who, according to Jaspers is transcendence rather than a Being or object. For Jaspers, the real task of theology is to uncover the intrinsic unthinkability of God as transcendence. He is exclusively transcendence only, so to speak. The same holds true for man as *Existenz* or possible freedom. I am *Existenz* insofar as I transcend my existence or objectivity.

Kant does not define either reason or soul or God as transcendence. This appears to be the central and crucial difference between Kant and Jaspers.

Plotinus, however, takes God to be pure unity or simplex and, hence, transcendence pure and simple.

It is a presence for him. Like Jaspers' subject, Plotinus takes the One as being beyond all objecthood. It eludes humans; it is unthinkable, it is nothing. One can become identical with this Transcendent One in special moments just by shedding all otherness. One might say that for Plotinus, in these special moments, humans become one with the Transcendent One.

One sees a certain similarity here between Jaspers' and Plotinus' positions. Jaspers takes human *Existenz* as transcendence and, for him, God is also transcendence. In authentic *Existenz*, humans become identical with the Transcendence that is mythically described as God, yet that is indeed just Transcendence and not a Being. This, one can say, is Jaspers' mysticism.

I think the three positions outlined above can be usefully placed in the context of what the early Ludwig Wittgenstein had to say about metaphysical subject. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein writes:

5.632: The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world.

5.633: *Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted? You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do not really see the eye. And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye.*¹⁰

For Wittgenstein, the eye is not a part of the field of sight. Rather, it is the limit of the field of sight. That is the metaphor he uses to clarify the subject's position. The subject is not a part of the world of objects. It is a limit of this world. One cannot go to the other side of this limit and describe it or grasp it (TLP 5.61). The eye cannot become a part of the field of sight to see itself. For the early Wittgenstein, famously, the limits of the world, limits of thought, and limits of language and logic coincide (TLP 5.6). This means that there is nothing to be said about the eye, the subject of experience, transcendent *Existenz*, or the Ultimate unity.

Kant thinks that the ideas of reason are the transcendental conditions for one's definite conceptions of things in the world. Without them, humans cannot have any definite conceptions. This

Kantian position is what seems to be portrayed by Wittgenstein's eye metaphor. The eye is the limit of the field of sight. It is not a part of the field and, hence, cannot be known. But, without the eye, one cannot have the field of sight either. It is the transcendental condition for the field of sight. For Kant, the transcendental conditions of knowledge of things in the world are a product of the regulative function of reason. For Wittgenstein, they are the limits of logic. I suggest that the two positions seem to differ only in terminology.

On the other hand, Jaspers' position seems different if looked at from the perspective of Wittgenstein's eye metaphor. Since the subject cannot be objectified, it is transcendent *Existenz*. As quoted earlier, "I am *Existenz* if I do not become an object for myself" (P2 3). Yet, according to Jaspers, both *Existenz* and transcendence have unthinkability to them for human beings. One thinks the unthinkable in thinking of them. *Existenz* exists in relation to transcendence; otherwise, it does not exist. As argued earlier, the light of the eye metaphor implies that the eye cannot be part of the field of sight. That is the case with Jaspers' *Existenz* and transcendence as well. But exist, they must, for their presence saves me from becoming just another object among objects. In this sense, they are also transcendental conditions for the existence of my subjectivity or consciousness. But they save my subjectivity from becoming prey to my ordinary objective existence. This role—the eye saving itself from becoming a part of the field of sight—is not brought out with any clarity by the early Wittgenstein. The eye is an unthinkable limit of the field of sight.

What we cannot think, that we cannot think: we cannot therefore say what we cannot think. [TLP 5.61]

He goes on to deny that there is such a thing as a subject:

The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing. [TLP 5.631]

Jaspers agrees that subjectivity is not a thing, as it is not objectifiable. However, for Jaspers, this is what makes the thinking subject what it really is, namely, transcendent *Existenz*.

As far as Plotinus is concerned, the One is transcendent, beyond all knowledge and comprehension. No concepts can be applied to it. All else, beginning with the intellection-principle with all the Forms in it, emanates from the One, like the

10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. Charles K. Ogden and Frank P. Ramsey, London, UK: Kegan Paul 1922, side-by-side edition, version 0.69 (September 2, 2025), <https://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/tlp.pdf>. [Henceforth cited as TLP]

light from the sun. The One, as the Ultimate unity, is beyond the subject-object distinction as well. In the light of the eye metaphor, the One is the eye from which the field of sight derives. It is behind and beyond the field of sight, beyond all reach. All is derived from the One. However, it is not one of its derivatives (*E* 356, VI.9.5.48-62). Provided one understands the eye to be the transcendent foundation of the field of sight, the eye metaphor seems to fit Plotinus' position about the Transcendent unity.

The difference between Plotinus and Kant is based on their metaphysical disposition. Plotinus considers the Transcendent One as being the source of all reality. Kant takes the ideas of reason, that is, the ideas of the soul, the world, and God, as mere ideas that play a regulative role in organizing and unifying human knowledge of the things. They have no further reality

beyond being regulative ideas and are not a source of all reality at all. Jaspers also rejects the view that transcendence and *Existenz* are a source of being or have a being for that matter. They are what prevent humans from becoming objects among objects. They save one's subjectivity. In a nutshell, for Plotinus, all reality comes from the Transcendent One; for Kant, ideas of reason have nothing, that is, no object, corresponding to them; and for Jaspers, transcendence is what preserves human subjectivity.

In conclusion, Jaspers retrieves human consciousness or subjectivity through transcendence, Kant retrieves the unity of consciousness through the transcendental ideas of reason, and Plotinus takes the Transcendent One as the source of all reality, including the intellection-principle that contains all the Forms, making knowledge possible for human beings.