



Reading Ciphers With Jaspers and Ricoeur

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Abstract: This essay revisits and prolongs the debate on religion between Karl Jaspers and Paul Ricoeur. I seek to show that they agree on many basic points and that their differences are best characterized as non-oppositional. Both thinkers reject authoritarian religion and the claim to exclusivity and universality that often accompanies it. In a 1957 critique of Jaspers, Ricoeur defines their positions as salvation versus speculation. In response, I cite texts showing (1) that Jaspers makes room for the kind of religious specificity that Ricoeur affirms and (2) that for Jaspers philosophy's role is to prepare the way for the ultimate experience. Whereas Ricoeur holds that Jaspers both traps himself in negativity and floats in vain poetizing, I contend that a careful reading of Jaspers reveals a movement from fear to leap to serenity. As for Ricoeur, I suggest that his hermeneutics of the originary language of religion, developed over the past four decades, can plausibly be seen as a Jaspersian reading of ciphers.

Karl Jaspers and Paul Ricoeur conducted a lively and respectful public debate about religion. Ricoeur wrote his first book on the philosophy of Karl Jaspers,¹ had a published exchange with Jaspers on the question of religion,² and continued to refer to Jaspers in many subsequent books and essays. Whereas phenomenology and existentialism and deep knowledge of the Western tradition of philosophy gave them much in common, they differed most sharply about religion. In this essay I propose to revisit their debate and show that on several key points, thanks to a careful reading of Jaspers, the gap between them can be reduced if not overcome.

¹ Mikel Dufrenne and Paul Ricoeur, *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1947).

² *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, P. A. Schilpp ed. (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1957/81). Cf. Ricoeur's "The Relation of Jaspers' Philosophy to Religion" (hereafter, "Relation"), pp. 611-42, and Jaspers' "Reply to My Critics" (hereafter, "Reply"), pp. 778-81.

For Ricoeur, a discussion of Jaspers on religion is complicated because Jaspers, rather than taking religion on its own terms and reflecting on it philosophically, takes it out of its own context and locates it in "the new problematical area of *the metaphysical dimension of reality*."³ Religion thereby becomes a philosophical question worked out in terms of the relation between appearance and Being (or Transcendence). This is problematic for Ricoeur since he sees it as a stumbling block for the Christ-myth which is banished by a totally different conception of mediation. From Jaspers' perspective, "religious mediation [of which Christianity is a prime example] is unacceptable because it claims to localize, and then to guarantee, the presence of Transcendence in immanence."⁴ This critique does apply to some versions of Christianity, the

³ Relation, p. 620.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 631.

authoritarian ones that Jaspers discusses in *Von der Wahrheit* under the heading of "Catholicity." Ricoeur agrees with this critique of authoritarian religion, calling it religion's *pretension*; he holds that Jaspers misses what he calls religion's intention.

It must be pointed out, however, that Jaspers, working from his "metaphysical" perspective, can affirm some kinds of religious adherence, including Christian ones. That the Christ-myth is not simply banished can be seen by noting the several important points in this passage from *Philosophie, Vol. III*:

In extended historicity Existenz follows the substance of the tradition out of which it arose. The fact that the metaphysical content is historic means that Existenz adheres to the revelation of transcendence it has received in the particular configuration it has encountered and in the language it has heard. This is so not because this revelation is one configuration among others, thus also a truth, but because it is, for Existenz, simply the truth on the basis of which its self-being will stand or fall.... As long as a community of free Existenzen is kept in motion by such historic form, Existenz will not confuse the meaning of universality and hence will remain open to the truth of other Existenzen. Adhering unconditionally to its own truth and conscious of its historicity, Existenz would avoid exclusivity *vis-à-vis* others as well as the claim to universality.... Existenz would, however, respond affirmatively to the question whether the being of the self in its transcendent relatedness could be grounded in an accident of history. Historicity becomes the source of the conviction of not being *everything* and of not regarding oneself as the sole type of being there ought to be.⁵

An example of how Ricoeur shares Jaspers' rejection of authoritarian religion is found in his comments on the status of Scripture. Ricoeur is "frightened by the word 'sacred'" applied to Scripture because that could lead to arbitrariness,⁶ unnecessary compulsion, and resistance to critical reflection. Moreover, in the case of the Christian Bible, history shows that the text is not sacred because adopting the canon involved choosing some texts rather than others and because it was decided that the texts could be

translated into other languages than the originals. He writes, "I am prepared to say that I recognize something *revealing* that is not frozen in any ultimate or immutable text."⁷ Ricoeur is willing to say that Scripture is "authoritative," meaning that it is a "text that constitutes the founding act of the community."⁸ But since revealing is historical, "a permanent process of opening something that is closed, of making manifest something that was hidden,"⁹ the community formed around it is dynamic and changing. Scripture, nonetheless, is a constant for the Christian community because preaching permanently reinterprets it, and not some other Scripture or literary text. Preaching on another text would be a crisis for the community, would put its identity in question, but would not be a sacrilege. The continuity of one community would be broken, but perhaps another community would be in formation.

Now that we see that Jaspers and Ricoeur stand together in rejecting authoritarian and dogmatic religion, their opposition must lie elsewhere. Let us go back to Ricoeur's contention that whereas religion's primary intention is to save freedom from its vanity.¹⁰ Jaspers defines religion in terms of the relation between appearance and Being. If the primordial problems of religion and philosophy are salvation and speculation respectively, they can be in polar relation, a position that Ricoeur advocates. He thinks, however, that Jaspers, by regarding religion in terms of appearance and Being, is committed to putting philosophy and religion in a mutually exclusive relation. Is this the case?

The first thing to be said is that Jaspers does not understand speculation in the traditional sense of thinking that attempts to provide a systematic theory of reality. For him, the metaphysical dimension, and along with it ciphers and the reading of ciphers, emerge only when the destiny of *Existenz* is at stake. There is, then, a religious dimension to Jaspers' philosophizing, as witness his adoption and development of the category of philosophical faith. The question is whether Jaspers' philosophical faith excludes religion, by either rejecting it or absorbing it, as Ricoeur seems to think.

At one point in his exposition of Jaspers, Ricoeur says that Jaspers forces a choice "between the

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie, Vol. III*, p. 24, using the translation, slightly emended, of Edith Ehrlich, Leonard Ehrlich, and George Pepper in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), pp. 304-5.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "The 'Sacred' Text and the Community," in *Figuring the Sacred*, Mark I. Wallace ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁰ Relation, pp. 631 and 640.

'encipherment' (*Chifferwerden*) of all things, and the Christian incarnation.¹¹ But a look at the passage that Ricoeur cites in support of his point (at the very end of *Von der Wahrheit*) shows that Jaspers is objecting not to Christianity or all positive religion but to those who claim that their revelation and special historicity have validity for all humans. Jaspers is criticizing those versions of Christian teaching about Jesus which carry a certain metaphysics, namely, that Jesus is both man and God. Since Ricoeur has never adopted the metaphysics that provided the terms in which the Chalcedonian Christological dogmas were stated, it does not seem to me that he needs to conclude that Jaspers is forcing a choice between encipherment and Christian incarnation. The issue for both thinkers is whether there is confusion: between cipher and Being itself (Jaspers); between symbol and that which is symbolized (Ricoeur). Again, I find that they agree more than disagree.

The passage from *Von der Wahrheit* is also pertinent to Ricoeur's contention that Jaspers' philosophical faith is prideful self-absorption on the part of *Existenz*. The metaphysical experience is not, for Jaspers, just a one-way matter originating in *Existenzen*. He says, "Transcendence has spoken historically...everywhere."¹² *Existenz* is a gift in the first place, and when *Existenz* and Transcendence are related by ciphers the time for asserting ownership and control has passed. If Ricoeur is right that religion is concerned primarily with the salvation of freedom, it is hard to see what quarrel he can have with Jaspers who says that "the idea of God is necessary so that man may come to himself, so that man may become free of all the world for himself," but that "an invented God cannot have such an effect... Only an actual God is capable of this.... The origin lies in God. To each man must be given from Him what he becomes through the fact that he begins to perceive Being and how he begins to perceive it."¹³

And, finally, the very last lines of *Von der Wahrheit* suggest that philosophy does not take *Existenz* all the way to the goal, that philosophy (even philosophical faith) does not completely absorb or annex religion. "The communication of philosophy does not give

essential reality but makes it possible to become aware of it. Philosophy awakens, makes one attentive, shows ways, leads the way for a while, makes ready, makes one ripe for the experience of the utmost (*das Äußerste*)."¹⁴ I find here not mutual exclusion of philosophy and religion, but a strong hint of a complementary polarity *à la* Ricoeur, where philosophy and religion have distinct roles.

So perhaps the conflict between Jaspers and Ricoeur is not at the global level where we have been working so far. Let us see whether it lies in what Ricoeur finds to be a "confusion of guilt and finitude" in Jaspers' account of religion.¹⁵ That Ricoeur regards this as an important point is no surprise since he devoted an entire book to making the distinction between these two concepts.¹⁶ At the level of eidetic reflection on human being Ricoeur finds fallibility (finitude) and only the possibility of fault (guilt). The reality of guilt appears only when philosophy addresses, at the level of empirics, actual human experience. Jaspers, according to Ricoeur, makes the confusion because he finds guilt at both the metaphysical and moral levels. That is, guilt is a constitutional limitation of existence and becomes deeper through specific action. By becoming inevitable, Ricoeur says, *guilt tends invincibly to become a misfortune of existing which is absolutely past possibility of pardon and redemption*.¹⁷

What is more, Ricoeur thinks that this makes understandable "the whole orientation of the philosophy of Jaspers toward foundering rather than toward 'rebirth'."¹⁸ The ensuing paragraphs complete the indictment in terms that are for the most part prominent in Jaspers' own text: defeat, disintegrative process, disaster, strange appetite for ruin, wish to annihilate, abysmal lack, failure, defiance, passion for the night, surrender, the drive to destroy oneself, the drive of *Existenz* toward its own failure, and the necessary ruin of everything that becomes. The section

¹⁴ Truth and Symbol, p. 79, *Von der Wahrheit*, p. 1054.

¹⁵ Relation, p. 632.

¹⁶ *Fallible Man*, Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965. Cf. especially the "Conclusion."

¹⁷ Relation, p. 633. Italics in the original. I will not attempt here to deal with all the issues concerning the relation between finitude and guilt. That relation may well be a major "fault"-line in recent philosophy. My focus is on the single question whether Jaspers is, in principle, limited to a philosophy of foundering.

¹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 633.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 624.

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, J. T. Wilde, W. Kluback, and W. Kimmel trans (New Haven: College and University Press, 1959), p. 76. Also, Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1947), p. 1052.

¹³ Jaspers, *Truth and Symbol*, pp. 77-9; *Von der Wahrheit*, pp. 1053-4.

ends with Ricoeur's judgment that "'vanity' lies at the heart of the philosophy of Jaspers" and his suggestion that *Existenz* is burdened by "a freedom which is less enamored of Being than of its own power to choose and its own glory."¹⁹ We must now assess Ricoeur's account of Jaspers.

It seems that Ricoeur's concern over Jaspers' confusion of finitude with guilt has skewed his reading of Jaspers. He writes, "What the believer cannot understand is a doctrine of guilt loosed from a doctrine of forgiveness. For him guilt is known retrospectively from the depths of a dawning restoration."²⁰ The inability to understand makes it impossible for Ricoeur to find any significant element of deliverance or salvation (*Erlösung*, is the multivalent German word) in Jaspers. The result is that he seizes on the many negative terms listed above and takes them as representative of Jaspers' position. I believe I can show that if Ricoeur had correctly seen the role of the negative terms he would have been able to see the positive side of Jaspers' position.

Even though Ricoeur's exposition of Jaspers pays attention to the structure of Jaspers' main works, *Philosophie* and *Von der Wahrheit*, I contend that he misreads the movement of the most pertinent part of *Philosophie*, Vol. III, on metaphysics. Ricoeur acknowledges Jaspers' own statement that each chapter is a self-contained whole with all of the main elements in play in the way appropriate to a given chapter. Accordingly, *Philosophie* does not repeat the classical move from world to self to God. Ricoeur notes that, "From the very first pages of *Philosophie*, absolute Being is already present as the goal of philosophy,"²¹ and cites the following example: "I can never be other wise than in a situation, conscious of objects and searching for being-in-itself."²² With this structural feature in mind, Ricoeur rightly thinks that he is justified in beginning his exposition of Jaspers' religious philosophy with "the

final thesis of the work, the theory of ciphers."²³ What follows is a searching and insightful presentation of Jaspers on the relation between philosophy and religion.

The problem with Ricoeur's reading emerges in the concluding "Critical Remarks." Here he contends that because Jaspers conflates finitude and guilt he can offer nothing but failure and despair. Since the concept of foundering or shipwreck (*Scheitern*) is central to Jaspers' philosophy, he can find many examples of failure and breakup. He takes them from many different places in Jaspers' books, particularly from the section on tragedy in *Von der Wahrheit* and from the section on existential relations to transcendence in Vol. III of *Philosophie*. But there is a structural reason why this treatment of Jaspers is deficient. It fails to respect the movement of Volume 3. As I see it, this volume on metaphysics has four steps. The first introduces the idea of Transcendence. The next two, Formal Transcending and Existential Relations to Transcendence, show how the realms of formal thought and existence have a drive toward transcendence but cannot break through to it on their own terms. The book has its resolution in the fourth step, The Reading of Ciphers. My point is that the middle steps, and particularly the one dealing with existential relations to transcendence that Ricoeur cites so often, should not be taken as presenting Jaspers' position on the relation of *Existenz* to Transcendence and on the problem of guilt. Steps two and three lay out an *aporia*, a difficulty that is addressed in step four. Ricoeur is right to say that the theory of ciphers is Jaspers' "final thesis," but he is wrong to ignore the reading of ciphers when he makes his case on the question of deliverance. When he makes his criticism he seems to have forgotten that he earlier cited what I take to be the key passage to the structural issue. At the end of the introductory section on Transcendence, Jaspers writes, "The *search* for transcendence lies in the existential relations to it [section three]; its *presence* lies in cipher writing [section four]; the *space* for both is held open by formal transcending [section two]."²⁴

A reference to Kant will perhaps give a context for the argument I am making about a structural reading of Jaspers. In *The Great Philosophers* Jaspers says that "Kant is the absolutely indispensable philosopher" and that "the fate of philosophy hinges on our attitude toward

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 635 and 636.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 633.

²¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 619.

²² *Philosophy*, E. B. Ashton trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), Vol. 1, p. 48. In Relation, this passage is cited as appearing on p. 13 of *Philosophie*, when actually it appears on p. 5. A second quotation from *Philosophie* is cited as appearing on p. 15, when actually it appears on p. 13. The second sentence quoted by Ricoeur, "Existenz is that which relates to itself and to its Transcendence," appears slightly differently on p. 56 of the Ashton translation.

²³ Relation, p. 619.

²⁴ *Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 32. Quoted slightly differently by Ricoeur at Relation, p. 620.

Kant." For Jaspers, Kant "remains a source of boundless inspiration," and he wants "to enter into the movement of Kant's creative thinking."²⁵ In *Philosophie*, Jaspers says that Kant "always wants to transcend" and creates the transcendental method to "transcend to nonobjectiveness."²⁶ Vol. III of *Philosophy* is a model example of how Jaspers enters into the movement of Kant's thinking rather than woodenly repeating it. Whereas Kant, in the "dialectic" chapters of his *Critiques*, marks the limits of reason by showing how it contradicts itself when it tries to achieve objective knowledge of what is not objective, Jaspers, in the sections on "Formal Transcending" and "Existential Relations to Transcendence," shows how neither of these efforts can come to completion on their own terms. "Formal Transcending," following closely the rubrics of Kant's first two *Critiques*, shows the impossibility of absolutizing the categories. Jaspers concludes that "formal transcending [by foundering] makes room for the cipher language of transcendence."²⁷ Jaspers' creative advance on Kant comes in the following section where he traces a similar movement of transcending and foundering under the existential rubrics of "Defiance and Surrender," "Rise and Fall," etc. These sections, together, are a preparation for the concluding one on the "Reading of Ciphers." There, Jaspers offers his parallel to the Ideas and Ideal of Reason which are Kant's nonobjectiveness. Jaspers proposes "a kind of objectivity" that abides by the strictures of Kant's critical philosophy, namely, metaphysical objectivity or cipher. It is in this section that we should look for Jaspers' answer to the question of deliverance. Ricoeur's failure to find deliverance in the earlier sections is a failure to read Jaspers in the proper order.

Ricoeur's structural misreading, which mistakes what we might call Jaspers' diagnosis of a problem for his solution, is coupled, naturally enough, with the second problem, his failure to see the positive, though complex, proposal that Jaspers makes for the relation between *Existenz* and Transcendence. Since Ricoeur seems to find it significant that the title of the final section of *Reading Ciphers* is "Vanishing of Existence and Existenz as the Decisive Cipher of Transcendence

(Being in Foundering)," I will focus my attention there. Jaspers himself raises the pertinent issue: "Contained in the multifariousness of foundering is the question whether foundering is destruction plain and simple because that which founders does, indeed, perish, or whether in foundering a Being becomes manifest; whether foundering can be not merely foundering but may be perpetuation."²⁸

Jaspers holds that foundering requires knowledge and that therefore only humans can founder. The knowledge that is pertinent to foundering is the discovery that every claim to finality is false. A systematic doctrine of God overreaches, for by presuming to talk about God in conceptual terms it shows that it literally does not know what it is talking about. Experience shows that an optimistic philosophy of love is inadequate, just as is a pessimistic philosophy of despair.

Jaspers distinguishes between duration (*Dauer*) and perpetuation or eternalization (*Vereewigen*). If, as a natural being, I try to achieve duration, I discover that things natural, fabricated, and human pass away. Timeless concepts do not satisfy because they are unreal and empty. Jaspers says that "When...existence as possible Existenz ultimately sees authentic Being only in the present actuality of its own self-being, even destruction and perishing become a Being if they are grasped freely."²⁹ The present actuality retains its historical particularity, but now *Existenz* is aware that its own being is at stake. It is not, however, left all alone, for it is now able to apprehend Being. Being is present, but in the necessarily ambiguous way that it must be since it is not present as such, but through some aspect of worldly experience. Since the distinctive thing about foundering is that a cipher may emerge, any particular experience, including destruction, can be the occasion for it. Accordingly, Jaspers says that "there is nothing that could not be a cipher."³⁰ And the complementary and equally basic point is that "Existenz is that which relates to itself and to its Transcendence."³¹ That is, *Existenz* is only fully itself in a realized relation to

²⁸ *Op. cit.*, pp. 194-5. But here I have used the translation in *Karl Jaspers: Basic Philosophical Writings*, p. 332.

²⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 195, but using the *Basic Writings* translation from p. 332.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

³¹ *Philosophy*, Vol. I, p. 56. Following Ricoeur's translation (*cf.* footnote 13), but restoring the italics which are in the original.

²⁵ The lines quoted are from pp. 380 and 381 of *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. I, Ralph Manheim trans. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962).

²⁶ *Philosophy*, Vol. I, pp. 79-80.

²⁷ *Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 59.

Transcendence. Jaspers writes, "For any possible Existenz, whether without, against, or with transcendence, transcendence remains the ceaseless question." Jaspers gives his answer to the question when he says in the next paragraph, "The test of the possibility of my Existenz is the knowledge that it rests upon transcendence."³²

Since no particular outcome is attached to the achieved relation of *Existenz* to Transcendence, we see that deliverance for Jaspers is simply the assurance of Being: "That there is Being suffices."³³ There is a certain peace and serenity in this assurance. But it is attained on the other side of fear, the ultimate fear in which all seems hopeless. "The leap from fear to serenity is the most tremendous one a man can make. That he succeeds in it must be due to a reason beyond the *Existenz* of his self-being. Indefinably, his faith ties him to transcendent being."³⁴ The tie to transcendence, formed by the fear-leap-serenity triad, also makes possible seeing mundane realities without reserve. This calls to mind Whitehead's insistence on "the awful ultimate fact, which is the human being, consciously alone with itself, for its own sake.... if you are never solitary, you are never religious" and that religion is what you do with your solitariness: reach out to others, to the world, and to God.³⁵

The preceding discussion of religion has attempted to show that the opposition between Jaspers and Ricoeur is not as sharp as Ricoeur wanted to draw it in 1957. If I am correct, there are non-oppositional differences between them, such that each allows space for the position of the other. I now turn to some of those differences as they relate specifically to the reading of ciphers.

Ricoeur's programme for a philosophy of the will, announced in 1950, was to have three parts: an eidetics, an empirics, and a poetics. The first appeared in 1950 as *Le Volontaire et l'involontaire* (translated as *Freedom and Nature*) and the second in 1960 as *Finitude et culpabilité: (I) L'Homme faillible, (II) La symbolique du mal* (translated respectively as *Fallible Man* and *The Symbolism of Evil*). The poetics never appeared. Whereas the first two parts of the philosophy of will made an "abstraction" of

Transcendence, the poetics is to take up the connection of Transcendence and freedom. Writing in terms that resonate with Jaspers, Ricoeur says in the 1950 Introduction to the whole project,

There is no thinkable system of freedom and Transcendence.... We shall be led to criticize systems which seek a conceptual harmonization of freedom and of Transcendence, whether by sacrificing one to the other, or by conjoining, without paradox, a half-freedom and a half-Transcendence. We hope to show the fruitfulness of an "a-logic of paradox" for recasting the old debates about freedom and grace.... The paradox of freedom and Transcendence can be sustained only as a mystery which it is the task of poetics to discern.³⁶

Although the third volume of the *Philosophy of the Will* did not appear, Ricoeur published several essays that carry out some of the tasks envisaged. For example, the 1961 essay, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection," culminates in a searing critique of original sin when it is taken as an intelligible concept which can yield knowledge rather than as a symbol. Although original sin is a pseudo-concept, "its irreplaceable function is...to integrate the schema of inheritance with that of contingency."³⁷ What follows are four decades of work focused on the interpretation of the "originary" language of religion. He faults Ian Ramsey for discussing religious language that "is highly elaborated from a theological point of view." He holds that "we should consider the most originary, the most pretheological, level of religious discourse possible. The parables, proverbs, and eschatological sayings, for example."³⁸ Religious discourse, rather than being scientific or ethical, is existential. So although the Genesis account of creation "is cosmologically out of date, it remains existentially true."³⁹

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, Erazim A. Kohák trans. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 33.

³⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection: I," in *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Don Ihde ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 306. Ricoeur's critique is fully developed in the final two sections of this essay (pp. 304–14).

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *Figuring the Sacred*, Mark I. Wallace ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 58.

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, "The Language of Faith," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: An Anthology of His Work*, Charles E. Reagan and David Stewart eds (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 228.

³² *Philosophy*, Vol. III, p. 6.

³³ Op. cit., p. 207.

³⁴ Op. cit., p. 206.

³⁵ Alfred N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), p. 16.

Ricoeur aims the beam of reflection underneath objective language and at the primitive, the primordial, the original, which give "access to the manifestation of the world...a world in which man is placed at the center."⁴⁰ For Ricoeur the existentialist there is a relation between limit-expressions and limit-experiences. Originary "religious language...uses limit expressions only to open up our very experience, to make it explode in the direction of experiences that themselves are limit-experiences. The parable...re-describes experience. But it does not re-describe it in the fashion of one more poetic language among others, but according to its intending of the *extreme*."⁴¹ A few lines later, Ricoeur, wanting to be more precise about the limit experiences he has in mind, says that they are not "just experiences of distress as in the thought of Karl Jaspers."⁴²

We seem to have here, in 1978, a reprise of the 1957 criticisms. For once again Jaspers is linked with distress, and Ricoeur refers to (merely) poetic language. But does the contrast with Jaspers need to be drawn so sharply? It is true that Jaspers, who deals with forms of language at their breaking points, often discusses "highly theological" religious language. But three other factors place Jaspers closer to Ricoeur: (1) Jaspers' positive appreciation of biblical religion, (2) his conviction that faith is an existential matter, and (3) his insistence that faith should not lead one out of the world, but, rather, back into the historical situation.

I conclude by mentioning one further point of convergence between Jaspers and Ricoeur, namely their handling of the question of God. Whereas Ricoeur reads Jaspers as in the speculative tradition of Plotinus, Spinoza, and Hegel and worries that the vanity of *Existenz* leads Jaspers to a philosophical gnosticism,⁴³ it seems to me that Leonard Ehrlich is closer to the truth when he writes that even though "Jaspers seems not to have read Maimonides...it should be clear that in conception, if not in its execution and the historic circumstances in which it occurred, Maimonides' negative theology approaches the intention of Jaspers'

cipher-philosophy."⁴⁴ Although Ricoeur does not offer a negative theology (that would bring him too close to speculative concerns), he is also a minimalist on the God question. A minimalist, however, for whom God is the central religious name.

The word "God" does not function as a philosophical concept.... Even if one is tempted to say...that "God" is the religious name for being, still the word "God" says more: it presupposes the total context constituted by the whole space of gravitation of stories, prophecies, laws, hymns, and so forth. To understand the word "God" is to follow the direction of the meaning of the word. By the direction of the meaning I mean its double power to gather all the significations that issue from the partial discourses and to open up a horizon that escapes from the closure of discourse.... The God-referent is at once the coordinator of these various discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them.⁴⁵

In his Reply in 1957, Jaspers, without abandoning his position, found a way to accept many of Ricoeur's criticisms. I hope to have shown (1) that some of Ricoeur's other criticisms are without basis and (2) that a Jaspersian philosopher could affirm the hermeneutical philosophy of religion that Ricoeur has developed during the past four decades. I hope, as well, that I have shown that it is still fruitful to consider together these two exemplars of the loving struggle of philosophizing.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *Figuring the Sacred*, Mark I. Wallace ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Relation, pp. 622, 630, and 641-2.

⁴⁴ Leonard Ehrlich, *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975), p. 155.

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in *Figuring the Sacred*, Mark I. Wallace ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 45-6.