



Karl Jaspers and Plotinus Transcendence, Freedom, and Human Existence in Modernity

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Abstract: This essay addresses the significant implications of Jaspers' criticism of the modern order of life, the erosion of authentic selfhood, and the relentless struggle for attaining genuine freedom. The outcome in modernity is often a display of shallowness rather than genuine existence, divisiveness in place of unity, excessive talking instead of communication of fundamental knowledge, and endless imitation in place of authentic presence. Jaspers' and Plotinus' insightful philosophical explorations of freedom, transcendence, and human existence comprehend seminal teachings for modernity and the timeless quest for self-knowledge. For Jaspers, self-realization, transcendence, and acts of freedom require acknowledging connectedness with others and considering human beings from comprehensive new perspectives. For Plotinus, it involves a mystical opening of the One in All and the All in One. Thereby, transcendence encompasses a dual unity of self and otherness, while self-identity retains its fullness.

Keywords: Self-knowledge; authenticity; godhead; otherness; philosophical wisdom; ancient philosophy; transcendent; boundaries.

The nameless which could be grasped would never have been the nameless. The anonymous, the nameless, is not only the true being of man, which tends to vanish in dispersion, but also the true not-being, which seems...to claim the whole realm of life.

Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*.¹

Let us speak of the *nous* in this way, first invoking God himself, not in spoken words, but stretching our soul in prayer toward him, since this is how we can pray to him, alone to the alone.

Plotinus, *Enneads*.²

Introduction

By way of examining the visions of transcendence, freedom, and human existence in the works of

Karl Jaspers and Plotinus, the reader is encouraged to identify the similarities and differences between a modern and an ancient philosopher.

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, transl. Eden and Cedar Paul, London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1951, p. 163. [Henceforth cited as *MM*]

² Plotinus, *Ennead V.1.6.9-12*, "On the Three Primary Hypostases," in *Plotinus, Volume V: Enneads V, 1-9*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1984, p. 29. [Henceforth cited as *E5*]

Both philosophers believe that, regardless of circumstances, a philosopher's gaze should be entirely focused on transcendence and freedom. Comparing the ideas of these two influential philosophers who lived centuries apart is revealing. Their complementary insights into the significance of philosophical transcendence and guidance for future philosophers provide a comprehensive understanding of human freedom and existence, which may prove to be essential for life in modern times, where, amidst societal pressures, individuals avoid making genuine decisions and often conform to maintain a good standing among their peers and a state of pseudo-peace, leading to hidden conflicts regarding self-realization. Jaspers and Plotinus encourage individuals to pursue self-realization in the midst of life's challenges. Freedom involves recognizing and striving toward one's potential, and the betrayal of one's possibility only points to a lack of authentic communication. In contrast, transcendence and freedom require an understanding of the limitations of human knowledge and the necessity of genuine self-knowledge, which involves the recognition of one's otherness and unknowability. In both philosophers, personal decisions and actions primarily determine human existence; individuals must act genuinely in the here and now, as this forms the foundation for future activity. For Jaspers, individual freedom demands that each person evokes from within what no other can, allowing direct certainty of one's relation with the godhead. The human future can only be conceived as an open possibility that allows aiming for transcendent freedom to modify events. In Plotinus, freedom entails the soul's harmonizing with the power and character they possess, with the star above them serving as their guiding spirit, their god, and their *daimōn*.

Jaspers' Viewpoints on these Themes

Jaspers identifies the ongoing and irreversible loss of meaningful substance being a prominent feature of our current era. He affirms the Greek interpretation of *philosophos*, the lover of wisdom, as accurately reflecting the essence of philosophy, which

encompasses a comprehensive investigation of the entirety of existence. Jaspers writes that philosophy pertains to

man as man, with a truth which, wherever it is [manifesting] moves us more deeply than any scientific knowledge.³

The certainty sought in philosophy is not the objective, scientific kind of uniform for all minds; instead, it is an inner certainty involving a person's totality. For Jaspers, "Philosophy means to be on the way" (WW12), thereby reflecting the questing nature of philosophers that consists in challenging answers with further questions. The continuous pursuit of philosophical wisdom symbolizes humanity's journey through time and offers the potential for profound satisfaction and "exalted moments of perfection" (WW 12). However, realizing man's historical essence reveals being as such. This stands in contrast to fully capturing perfection through fixed beliefs, dogmas, or doctrines. As such, philosophical activity aims to comprehend the transcendent reality within the scope of human experiences.

Jaspers' criticism of modern society revolves around the deterioration of genuine selfhood and the pursuit of authentic freedom. In today's purely secular world, human activities often subject individuals to historical processes driven by complex political power that fail to comprehend the overall existential situation. Blind or unconscious will, and a lack of meaning, govern and diminish human affairs, fragmenting them. Given the increased societal pressures, individuals struggle to recognize and exercise their freedom to act and are less motivated by responsibilities for the world. Human action frequently results in superficiality, division, and imitation, hindering authentic decision-making. However, making decisions and taking action in the present creates the foundation for future activities and self-realization. To act authentically, one must engage in genuine philosophical thinking, which requires foresight, comprehensive understanding, and awareness that the infinite realm of possibilities remains open beyond immediate reality. Anything less leads to chaos, destructiveness, and disintegration, resulting in outrage and irritable activity (MM 92-3).

Note: Throughout this essay, I have occasionally modified Armstrong's translation in order to better convey the original Greek meaning, or to enhance the translated text's readability.

³ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom: An Introduction to Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Manheim, New Haven: Yale University Press 1960, p. 8. [Henceforth cited as WW]

Powerless, modern individuals often follow predetermined paths, focusing on optimal methods for the rationalized provision of life's necessities, which can only lead to frustration when they realize that the ultimate objective of such industriousness remains unknown. However, that very unknowability of the objective is the springboard: "to him alone who, despite everything, can fix his gaze upon Transcendence" (MM 93). Sixty pages back, Jaspers states:

A knowledge of my world provides the sole means whereby I can: first of all, become aware of the extent of the possible; secondly, shape sound plans and form effective resolves; thirdly, acquire the outlooks and the ideas that will enable me (a philosopher) to interpret human life as a manifestation of Transcendence. [MM 33]

Transcendence and freedom involve acknowledging one's lack of self-sufficiency. For instance, Jaspers comments that despite its contemplative merits, Michel de Montaigne's work is an illusory approach to the practical, skeptical openness of an "earthbound self-sufficiency" (WW 184). The individual's will, which is not absolute and independent, cannot achieve freedom. It being granted to oneself, one is also prone to failure. However, when one is genuinely oneself, one realizes that existence is not solely one's own doing (WW 45). An unknowable transcendent bestows the openness and freedom of existence. This marvel surpasses human understanding and encompasses, in the words of Jaspers, "the yearning for the unknown; and questioning at the limits—all these are philosophy" (WW 142). Hence, freedom and liberty cannot be coerced or compelled. Instead, they hold that the certainty of God's existence comes from direct experience with the godhead.

In Jaspers, the certainty of God has the force of one's existence. God, freedom, and existence are inseparable. He writes:

We also call man's freedom his existence. My certainty of God has the force of my existence. I can have certainty of Him not as a content of science but as presence for existence. [WW 45]

Otherwise, God exists to the extent I authentically become through freedom, and God's existence is ascertained only as openness to existence. The self undergoes the highest form of freedom when directly connected with transcendent unity. Conversely, Jaspers writes,

If I do not experience the miracle of selfhood, I need no relation to God, I am content with the empirical existence of nature, many gods, demons. [WW 45]

He continues,

But the illumination of our existence as freedom does not prove the existence of God; it merely points, one might say, to the area in which certainty of his existence is possible.

The thought that strives for compelling certainty cannot realize its aim in...proof of God's existence. But the failure of thought does not result in nothingness. It points to that which resolves into an inexhaustible, forever-questioning, Comprehensive consciousness of God. [WW 46]

Accordingly, philosophy does not grant to one an unattainable knowledge of God but a comprehensive awareness of the godhead. The authentic reality, God, is accessible to existence through an innate orientation toward the ultimate. Jaspers elaborates that faith in God is immediate, independent, and direct without mediation or intermediaries. One achieves life's true fulfillment by becoming aware of God as the ultimate reality. One apprehends the proposition "God is" by transcending the world of objects and discovering authentic existence beyond historical realities. Everyone is responsible for oneself and must not evade responsibility by renouncing freedom under the guise of seeking it. Therefore, one must own the decisions and chosen paths that lead to oneself. God's majestic wisdom does not actuate an absolute authority, and one is not a puppet of God's will. Instead, Jaspers writes,

God in his wisdom wanted us to be free. [WW 46]

When Jaspers affirms that "the mystic is immersed in the Comprehensive," he also notes that what is communicable regarding this matter resists the subject-object dichotomy (WW 34). Thus, mystics historically struggled to convey the essence of these experiences. Clear consciousness can never fully capture the entirety of that source of knowledge. Philosopher-mystics can only articulate what assumes the form of objects; the rest remains incommunicable. Nonetheless, this ineffable experience in the backdrop imbues philosophical ideas with actual content and meaning.

Accordingly, consciousness holds an inexhaustible significance for those who experience union with the godhead, representing true

awakening. On the other hand, conventional subject-object consciousness resembles a state of slumber. Jaspers was captivated by Plotinus, regarding him as "the greatest mystical philosopher of the West" (WW34) due to his grand and elevated vision of self-unification. Referring to the great mystic, Jaspers writes:

Often, when I awaken to myself from the slumber of the body, I behold a wondrous beauty: I then believe firmly that I belong to a better and higher world, I call forth the most glorious life within me, I have become one with the godhead. [WW 34]

Regarding philosophy in modernity, Jaspers observes that despite the immense progress in medicine since the time of Hippocrates, one cannot confidently assert that humans have surpassed the philosophical depth of Plato. Human advancements have primarily been in scientific knowledge, rather than yielding profound philosophical insights. Unlike science, Jaspers argues, philosophy "springs from a different source" (WW 8) that involves one's entire being and explores the totality of existence rather than focusing solely on objective facts. Although philosophical thinking integrates the latest scientific discoveries, its fundamental truth arises from contemplation beyond the subject-object division, emerging "whenever men achieve awareness" (WW 8).

Plotinus' Enigmatic One and the Twofold Unity of Self-Identity and Otherness

According to Plotinus, individual souls enmeshed in physical existence have descended from the higher spheres of *nous* into states of division; simultaneously, however, they are identical and distinct. Leo Sweeney correctly points out that the *Enneads* of Plotinus abound in paradoxes: each soul retains its singularity while collectively forming a unified whole; one source produces many souls that resemble the intellects within *nous*, which are separated yet remain undivided.⁴

Plotinus' conception of self-knowledge is equally daunting and unveils the cosmic dignity and might of the enlightened soul; he ascertains that within heavenly *nous*, each person is both oneself and one with all; so, by

knowing himself he knows all, and by knowing all he knows himself. [PP 507]

Sweeney continues by translating *Ennead* V.8.3.32–36 as follows:

in the world of *Nous*, each item is itself and yet is simultaneously everything else. All things There are heaven: earth and sea and animals and plants and men are heaven. Each has There everything else in itself and sees all things in every other, for all are everywhere and each and every one is all, and the glory is unbounded: for each of them is great because even the small is great: the sun There is all the stars, and each star is the sun and all the others. [PP 507]

When the soul approaches its holy essence, the veil that separates our awareness from "perceiving the things contemplated by the part of our soul above" dissolves,⁵ uniting the earthly and celestial aspects. Every soul understands its interdependence, direct connection, and communication with all other souls, intellects, beings, and existence. Further, when the soul's contemplative gaze focuses on any aspect of multifarious reality, it unifies with it. Abiding near the soul embodies a twofold unity of self-identity and otherness (E5 106, V.3.10.28–30); when it maintains both a distinct identity and fullness, the soul perceives the all-unifying totality within every form. However, the primordial presence of the boundless One extends beyond all constraints of self-identity and otherness and is a state of expansive freedom. To this point, I proceed by inquiring from the outset.

Drawing on Plato's *Parmenides* and *Republic*, Plotinus proclaims the One, the Platonic *summum bonum*—the Good itself—is *epekeina ousias*,⁶ that is, transcending both being and essence. He writes:

There must be something simple before all things, and this must be other than all the things which come after it, existing by itself, not mixed with the things which derive from it, and all the same able to be present in a different way to these other things, being really one, and not a different being and then one; it is false even to say of it that it is one, and there is "no concept or

⁵ *Ennead* IV.8.8.5–6, "The Descent of the Soul into Bodies," in *Plotinus, Volume IV: Enneads IV*, 1–9, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1966, p. 421.

⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.8.9.28, "Free Will and the Will of the One," in *Plotinus, Volume VII: Enneads VI*, 6–9, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988, p. 254.

⁴ Leo Sweeney, "Basic Principles in Plotinus' Philosophy," *Gregorianum* 42/3 (1961), 506–516, here p. 507. [Henceforth cited as PP]

knowledge" of it; it is indeed also said to be "beyond being." [E5 142, V4.1.5–12]

In primordial simplicity, the One remains distinct from all things, surpassing everything in presence and power.⁷ Hence, the non-dual One, transcendent and beyond description, evading all names and attributes, is most effectively approached through negative philosophical thinking—by understanding what it is not, neither this nor that (E7 315, VI.9.3.52–55). In proximity, absorbed in negative contemplation, the One draws near, allowing the soul to recognize its intrinsic divine nature or holy monad, interconnected with all existence. However, paradoxically, the One is utterly silent, neither coarse nor subtle, transcending One-and-All.

The infinite One, beyond its comprehension, "outside all coincidence and composition" (E5 141, V4.1.13), complete—above any consideration (E7 111, VI.7.8.18)—transcending *nous* and thought, is best accessed through contemplative intuition and prevalent mystical silence beyond language and ordinary consciousness (E5 123, V.3.14.18–19). The suchness of apophatic silence allows the soul to unite with the boundless One in harmony with enigmatic otherness and the cosmic expanse. Near the source where being and thought merge (E5 23, V.1.4.16–26), the overpowering presence erases adumbrated forms, enabling the soul to maintain its godly identity while uniting with otherness.

Essentially, Plotinus reveals Plato's path, showing how to ascend through the ranks of *nous* to achieve the beyond-being purity and nobility of the One—mystical union with the Good itself. Mystical union, which grants direct spiritual perfection, harmonizes the soul through an incomprehensible silence that surpasses speech, knowledge, and understanding. Herein, the soul comprehends that silence and the unknowable that underlies the world expanse and all experiential reality, revealing the dual unity of self-identity and otherness, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of being and beyond being.

Plotinus emphasizes the boundlessness of the *unio mystica* thus: "the god within each one of us is one and the same."⁸ His inquiry of the One intends to guide

those on a philosophical quest:

We speak and write, advancing to It [the One] and awakening from words shifting towards contemplation as if showing the way to him who wishes to see something. [E7 317, VI.9.4.12–16]

Philosophical teaching "extends to the road and the passage," but crucially, "the vision is the work of him who has decided to see" (E7 317, VI.9.4.12–16). The name One is given so "the seeker, beginning with this which is completely indicative of simplicity, may finally negate this as well," as no name "is worthy of manifesting that nature" (E5 175, V.5.6.29–34). For the seeker,

analogies teach, as do negations and knowledge of what comes from It [the One], and certain steps upwards. [E7 199, VI.7.36.6–8]

Philosophical endeavor is crucial for the soul's ascent, guiding the seeker toward self-unification through contemplation, negation, and comprehensive understanding.

Conclusion

Both Jaspers and Plotinus concur that transcendence and freedom require an understanding of the limitations of human knowledge and the necessity of genuine self-knowledge qua otherness and unknowability. Plotinus would agree with Jaspers' reading of Kant: "God's unfathomable wisdom is as admirable in what it gives us as in what it denies us" (WW 46). In both philosophers, personal decisions and actions primarily determine human existence; individuals must act genuinely in the present, as this forms the foundation for future activity. For Jaspers, individual freedom demands that each person evokes from within what no other can, allowing direct certainty of one's relation with the godhead. The future for human beings can only be an open possibility, aiming for transcendent freedom to modify events. In Plotinus, being set free means that souls

come to the star, which is in harmony with the character and power that lived and worked within them, retaining the star above them as their *daimōn*, their god.⁹

⁷ Plotinus, Ennead VI.9.3.36–45, "On the Good or the One," in *Plotinus, Volume VII: Enneads VI, 6–9*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988, p. 313. [Henceforth cited as E7]

⁸ Plotinus, Ennead VI.5.1.4, "Free Will and the Will of the One," in *Plotinus, Volume VI: Enneads VI, 1–5*, transl.

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Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988, p. 327.

⁹ Plotinus, Ennead III.4.6.27–29, "On Our Allotted Guardian Spirit," in *Plotinus, Volume III: Enneads III, 1–9*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1980, p. 159.

