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Ascent to the One and Becoming Existence

Different Paths to Selfhood According to Plotinus and Karl Jaspers

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Abstract: The main common concern of Plotinus' and Karl Jaspers' philosophy lies in the effort to overcome the alienation of the human being lost to the realm of immanence by becoming one's true or authentic self. However, these two thinkers have differing ideas about the human path to selfhood: While Plotinus sees the way in the ascent of the soul to the Intellect and to the One, Jaspers considers it as a drama of existence striving for its self-realization through decisions in concrete situations, especially in boundary situations, and through, what he calls, "existential communication." These diverging ideas form the background of Jaspers' critique of Plotinus in his book, *The Great Philosophers*.

Keywords: Intellect; encompassing; soul; mystical ascent; selfhood; boundary situations; existential communication.

What do Plotinus and Karl Jaspers have in common? One is a Platonic philosopher and mystic of the third century, and the other is a twentieth-century representative of the philosophy of existence. Given the historical and cultural distance that separates the two figures, it might seem that they have little in common. On closer inspection, however, one can see that there are several points of contact and common intellectual concerns between these two thinkers.

External evidence of that is the fact that in his book *The Great Philosophers*, Jaspers devoted an entire chapter to Plotinus.¹ Thereby, Jaspers does not proceed as a mere historian of philosophy who would interpret the ideas of the ancient author, examine his sources,

and put them in their original context. Rather, Jaspers enters a lively philosophical discussion with Plotinus, and in the penultimate part of his chapter on Plotinus, called *Kritische Charakteristik*, he points out certain key contradictions in Plotinus' thinking and grapples with the existential meaning of his philosophical statements (GP 720-7). In doing so, Jaspers does not hesitate to use his own philosophical terminology, as known from his other writings.

As I will argue, the main common concern of Plotinus' and Jaspers' philosophies lies in the effort to overcome the alienation of the human being lost to the realm of the sensible world or immanence by attaining one's true or authentic self. In one's effort to overcome alienation and find one's true self, the relationship to one's divine ground, to the One or to transcendence, plays a decisive role. For both thinkers, this concern with man's destiny and striving for one's true self is inseparably connected with an ontological interest.

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Die großen Philosophen. Erster Band. Teilband 2: Aus dem Ursprung denkende Metaphysiker: Anaximander Heraklit Parmenides Plotin Anselm Spinoza Laotse Nagarjuna*, ed. Dirk Fonfara, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2022, pp. 673–730. [Henceforth cited as GP]

Both are concerned with building an ontological system, clarifying the basic layers or modes of being, and showing what place human beings occupy in them.

Plotinus: Path to Selfhood as the Soul's Ascent to the Intellect and to the One

With respect to Plotinus, it must be underscored at the outset that he does not employ a singular, fixed designation for the notion of "the self." As Mateusz Stróżyński aptly observes:

There is no single term for "the self" in Plotinus; he uses different words such as ἡμεῖς ("we"), αὐτός ("he"/"himself"), ἄνθρωπος ("human being"), or simply ψυχή ("the soul") to refer to the concept of the self.²

Yet, as Pauliina Remes has noted, Plotinus frequently adopts the plural pronouns "we" or "us" in order to

distinguish our truest nature or self from the whole human being.³

The inquiry into the nature of the true self, articulated precisely as the question of who "we" are,⁴ is, indeed, intimately bound up with Plotinus's differentiation of the parts of the soul, or of the levels of human consciousness.

Another essential introductory observation concerns Plotinus' thought, which is characterized, as scholars engaged in the study of Plotinus generally agree, by the co-existence of two basic points of view: (1) a religious-ethical or mystical one, and (2) an ontological-cosmological one.⁵ The religious-ethical or mystical point of view refers to Plotinus' effort to activate higher faculties of the soul and to uncover its true self in uniting with its transcendent principle. The ontological-cosmological point of view is manifested in the fact that Plotinus puts his interpretation of the

mystical experience into the ontological framework outlined by ancient Platonic and Neo-Pythagorean traditions. The stages by which the human soul ascends to its divine principle are the levels of the ontological structure of the Platonic hierarchical universe. In accordance with the tradition of Platonic hierarchical polytheism, this universe is seen as a system of different degrees of divinity. The principal hypostases of Plotinus' system: the One, Intellect, soul, and even the visible world as a whole are viewed as deities of greater or lesser dignity.

The basic human possibility to lose oneself or to find one's true self is given by the fact that man is a multidimensional being. For Plotinus, man existing in the sensible or material world is first and foremost a composite of soul and body. However, as Remes points out, the soul and the body are not to be regarded as two ontologically coequal substances. Rather, their relation is asymmetrical and causal: it is the souls and their powers that

generate, organize and constitute bodies as true unities. [PS 29]

Accordingly, Plotinus appears to identify the self not with the organism as a whole but with the soul as the principal and constitutive aspect of the composite being. Likewise, Arthur Armstrong emphasizes that Plotinus does not conceive of the human being as a substantive unity of soul and body. Instead, man is, in essence, a soul whose presence within the body is transitory and which animates and shapes the body without being intrinsically bound to it.⁶

Moreover, as the dynamic and mediating principle within Plotinus's metaphysical framework, the soul possesses the capacity to move along a gradational scale of descent and ascent that reflects its proximity or distance from the first principle, the One. For this reason, William Inge, one of the classical interpreters of Plotinus, points out that while in modern idealism the soul tends to be a fixed center, in Plotinus, it is perceived as being "the wanderer of the metaphysical world."⁷ As Mary Midgley has aptly put it, the soul in Plotinus may be likened to a climber

² Mateusz Stróżyński, "The Ascent of the Soul as Spiritual Exercise in Plotinus' Enneads," *Mnemosyne* 74/3 (May 2021), 448–477, here p. 452.

³ Pauliina Remes, *Plotinus on Self. The Philosophy of the 'We'*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 4. [Henceforth cited as PS]

⁴ Plotinus, Ennead VI.4 [22] 14, 16, "The Presence of Being Everywhere I," in *Plotinus, Volume VI: Enneads VI, 1-5*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988, p. 317.

⁵ For example, Henry J. Blumenthal, *Plotinus' Psychology. His Doctrines of the Embodied Soul*, The Hague, NL: Martinus Nijhoff 1971, pp. 2–3. [Henceforth cited as PP]

⁶ Arthur H. Armstrong, "Studies in Traditional Anthropology II: Plotinus," *Downside Review* 67/4 (October 1949), 406–419, here p. 406.

⁷ William Ralph Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus: The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews 1917–1918*, Vol. 1, London, UK: Longmans, Green and Co. 1923, p. 203.

who is scarcely distinguishable from the very ladder of ontological stages upon which he climbs.⁸ Plotinus himself characterizes human souls as amphibians, who are

compelled to live by turns the life There, and the life here: those which are able to be more in the company of Intellect live the life There more, but those whose normal condition is...the opposite, live more the life here below.⁹

The soul animating the human body and, to some extent, making use of the capacities of bodily organs, is endowed with various faculties. Accordingly, Plotinus distinguishes different levels or parts of the soul to which the faculties correspond. However, as Filip Karfik points out,

there are no "parts" of the soul in the sense of a division *partes extra partes* which, according to [Plotinus], applies only to bodies.¹⁰

As Karfik succinctly elaborates, for Plotinus, the lower parts of the soul are the animal or sensitive soul (τὸ αἰσθητικόν) that enables sense-perception, and the vegetative soul (τὸ φυτικόν) that is responsible for the functions of growth, nutrition, and reproduction (*PSP* 116-9). According to Plotinus, so Karfik concludes, "the lowest part of the soul *qua* soul is 'nature'" (*PSP* 124). This vegetative faculty represents the lowest level of individual souls that animate the body and ensure immediate connection with matter. The higher "part" of the soul is the "rational" (τὸ λογιζόμενον) or "dianoetic" soul (τὸ διανοητικόν) that is endowed with the faculty of discursive reasoning (*PSP* 137). The rational soul—in contrast to the lower parts of the soul—is independent of the body, insofar as it makes no use of bodily organs (*PSP* 129). However, in the case of individual human souls attached to a terrestrial

body, the rational soul engages with the phantasms furnished by sensation, that is, by the operation of the sensitive soul.¹¹ In its discursive thinking, the dianoetic soul subjects these impressions originating from sensory perceptions to its normative—both theoretical-epistemological and practical-ethical—judgments. Yet, as Werner Beierwaltes underscores, for Plotinus, the normative judgments and rational operations of the soul presuppose *a priori* structures, which the soul indeed finds in itself as its rational structure, but this rational structure of the soul only reflects the structure of the intelligible realm.¹² In fact, the dianoetic soul receives imprints from both sides: from the sensory experience and from the sphere of intelligible forms or the Intellect that act on the soul as if from within, but represent a higher ontological level (*E5* 411 V.3.2.7-14, 24-25).

The influence of ideal structures upon the rational soul is mediated through a distinct faculty—namely, the better or pure part of the soul—that is different from discursive reason (*E5* 411 V.3.3.11-12). It is precisely this part of the soul that becomes receptive to the imprints transmitted from the intelligible realm, or the Intellect. As Karfik writes:

Plotinus specifies that there is a "pure part of the soul"...which receives "traces laid...upon it by the intellect." [*PSP* 138]

The correct discursive thinking is thus dependent on the fact that the pure part of the soul is immediately illuminated by the Intellect. Some researchers, such as, for example, Beierwaltes conclude that Plotinus, in addition to discursive reasoning, also attributes to the soul the faculty of intellectual thinking or νοῦς ὁ τῆς ψυχῆς (the intellect of the soul), which mediates between the dianoetic soul and the divine Intellect (*SEE* 103). In contrast, other scholars such as Blumenthal or Karfik believe that the intellect of the soul is identical with the faculty of discursive reasoning (*PP* 102-3, *PSP* 136-9). Regardless of which

⁸ This characterization originates from Mary Midgley's incomplete and unpublished doctoral dissertation on Plotinus. I am grateful to Panayiota Vassilopoulou for bringing this detail to my attention.

⁹ *Ennead* IV.8 [6] 4 33-35, "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. 411.

¹⁰ Filip Karfik, "Parts of the Soul in Plotinus," in *Partitioning the Soul: Debates from Plato to Leibniz*, ed. Klaus Corcilius and Dominik Perler, Berlin, DE: Walter de Gruyter 2014, pp. 107-148, here p. 107. [Henceforth cited as *PSP*]

¹¹ Plotinus, *Ennead* V.3 [49] 2 7-9, "On the Knowing Hypostases," in *Plotinus, Volume V: Enneads V, 1-9*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1984, p. 411. [Henceforth cited as *E5*]

¹² Werner Beierwaltes, *Selbsterkenntnis und Erfahrung der Einheit: Plotins Enneade V 3; Text, Übersetzung, Interpretation, Erläuterungen*, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Klostermann 1991, p. 103, my translations. [Henceforth cited as *SEE*]

interpretation one adopts, at least three different levels of the human soul can be distinguished: the sensitive soul directed to the sensible and material world, the pure part of the soul or faculty of intellective thinking close to the Intellect, and the dianoetic soul self, which is between these two levels.

While the very structure of the rational soul and its relation to the Intellect remain subjects of considerable debate among contemporary scholars of Plotinus, the foregoing exposition nonetheless makes it clear that the human being itself is a multidimensional entity capable of turning to various levels of being. In *Ennead* II.9.2.4-10, "Against the Gnostics," Plotinus writes (in Armstrong's translation):

one part of our soul is always directed to the intelligible realities, one to the things of this world, and one is in the middle between these; for since the soul is one nature in many powers, sometimes the whole of it is carried along with the best of itself and of real being, sometimes the worse part is dragged down and drags the middle with it.¹³

It is this multidimensionality of the human soul itself which, as Armstrong points out, forms a basis

for the possibility of choosing to live on different levels which is taken for granted throughout most of the *Enneads*. [P 226]

The soul, as it were, identifies with what it turns to, and thus decides the form of its existence. In *Ennead* VI.8, Plotinus clearly expresses the idea that the essence of every being endowed with freedom of choice is carried by the will and that one decides what one is by virtue of one's will and desire. In this sense, it can be said that each individual "itself makes itself."¹⁴

As Plotinus indicates in *Ennead* V.3, the "we," that is, one's self, can be equated with the "principal part of the soul," which is situated between the higher and lower faculties of the soul and which Plotinus identifies with discursive reason (E5 81 V.3.3.36-40).

¹³ Arthur H. Armstrong, "Plotinus," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 1967, pp. 195-268, here p. 225. [Henceforth cited as P]

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* VI.8 [39] 13 18-25, "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. 269.

In Pierre Hadot's interpretation, this principal part of the soul represents a kind of center which can direct its attention upwards or downwards and thus decide one's way of living.¹⁵ In another and deeper sense, however, the "true self" surpasses the domain of discursive reason. As articulated by Armstrong, one's true self ultimately lies in "living on the level of Intellect" (P 227), for the soul has its origin in Intellect, and the hypostasis of the soul is the result of ontological degradation and separation from this origin. Therefore, only these higher degrees are the legitimate aim of the soul's orientation, and only in being directed toward them does one become oneself, while his absorption in the lower realms entails alienation from his true selfhood. Even in the state of self-alienation, however, the soul's higher part, without knowing it, remains always anchored to a higher level of being (PSP 131), and therefore an essential internal contradiction arises in it. This specific tension between the self as the center of awareness and decision-making and the true self—Remes refers to them as "the everyday self" and "the ideal self" (PS 126)—which the soul attains by transcending the plane of discursive thinking, constitutes the specifically dynamic nature of the soul's life.

Plotinus considers the ascent of the soul, through which a person reaches one's true self, as purification and liberation from multiplicity. As the soul turns to higher or deeper levels of being, it activates higher degrees of unity and self-awareness within itself. At the same time, the soul becomes identical with these higher forms of being, by transforming itself into them. In Beierwaltes' reading, the ascent to the level of Intellect is the transformation of the soul into Intellect (SEE 116). The soul becomes part of the movement of divine Intellect, which in a single timeless reflexive act thinks of itself and of intelligible beings in their entirety. Only in this state is the soul capable of true self-knowledge, which cannot be achieved at the level of discursive thinking that, unlike the thinking of the Intellect, concerns things external to it (PS 171-2).

This transformation changes the way of life and the thinking of the soul. Although the Intellect is the prototype of concepts and of the logical relations by which the discursive thinking of the rational soul is

¹⁵ Pierre Hadot, *Plotin ou la simplicité du regard*, Paris, FR: Gallimard 1997, p. 34, my translation. [Henceforth cited as PSR]

governed, it includes them, in Karfik's words,

in a timeless, simultaneous presence of everything in everything.¹⁶

As Beierwaltes emphasizes, thinking on the level of the Intellect does not proceed in successive steps but knows itself as a whole in a timeless act of self-reflection, and thus, it actually makes present the simultaneity of all ideal contents in a single act of intellection (SEE 100). Paraphrasing Plotinus' *Ennead* IV.4 [28] 1, "Problems Concerning the Soul II", Beierwaltes writes,

The thinking of the Intellect is...the timeless awareness of everything that is "thinkable as always already thought."¹⁷

It is therefore not a kind of discursive thinking, as in the case of the dianoetic soul, but rather thinking in the manner of the Intellect. While discursive reasoning is inseparably linked to the succession of time, thinking in the manner of the Intellect is connected to eternity, which Plotinus defines as a permanent presence, as a timeless "now,"¹⁸ as a timeless simultaneity of everything that is only unfolded in time and ranked in relations of succession and sequence. Eternity is the mode of being of the Intellect: Plotinus characterizes eternity as "the life of the Intellect" (PEZ 41), just as he calls time "the life of the soul" (PEZ 66).

However, the soul is able in very exceptional moments to transcend even this reflexive and intelligible layer and unite with the ultimate principle of everything, namely with the One or Good. At this level, the soul no longer thinks. This means it does not relate to something in a noetic way, but, above its own reflexivity, it unites with its principle in *henosis*, that is, in mystical union. Even this supreme act of mystical vision is a transformation of the soul into a higher form of being, namely, a transformation into the One. As Beierwaltes explains, in uniting with its deepest root, thinking

transcends itself while realizing its highest possibility.¹⁹

¹⁶ Filip Karfik, *Plótínova metafysika svobody*, Praha, CZ: Nakladatelství Oikymen 2002, p. 102, my translation. [Henceforth cited as PMS]

¹⁷ Werner Beierwaltes, *Platonismus und Idealismus*, Frankfurt am Main, DE: Klostermann 2004, p. 32, my translation.

¹⁸ Werner Beierwaltes, Plotin: *Über die Ewigkeit und Zeit*, Frankfurt a. M., DE: Klostermann 1967, p. 53, my translation. [Henceforth cited as PEZ]

¹⁹ Werner Beierwaltes, *Das Denken des Einen*, Frankfurt

The human soul can attain its true self only in ascending to the level of Intellect and, finally, in unifying with the One self, since it originates in them (DDE 133-4, 143-4).

In this sense, as Armstrong observes, the soul's ascent to the higher ontological levels—conceived as its "philosophical salvation"—constitutes the "reversion to its proper place and state" (P 224).

Nonetheless, these states of activation of higher forms of life and transformation into higher levels of being are attainable for individual souls in this life only in moments of contemplation, and souls cannot dwell in them permanently. Therefore, human souls then return to the ordinary level of consciousness, yet in an essentially transformed manner. In Hadot's interpretation, the individual soul, once returned to ordinary life and consciousness,

discovers within itself...a trace of Divinity, virtue, which makes it like God. [PSR 117]

The attainment of one's true self coincides with deification, which is, according to Plotinus, the proper goal of human life. As Plotinus states in *Ennead* I.2, "On Virtues":

Our concern...is not to be out of sin, but to be god.²⁰

Accordingly, Armstrong writes that for Plotinus, the human being

is in some sense divine, and the object of philosophic life is to...restore its proper relationship...with the divine All and, in that All, to come to union with its transcendent source, the One or Good. [P 222]

However, one can achieve deification only because oneself or one's soul itself is of divine origin.

Karl Jaspers: Path to Selfhood Through Existential Decision-Making and Communication

For Karl Jaspers, the problem of becoming an authentic self is the basic issue of his philosophy. Nevertheless, Jaspers' philosophy is not a mere philosophy of existence. From the early 1930s onward, his philosophy is concerned with the

am Main, DE: Klostermann 1985, p. 123, my translation. [Henceforth cited as DDE]

²⁰ *Ennead* I.2 [19] 6 2-3, "On Virtues," in Plotinus, *Volume 1: Porphyry on the Life of Plotinus and the Order of his Books*, transl. Arthur H. Armstrong, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1966, pp. 141-3.

question of being, and his elucidation of human existence is set in an ontological framework. Already, the introduction to the first volume of his three-volume *Philosophy* opens with the question, "What is being?"²¹ Jaspers is concerned with the distinction of basic modes of being, which are equally original. In his later works, this question is also formulated as a question regarding what he calls *das Umgreifende* (the encompassing) and its modes. As Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner remark in a footnote regarding a letter by Jaspers to Hannah Arendt, Jaspers first expounded his doctrine of the modes of the encompassing in his lectures on Logic in the winter semester 1931/32.²² The first publication in which his periechontology appears is *Vernunft und Existenz* (published in 1935).²³ The basic division of the modes of the encompassing lies between the encompassing "that is us" and the one "that is being itself," and between the immanent and transcendent modes.²⁴ Ronny Miron writes:

The premise on which Jaspers based his perception of Being was that Being does not exist only within the boundaries of immanence, and it cannot be exhausted solely within the boundaries of human existence.²⁵

Like Plotinus, for Jaspers, the possibility of self-alienation and becoming an authentic self is closely tied to the multidimensionality of man. Jaspers distinguishes between different levels of a human being that cannot be reduced to one another. He evidences this by pointing out that when one uses the pronoun "I" (*Ich*), it can be employed in various meanings that correspond to different levels

or dimensions of a human being (P1 57). Jaspers introduces four basic modes or levels of a human being: *Dasein*, consciousness in general, spirit, and existence. The mentioned levels of a human being belong to the basic modes of being or of the encompassing "that is us" (VE 31-7).

As Kurt Salamun elaborates, *Dasein*, in its first meaning, refers to the body, or more precisely, to the vital or organic aspect of a human being. Jaspers sometimes writes that, as *Dasein*, man is "mere life," namely in the sense that he is focused primarily on the performance of vital functions and the fulfillment of vital needs.²⁶ *Dasein* is a fundamental dimension, to the extent that, thanks to it, humans are situated in the world at all. *Dasein* is articulated through the affirmation "I am here" (*da*). It assumes the character of a concrete living being within space and time as perceived by other *Dasein* (VW 53). Since *Dasein* is the aspect of the human being most likely to be accessible to sensory experience, Jaspers also refers to it as *empirisches Dasein* (P1 57). Yet, it exceeds mere spatial-temporal localization. *Dasein* realizes itself as that which encompasses space and time and thus cannot be fully apprehended within space and time, appearing only through its phenomenal aspects (VW 53).

Dasein is primarily characterized by its permanent desires; it seeks to satisfy its needs and enjoy its immediate happiness at all costs, while also expanding its possibilities and living space. Yet this happiness remains transient and incapable of yielding enduring fulfillment. In fact, *Dasein* is marked by its changeability and finiteness. It emerges temporarily, undergoes birth and death, asserts itself momentarily, and ultimately succumbs and relinquishes its place to other *Dasein* (VW 54).

The foregoing considerations make evident that *Dasein* cannot be equated solely with the living body, nor is it reducible to the physical-vital dimension of a human being. As Oswald Schrag elucidates, Jaspers conceives *Dasein* as

a physio-psycho-sociological being dominated by the will to self-preservation...the will to recognition, and

²¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, Vol. 1: *Philosophische Weltorientierung*, KJG I/7.1, ed. Oliver Immel, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2022, p. 47. [Henceforth cited as P1]

²² Karl Jaspers, "17 April 1965 letter to Hannah Arendt," in *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers: Correspondence 1926-1969*, transl. Robert and Rita Kimber, eds. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace & Co 1992, pp. 594-6, here p. 595, fn4 p. 820.

²³ Karl Jaspers, "Vernunft und Existenz," in *Schriften zur Existenzphilosophie*, KJG I/8, ed. Dominic Kaegi, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2018, pp. 1-98, here pp. 29-31. [Henceforth cited as VE]

²⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophische Logik, Erster Band: Von der Wahrheit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1947, p. 50. [Henceforth cited as VW]

²⁵ Ronny Miron, *Karl Jaspers: From Selfhood to Being*, Amsterdam, NL: Editions Rodopi 2012, p. 202.

²⁶ Kurt Salamun, "Existenzverwirklichung in der Kommunikation," in *Grundprobleme der großen Philosophen: Philosophie der Gegenwart*, Vol. 5, ed. Josef Speck, Göttingen, DE: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1982, pp. 9-47, here p. 18. [Henceforth cited as EK]

the will to power.²⁷

Accordingly, the needs of *Dasein* include not only elementary bodily or vital needs, but also, for example, the desire for economic well-being, power, or social status. The effort to maintain and expand the possibilities of *Dasein* can thus take on forms such as the enforcing of economic, political, or personal power, or perhaps even wars of conquest and so on. *Dasein* therefore does not correspond to the mere body in Plotinus' sense, but rather to the body alongside the lower parts of the soul.

Consciousness in general (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*) refers to the human being as the objectively knowing subjectivity. It is a condition enabling things in the world to appear to us as phenomena or objects of our knowledge (P1 57-8). Consciousness in general, considered as that "all-encompassing object consciousness," is focused on phenomena or objects, whether through perception, imagination, cognition, or thinking (VW 65). However, Otmar Klein brings attention to the fact that Jaspers sometimes distinguishes the "all-encompassing object consciousness" (*allumfassendes Gegenstandsbewusstsein*) and "consciousness in general" (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*), while at other times he fuses the two.²⁸ Following the phenomenological terminology, Jaspers also refers to the focus of consciousness on objects "intentionality" (P1 52). Understood in its more specific sense, consciousness in general enables the obtainment of generally valid and universal knowledge (BU 101). Through it, humans know reality in a more or less identical way (VE 32), as it discloses what is universally valid for knowledge (VW 65). In this sense, consciousness in general is the domain of general or universal rationality. At this level, "clear and cogent, universally valid logical thinking" reigns,²⁹ adhering to logical laws. Therefore, the consciousness in general of any person is in principle interchangeable or substitutable

with the consciousness of anyone else (P1 57). If one were to look for an analogy in Plotinus, discursive reasoning most likely corresponds to consciousness in general, in its more specific sense, although Jaspers' immediate prototype is rather Kant's *Verstand*.³⁰ Nevertheless, for Jaspers, in contrast to Plotinus' discursive reasoning or to the modern cogito, consciousness in general is definitely not identical with the human self in any sense. It cannot even be said that humans decide on this level whether or not they are becoming themselves. Indeed, it is true that if a human being remains only on this level, attaining one's authentic self will not occur.

Spirit (*Geist*) represents a level of human consciousness that is distinct from consciousness in general. As Schrag emphasizes, while phenomena or objects in the world are given to humans through consciousness in general, spirit engages with ideas and interprets reality in their light (EET 91-2). Through the mediation of its ideas, spirit integrates phenomena and objects into meaningful totalities, thereby imparting coherence and unity to the otherwise fragmented and manifold realm of knowledge and experience (VW 71-2). The spirit is the bearer of specific spiritual movements and contents (VW 71), which are a manifestation of a person's relationship to the overall meaning (EK 22). This function of the spirit, which consists in uniting the multiplicity of phenomena into wholes and establishing an overall meaning, is applied not only at the level of theoretical knowledge but also at the level of human action. With its ideas and values, spirit also unifies the multitude of finite goals and objectives of human action (VW 71, 207). Typical external manifestations of the spirit are works of thought or art, social institutions, systems of norms or rules, etc. However, the spirit itself constantly transcends all its manifestations and objectifications: it remains in a living movement, always surpassing everything objectively graspable, including its own creations and aiming at the whole and the ground (VW 75-6). If one were to look again for an analogy of Jaspers' spirit in Plotinus, the soul's higher capacity of intellectual thinking or the rational soul participating in the Intellect would most likely correspond to it. What both clearly have in common is a relation with ideas and totality. Nonetheless,

²⁷ Oswald O. Schrag, *Existence, Existenz, and Transcendence: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press 1971, p. 41. [Henceforth cited as EET]

²⁸ Otmar Erich Klein, *Bewusstsein und Umgreifendes*, Frankfurt a. M., DE: Peter Lang 1990, pp. 74-5, 100-1. [Henceforth cited as BU]

²⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Volume 2: Existenzerhellung*, ed. Oliver Immel, KJG I/7.2, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2022, p. 53. [Henceforth cited as P2]

³⁰ Karl Jaspers, "Existenzphilosophie," in *Schriften zur Existenzphilosophie*, KJG I/8, pp. 99-160, here pp. 112-33. [Henceforth cited as EP]

Jaspers' spirit does not participate in the ideas present in the divine Intellect, but creates these ideas itself. The individual human spirit, at best, participates in the ideas created by other human spirits in the past. The spirit also belongs to immanent modes of a human being. And above all, according to Jaspers, humans do not reach their true selves on the level of the spirit.

Humans become themselves only at the level of existence. More precisely, existence is the human self in the proper and most essential sense. According to Jaspers, existence is only another word for selfhood (*Selbstsein*) (VW 76). Existence, unlike *Dasein*, is not simply given with one's birth. Christian Rabanus rightly points out that to become existence is a human task, not part of human facticity or nature.³¹ Existence is primarily offered to humans in the form of a possibility to be realized (EET 124). The human being is truly an existence only by first becoming it oneself: As articulated by Paul Ricœur and Mikel Dufrenne, one either realizes or does not realize one's existence, one either gains or loses oneself through one's own free choice and through one's decisions in concrete situations.³² Humans, as an existence, therefore decide for themselves whether they are heading toward their being in the sense of being themselves, or are deviating from it and falling into the void and nothingness.

However prosperous one may be as a *Dasein*, however capable or even genius one may be on the level of consciousness in general and spirit, without existence, it is as if everything were void for one and without ground, for one's own being is inauthentic and false (VE 37). One can literally feel lost in oneself and in one's life (VW 76-7). According to Jaspers, this is the very core of human alienation, which is originally alienation from oneself, and thus also from the world and all reality. This alienation is a consequence of one's own failure to realize existence, a failure in the basic task of becoming oneself. Jaspers explains that "only as an existence" do we overcome

this alienation, which still threatens us, and thus we again "find our footing" (VW 114).

As has been said, humans become themselves, or existence, through their free decision-making and choice of their possibilities in concrete situations. Additionally, special situations, which Jaspers calls boundary situations (*Grenzsituationen*)—such as death, suffering, struggle, guilt, and chance—play a key role in this respect. Boundary situations point to the essentially antinomic character of the human being.³³ They are, in principle, unsolvable on the level of *Dasein* and consciousness in general, for they cannot be solved by providing for oneself, nor by planned and purposeful actions aimed at changing situations (P2 177). These situations can be addressed only by an activity of a completely different kind, which does not primarily seek to change the external circumstances of situations but rather by an internal action that leads to a transformation of humans, namely to becoming an existence (P2 177).

Despite their clear negativity for *Dasein*, boundary situations can paradoxically become a catalyst for growth and maturation processes on the level of existence. In the apparent hopelessness of the boundary situations, existence finds a way out through a leap from immanence, which Jaspers refers to as a transcending leap, that is, a leap that transcends mere immanent modes of being (P2 177, 179-80). A limit present in boundary situations thus shows itself in its true function only for existence: as a limitation of immanence and as a reference to something that transcends immanent ways of being (P2 177-8). Boundary situations acquire their true meaning for an existence that is interested in them as privileged opportunities to gain or lose itself (P2 179).

Confrontation with boundary situations, according to Jaspers, leads to a crisis in which a decision must be made between despair and faith. Jaspers compares the experience of a boundary situation to an abyss that opens before oneself, and when looking into it, only one of two options can be experienced: "Nothing or God."³⁴ It all depends on the

³¹ Christian Rabanus, "Karl Jaspers und die Kommunikation," in *Karl Jaspers. Grundbegriffe seines Denkens*, eds. Hamid Reza Yousefi, Werner Schüßler, Reinhard Schulz, Ulrich Diehl, Reinbek, DE: Lau Verlag 2011, pp. 83-96, here p. 92. [Henceforth cited as KJK]

³² Paul Ricœur and Mikel Dufrenne, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence*, Paris, FR: Éditions de Seuil 2000, p. 22. [Henceforth cited as KJP]

³³ Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, ed. Oliver Immel, KJG I/6, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2019, p. 229.

³⁴ Karl Jaspers, "Der philosophische Glaube," in *Schriften zum philosophischen Glauben*, ed. Bernd Weidmann, KJG I/12, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2022, pp. 9-107, here p. 31.

inner stance one takes in the boundary situation: If one does not make a transcending leap, one remains trapped in the captivity of immanence, the border remains for oneself a mere wall. The shipwreck then leads to despair, resignation, and nihilism.³⁵ Such is the attitude if humans remain on the level of *Dasein* or consciousness in general: From the perspective of the immanent modes of their being, in boundary situations the boundary appears impenetrable, for they are unable to see anything beyond it (P2 177).

If, on the other hand, one is capable of a transcending leap, the boundary then includes a reference to something else. In such a case, to invoke the words of Wolfgang Janke, foundering in a boundary situation

does not refer Existenz to nothingness, but to the being of transcendence.³⁶

Then the boundary genuinely assumes its own function, namely, to demarcate the limits of immanent modes of being and at the same time to refer to transcendence (P2 177-8). If one, despite the sheer negativity of boundary situations, can withstand these situations and find a deeper support in them, then, according to Jaspers, this means that one has encountered transcendence. Boundary situations can thus become not only a privileged opportunity to find oneself, but also a privileged place of encounter with transcendence. In boundary situations, humans not only attain their authentic self but also experience their self and their freedom as anchored in transcendence and given by transcendence (P2 47).

Although existence, according to Jaspers, is realized on the basis of one's own decision or choice of one's possibilities in concrete situations, especially in boundary situations, he also emphasizes that one cannot become an existence without authentic relationships to other existences (EET 134). Jaspers calls the kind of intersubjective relationship that presents a necessary condition for becoming oneself "existential communication" (P2 56, 59-61). Existential communication points to a remarkable paradox: not only am I not a lonely and isolated being even on the level of my own being myself, but it is precisely on this

level that I am essentially dependent on a relationship to others. Jaspers argues not only that on the level of existence, I am the origin of myself, since as a free being I decide in an essential sense what or who I am (P1 57), but also that in existential communication I experience that I do not become myself only through myself and with myself, but in relationships with others (P2 50, 56, 58-9). Thus, for Jaspers, existence is not defined only by a relationship to oneself and to transcendence (VW49) but also with other existences.

Existential communication occurs between two selves in their "being themselves" (*Selbstsein*), which are irreplaceable in their uniqueness, in a historically unrepeatable situation (P2 59). In other words: Existential communication is mutual communication between existences, that is, communication from existence to existence (P1 61). As Salamun observes, this communication presupposes openness toward the other on the part of an individual engaged in the process of "becoming oneself" (EK 30-1). Only in this kind of communication does one's self exist for another self in mutual co-existence, and even co-creation (P2 59), for if it is true that, on the level of existence, a person is never oneself other than by becoming oneself through one's free decision-making and action, then in existential communication, the process takes on the character of participation in mutual creation. Schrag succinctly puts it as follows:

in it the self creates itself as well as the other self. [EET 133]

By committing to this communication, a person overcomes the isolated being of one's own self, but it is precisely this overcoming of isolated being that is the prerequisite for truly becoming oneself, which is only possible in existential communication with another self (P2 59).

Differences between Plotinus and Jaspers

Some similarities and differences between Plotinus and Jaspers have already been pointed out above. In conclusion, I will try to highlight several fundamental differences between the two thinkers:

Although Plotinus and Jaspers share the common concern with overcoming human alienation and attaining one's true or authentic self, they have differing ideas regarding the human path to selfhood. Plotinus sees the way in the mystical ascent of the soul to the higher levels of being, namely, to Intellect and

³⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Volume 3: Metaphysik*, ed. Oliver Immel, KJG I/7.3, Basel, CH: Schwabe Verlag 2022, p. 202.

³⁶ Wolfgang Janke, *Existenzphilosophie*, Berlin, DE: De Gruyter 1982, p. 167.

to the One. In sharp contrast to Plotinus, for Jaspers, mystical ascent does not play a significant role in the process of becoming oneself (P2 181); rather, the free choice of one's own options in concrete situations is decisive. Ricœur and Dufrenne aptly underscore that Jaspers conceives the human path to selfhood as a drama of existence striving for its self-realization through making decisions in concrete situations, especially in boundary situations (KJP 22).

Although both Plotinus and Jaspers maintain that the human being can overcome one's self-alienation only by transcending the ordinary level of one's life and consciousness toward one's divine ground, they understand the basic polarity between which this transcending movement takes place in different ways. For Jaspers, unlike Plotinus, the key difference lies not between sensible and intelligible reality, between the world of becoming and eternal unchanging forms, between the realms of multiplicity and unity, but between the realms of immanence and transcendence. At the same time, Jaspers includes the rational and spiritual component of human beings, namely consciousness in general and spirit, in the realm of immanence.

Since the transcending movement is understood by Plotinus as turning away from the sensible world and towards the intelligible realm, from multiplicity towards unity, and finally as a union with the One itself, the individual, in his uniqueness and with his personal love for other unique beings, has no weight (GP 726). On the contrary, for Jaspers the key feature of existence is its uniqueness and non-substitutability, which corresponds to the fact that existence is realized in concrete, unrepeatable situations and in existential communication with other unique selves.

Unlike Plotinus, Jaspers draws a clear dividing line between the human being and transcendence. The different levels of a human being cannot be understood as degrees of divinity in any sense. *Dasein*, consciousness in general, and spirit are not only clearly identified with "the encompassing that is us" but are also included in the realm of immanence. The only level of a human being that is explicitly related to transcendence and is even labelled transcendent, is existence. However, even existence is clearly included in the encompassing that is the human being, and its relationship to transcendence is never understood as unification with its divine ground or as a return to its own origin from which it came. In other words, Jaspers, following Kierkegaard, turns against the

idealistic tendency of merging the human and the divine, the created beings and the creator.

Although according to Jaspers, one becomes oneself only by transcending the limits of immanence and encountering transcendence, the grounding of existence in transcendence is paradoxical: One's relationship to transcendence is realized through the relativization or shaking off of the apparent supports in immanent being, which one relies on and clings to as *Dasein* and consciousness in general. This relativization occurs precisely in boundary situations that reveal the inadequacy and unreliability of immanent modes of being and thus lead one out of the illusion that assistance and real meaning can be found in them. It is precisely this loss of apparent support in the realm of immanence that urges one to make the transcendent leap.

As Jaspers concludes in *The Great Philosophers*, Plotinus' belief that humans have their origin in the higher levels of being and that one can rediscover one's true self by ascending to these levels results in his not taking seriously the historical dimension of human existence and the boundary situations with their negativity (GP 724). According to Jaspers, Plotinus lacks the consciousness of historicity: the world is deprived of its meaning as a unique place for the realization of existence (GP 725). For Plotinus, there is no gravity of absolute decision in time. Plotinus does not know the unity of eternity and time in historical consciousness as expressed by a paradoxical formulation: what is eternal is decided in time (GP 725). According to Plotinus, the world is just a stage, and life is just a role. There are only ascent and descent, the possibility of which is still open. Therefore, for Plotinus, nothing in the world is to be taken seriously: in its stead, he only cares about the purity of the soul, which is fulfilled in inexpressible ecstasy (GP 724). Boundary situations are also obscured or disappear in the overall harmonious vision of being. It is a closed circle: a harmonious vision of the universe suppresses boundary situations, and the loss of sensitivity for boundary situations enables the belief in harmony (GP 724).

As Jaspers demonstrates, achieving the true self, for Plotinus, coincides with the attainment of absolute calmness, in Armstrong's rendering, by keeping the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* (P 229). This calmness, however, is that of a beholder. Plotinus achieves that calmness by realizing that the soul is inviolable, indestructible, and immortal within itself. More precisely, since

the soul is actually multidimensional, it is affected by suffering on its lower level, and yet at the same time, unaffected on its higher level, which coincides with its true self. The soul is drawn into tribulation as a piece of the world but uninvolved as a spectator. Indeed, if the soul becomes aware of its own essence and origin, nothing in the world can touch and unsettle it. This imperturbability is possible because the soul knows that its home is elsewhere and not in this world (GP 722). Jaspers rejects *apatheia* or *ataraxia* as an attitude that avoids historical existence and boundary situations (P2 194, 196-7). To him, this definitive calmness can feel like a kind of blissful death within one's life (GP 726).

In sum, although Plotinus and Jaspers share a common concern with overcoming human alienation and attaining an authentic self—and despite some points of convergence in their respective accounts of the multidimensional structure of the human being—the contrast between their philosophies reveals two fundamentally divergent conceptions of the path to selfhood, of the human condition, and the individual's relation to transcendence. While Plotinus conceives this path as being a mystical ascent from the sensible realm to the intelligible, culminating in union with the One—a movement that abstracts from

historical existence and dissolves individuality into its divine origin—Jaspers insists on the irreducible singularity and historicity of existence, which is realized through concrete decisions enacted in time and in confrontation with boundary situations. For Jaspers, selfhood is not achieved by evading the fragility and negativity inherent in the human condition, but rather by engaging them resolutely and responsibly. The encounter with transcendence does not signify a return to one's own divine origin but rather a paradoxical relation that emerges through the problematization and destabilization of the apparent supporting elements in immanent being. And finally, whereas intersubjective relations play no important role in Plotinus' conception of the path to selfhood, Jaspers posits existential communication as a constitutive and indispensable condition for becoming oneself. Thus, Jaspers' existential philosophy stands in contrast to that of Plotinus by affirming the significance of individuality and historical existence, the existential seriousness of temporal decision-making in concrete situations, including boundary situations, the indispensable role of intersubjective relations in the constitution of selfhood, and the inescapable tension between the finite and transcendent being.