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Karl Jaspers' Conceptions of the Meaning of Life

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Abstract: The thesis is explicated, that we can finally distinguish three conceptions of the meaning of life in Jaspers' philosophy. This thesis is grounded on the distinction of two different periods of Jaspers' philosophizing: an early period of his existential philosophy, and a later period, when Jaspers rejected the terms "Existentialism" or "existential philosophy" for his philosophizing and preferred to call it a "philosophy of reason." In the early period, Jaspers holds the following two positions: (1) The idea of realising the meaning of life by overcoming boundary situations in the right way, and (2) the idea of realising the meaning of life by interpersonal existential communication. In the later period, he holds (3) the position of realising the meaning of life by a life governed by reason.

A closer examination of Jaspers' earlier books leads to the conclusion that the concept of reason has neither a dominant position in his *Psychology of World-Views* (1918), nor in his main work in Existentialism or existential philosophy, the three volumes of the book *Philosophy* published in 1932. The concept of reason became relevant for Jaspers in his *Existence and Reason* (1936). Then this concept got a basic priority in the large book *Von der Wahrheit* (1948), and also in Jaspers' main work in political philosophy, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* (1958). An explicit demand to call his later philosophizing a "philosophy of reason" we can find in the book *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, written in 1950.¹

These two different periods of Jaspers' philosophizing are closely related to specific biographical facts in his life. The period of his existentialism or existential philosophizing – from 1919 until 1936 – was highly influenced by two events which became

formative all over Jaspers' life. One event was a disastrous recognition concerning his health: Jaspers was eighteen years old when he learned that he was living with an incurable disease. In his *Philosophical Memoir* we can read:

One basic fact of my existence qualified all the decisions of my life: I was organically ill from childhood on (bronchiectasis and cardiac decompensation). I was eighteen...when the correct diagnosis was made.... I read a treatise by Rudolf Virchow which described my ailment in every detail and gave the prognosis: in their thirties at the latest, these patients die of pyemia. I realized what mattered in treatment. I slowly learned the procedures, partly inventing them myself. They could not be carried out properly if I led the normal life of the healthy. If I wished to work, I had to risk what was harmful; if I wished to go on living, I had to observe a strict regimen and to avoid what was harmful. My existence passed between these poles. Frequent failures, by allowing fatigue to poison the body, were inevitable, and every time recovery was essential. The point was not to let concern about my

¹ See Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in our Time*, Stanley Godman trans. (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1952), p. 63.

illness turn the illness into the sum and substance of life. My task was to treat it properly almost without noticing it, and to keep working as if it did not exist. I had to adapt everything to it, without giving up to it. Time and again I made mistakes. The exigencies arising from my illness touched every hour and affected all my plans.²

The permanent confrontation with the imminence of his own death because of his disease had a great influence upon one of the main thesis of Jaspers' existential philosophy, namely, that the experience of boundary situations like death, suffering, struggling, or guilt, is an unavoidable condition of human existence. Experiencing and overcoming those situations in the right way provides a basic opportunity to realize the meaning of life.

Another important biographical fact during Jaspers' period of existential philosophizing was his marriage to Gertrud Mayer in 1910, a woman of Jewish origin. About her first encounter, he wrote in his *Autobiography*:

Loneliness, melancholy, self-consciousness, all that changed when I, at the age of twenty-four, met Gertrud Mayer. Unforgettable when, accompanied by her brother, I first entered her room.... It was as if self-evident that the conversation soon turned to the basic questions of life, as if we had already known each other for a long time. From the first hour there was between us an inconceivable harmony, something never expected to be possible.³

The deep personal relationship with his wife has also shaped his conception of *interpersonal existential communication* that became a second aspect for the meaning of life in Jaspers' existentialism. A third and equally important biographical fact that influenced Jaspers' philosophy and radically changed his personal life, was his confrontation with the Nazi-regime in Germany. After the Nazis had come to power in 1933, Jaspers was excluded from all administrative duties at the University of Heidelberg. In 1937, he was denied the right to teach, and a year later he was forbidden to publish. Toward the end of WWII, Jaspers and his wife were in great danger of being deported to an extermination camp. His experience of Nazi-terrorism

was the dominant motivation why Jaspers together with his wife left Germany after the war, and moved to Switzerland to accept a professorship at the University of Basle in 1948. These encounters constituted a crucial motivation for developing a third conception of the meaning of life, namely, *a human being is governed by reason*.

In addition to my thesis, that we have to distinguish three conceptions of the meaning of life in Jaspers' philosophy, I wish to add a second thesis: All three of his conceptions of the meaning of life are grounded on a normative moral framework. We may call this framework an *implicit liberal ethos of humanity*, or, in philosophical terms, an implicit ethics of virtue. Jaspers never makes explicit this moral framework as an ethical position; indeed, he never intended to postulate moral attitudes or virtues as explicit norms and general ethical rules. He wanted, rather, to stimulate their acceptance by his philosophy, and to appeal to every individual in an indirect way to accept these virtues in their own live and personal relations.

One final introductory remark that I want to make concerns a severe methodological problem that is implicated in Jaspers' existentialism and his project of a transcending existential philosophizing. I think that there is an element of mysticism in his methodological framework that entails unacceptable methodological consequences. This problem becomes obvious in some of his meta-reflections on the task of transcending philosophizing, where Jaspers proposes to introduce contradictory statements into philosophical contexts in order to accept philosophical statements as mere sign-posts to the dimension of a non-objective Being that he calls "transcendence" and "existenz." He wants us to relativise the descriptive meanings and informative contents of philosophical statements. We are confronted with a similar problem in connection with the ladder-argument in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: If all sentences in the *Tractatus* have the only function of climbing the steps of a ladder,⁴ and their cognitive and descriptive content is absolutely irrelevant (*i.e.*, if sentences provide only a therapeutic function of learning to see the world in the right perspective), a discussion of the descriptive content of those sentences is of no purpose. Instead of serving as propositions, they have only a therapeutic function, a sign-post function. Whether or not they can fulfill such

² Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Memoir," in: Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy and the World: Selected Essays and Lectures*, E. B. Ashton trans. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1963), p. 198.

³ Karl Jaspers, "Philosophical Autobiography," in Paul Schilpp ed., *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1957), p. 11.

⁴ See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus-logico philosophicus*, D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness trans, with Introduction by Bertrand Russell (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 151.

function cannot be examined or proven, because their sign-post dimension is non-objective and cannot be verbally communicated.

I summarize my methodological objection to Jaspers in this way: We must not follow Jaspers in his demand to transcend or relativise the descriptive contents of his sentences; in this case we would not be allowed to give any interpretation at all to his philosophical propositions. To be sure, every interpretation presupposes a certain content open to hermeneutic approaches. If every content is *a priori* relativised, then we do not have anything which can be interpreted in any way or direction. In this case, philosophy as an activity of interpretation and argumentation would come to an end. There would remain only silence and some intuitive awareness of a mystical or transcendental dimension of Being, which we could not talk about and communicate to others. This methodological problem can be avoided only by not accepting Jaspers' demand for transcending and relativising the contents of his existential philosophy in a strict sense. The best way to interpret him here is to see his existential demands as an over-arching appeal to an anti-dogmatic way of philosophizing, and to a kind of philosophical open-mindedness that does not reduce all Being to dimensions of empirical and objective knowledge.

The Anthropological Framework

We have come, now, to the second section of my essay, which concerns the anthropological framework of Jaspers' existential thinking. This framework grounds the two conceptions of the meaning of life that I mentioned earlier in connection with Jaspers' Existentialist period.

Jaspers' anthropological framework consists of a dual conception of man, and bears in some basic aspects striking resemblances to Immanuel Kant's philosophical anthropology and to Søren Kierkegaard's conception of the human being. Both influenced Jaspers intensively as we can see from his early book *Psychology of World-Views* (1919). Jaspers understands a human being as an empirical and non-empirical phenomenon. While the empirical dimension of man can be researched by the sciences (*e.g.*, biology, psychology, sociology), the non-empirical dimension cannot be described and explained in objectifying scientific terms. In *Psychology of World-Views*, Jaspers argues that the non-empirical dimension of humanity can be elucidated only by a kind of hermeneutic approach in psychology.

In his works of existentialism he holds the position that it is the task of an existential transcending philosophizing to "elucidate" that non-empirical dimension of human existence.

Furthermore, Jaspers argues that a human being realises one's life and potentialities in four modes, or four dimensions, of being. As the first basic dimension of human self-realisation Jaspers mentions naive vitality, or, vital existence. This is the biological or physical part of oneself, where physical conditions, spontaneous emotions, basic interests and instinctive impulses dominate. Such dimension of human life, Jaspers calls it *bloßes Dasein*, is without self-reflection and self-consciousness. Jaspers argues: "Physically I am part of life, a part whose form and function is the continuity of that ever-changing body of mine. I want this life; without it I do not exist. I am present in its vital functions, but these functions are not I. As nothing but life, I would be just a natural process."⁵

The second dimension of human self-realisation he calls *Bewußtsein überhaupt* (*i.e.*, "consciousness in general" or "consciousness at large"). This is to be understood by way of analogy with Kant's epistemology: The human mind has a mere formal structure in virtue of the forms of perception (space and time) and the forms of conception (categories of thought). Those formal elements are *a priori* conditions for constituting knowledge. With consciousness in general, Jaspers refers to the dimension of logical thinking and rationality.

The third dimension of human being Jaspers calls the dimension of *Geist* ("spirit" or "reason"). Though *Geist* is dependent upon correctness of understanding and thinking, it goes beyond it. The specific capacity of spirit is the production of *ideas* that allow one to see different phenomena in terms of unities and as parts of a meaningful whole. These ideas are manifest in personal ideals, principles of religion, moral world-views, political ideologies, creative conceptions of the arts. Jaspers himself wrote three different monographs concerning the idea of the university, where the task and goals of university institutions are pointed out.⁶

Now these three modes of being – or, dimensions of self-realisation – represent humans only as an empirical phenomenon. All human beings, however,

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2: *Existential Elucidation*, E. B. Ashton trans., (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 28–9.

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University*, K. W. Deutsch ed., preface by R. Ulich, H. A. T. Reiche and H. F. Vanderschmidt trans (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959).

own as an existential possibility or potentiality a fourth and non-empirical dimension of self-realisation which is the highest form, *self-realisation as Existenz*. The concept of *Existenz* stands for the non-objective actuality of self-being and true self-hood, the authentic ground of human being, exemplified by the intimate dimension of personal autonomy, existential freedom, and undetermined moral decisions. No empirical studies or doctrines of ontology and ethics can provide adequate understanding of subjectivity and humanity. Understanding comes with realising this dimension in one's own life and/or by elucidating it through transcending philosophizing. "Self-realisation as *Existenz* is equivalent to realising the meaning of one's own life.

Jaspers' methodological conception of elucidating *Existenz* has some basic aspects in common with Kierkegaard's conception of subjective reflection. Kierkegaard described this type of reflection in contrary to objective reflection extensively in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Objective reasoning, as it dominates scientific thought, allows one to gain knowledge of things in the world including one's own objective nature (e.g., biological and psychological nature). By subjective reflection, one is directed to the non-objective and non-rational dimension of selfhood. This kind of reflection, which is genuine philosophical reflection, is not a mere contemplation of oneself, but a reflection upon oneself which itself is an action. It implies an act of self-conscious choosing of oneself. This choice also implies a moral act because in this act an individual takes full responsibility for one's own life-style and its consequences. Jaspers reformulates this Kierkegaardian position in terms of the elucidation of *Existenz*.

In becoming *Existenz*, one feels that existential self-realisation is not the result of one's own rational planning or solely a product of one's own managing efforts. It is experienced as a *gift from Transcendence*, or absolute Being, or God, or the Encompassing – Jaspers uses these terms (ciphers) synonymously – a dimension of Being that, in a radical sense, is unknowable. Jaspers cautions that religious creeds might evolve into illegitimate objectifications and anthropomorphisations of transcendent Being. Note that Jaspers does not view religious faith in atheistic terms. Rather, he takes a critical position against any conception of a revelation that seeks to provide objective, guaranteed proofs for the existence of God, or that is bound to rituals, churches, priests, and theologians who pretend to be the interpreters of God's will or revelation.

How, then, can one realise one's personal meaning of life as *Existenz*? Jaspers recognizes two basic possibilities: (1) the experience and overcoming of boundary situations in a right way, and (2) the experience of mutual existential communication with another person. What follows is a brief analysis of these two possibilities for realising the meaning of life as developed by Jaspers during his period of existentialism.

Realising the Meaning of Life by Reacting to Boundary Situations

Like many other existentialists, also Jaspers sees all human beings as constantly involved in situations. We cannot leave a situation without entering another. Occasionally, human beings encounter unexpected events, or as Jaspers calls them, *Grenzsituationen* (the term includes "boundary situation," "limiting situation," "borderline situation," and "ultimate situation"). *Grenzsituationen* cannot be dealt with by objective and rational knowledge alone, that is typically used to solve problems in everyday life. If we try to escape boundary situations by managing them with rationality and objective knowledge we must necessarily founder. Instead, boundary situations require a radical change in attitude in one's normal ways of thinking. The proper way to react within boundary situations "is not by planning and calculating to overcome them but by the very different activity of *becoming the Existenz we potentially are*; we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations. We can know them only externally, and their reality can only be felt by *Existenz*. To experience boundary situations is the same as *Existenz*."⁷

Here again, the affinities between Jaspers and Kierkegaard are evident. Jaspers maintains that becoming *Existenz* by experiencing boundary situations is necessarily tied to an intensive process of self-reflection, i.e., a non-empirical and non-objective relationship to one's self. By means of self-reflection, a person elucidates his or her own existential possibilities, and facing boundary situations, the person is, ideally, lead to an act of self-acceptance.

One of the most specific boundary situations in human life is the inevitability of death. Anticipating one's death, or that of a close friend, a child or parent, can be the source of fear and anxiety as well as nihilistic despair. But death can also bring the occasion for living

⁷ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, p. 179.

authentically, without postponement or self-deception. Jaspers points out a set of authentic moral attitudes or virtues that should guide human beings confronted by death: courage without self-deception, profound serenity in spite of inextinguishable pain, finding peace in realizing the finality of death, all of this with the calm acceptance, composure, patience, and dignity.

Another specific boundary situation is suffering, and Jaspers focuses on the importance of "active suffering" which is the opposite of resignation. It implies effort to be happy despite suffering. Due to the "antinomial structure" of all life and reality, human beings always have two basic options in confrontation with boundary situations: an option of resignation, pessimism and nihilistic despair, or in contrast, the option of optimistic confidence in the meaning of life.

Moreover, the boundary situation of guilt can bring a person the insight that both action and non-action can always bring unforeseen and unintended consequences that will affect others. The authentic moral attitude Jaspers correlates with guilt is one's permanent readiness for accepting personal responsibility for all actions and their consequences in the world.

Yet another boundary situation – inevitable struggle – makes us conscious of the everlasting life-struggles for material ends, prestige and power, or social status in society. In struggle, one's success is necessarily accompanied by the defeat and suppression of other person's demands. Struggle may be violent and coercive. Jaspers contrasts the violent struggle for existence with an authentic moral attitude, which he calls the "loving struggle" for *Existenz*. The loving struggle is a non-violent, non-coercive form of relation to another person, the dominant norm of such a relation is solidarity.

To summarize Jaspers' description of the boundary situations, we may say that these existential phenomena ought to be accompanied by a radical change in one's personality and world-view. In the unique and historical experience of boundary situations, it is up to each individual to realise the proper moral attitudes or virtues and, thereby, individual authenticity. When succeeding in the realisation of proper attitudes and virtues, one has a good chance to realise the meaning of life, at least as Jaspers has understood it during his early period of existentialism: The internalisation of such virtues into one's attitudes and life styles is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for realising the meaning of life.

Realising the Meaning of Life by Interpersonal Existential Communication

The second conception of realisation of the meaning of life in Jaspers' existentialism is grounded, as I already mentioned, in his philosophy of communication. In his philosophical anthropology, Jaspers distinguishes four types of communication that are correlative to the distinction of the four modes of human being. In the dimension of naive vitality and spontaneous instinctive life, humans live in primitive communities with others who are used to reach vital ends, *e. g.*, to satisfy basic needs of sexuality, power, desires, *etc.* In this dimension of life the underlying motives of communication are egocentric. In Kantian terms, persons are treated only as means to an end, and not as an end in itself.

In the dimension of consciousness in general, a type of communication is realised that is based on the capacity of rationality and its formal rules and categories, such as, intellectual discussions of experts with the aim of solving a technical problem. Such experts can be replaced should their intellectual capacity for solving the given problem be exhausted. In this context, it is not the irreplaceable individuality of a person that constitutes the interpersonal relation and communication, but rather the rational knowledge and technical ability for problem-solving.

In the dimension of *Geist*, human beings experience a mode of communication that goes further than the previous two modes. Jaspers writes: "Community in the idea of a whole – of this state, this society, this family, this university, this profession of mine – is what puts me for the first time into substantial communication... Communication in the idea, and in its realisation by *Existenz*, will move a man closer to his fellow-man than will the intellect or a purpose, or primitive community."⁸

While communication as vital existence, consciousness in general, and *Geist* are objective forms of human interactions which can be described and explained by the sciences, the highest and most valuable form of communication cannot be researched by the sciences nor adequately described in an objectifying language. This type of communication Jaspers calls "existential communication." It can be elucidated only by philosophy and is to be experienced in one's own life. Existential communication constitutes an intimate, personal relationship between two human

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 49.

beings like friends, lovers, spouses, parent and child, teacher and student, *etc.* Such intimate forms of interpersonal communication entail existential possibilities to realise the meaning of life as *Existenz*. It is significant that Jaspers' moralistic existentialist approach links this communicative ideal of the meaning of life, yet again, to a set of moral attitudes or virtues.

What follows is a brief discussion of five such attitudes or virtues. The first attitude concerns the dignity of solitude or the willingness and ability to be in solitude. Solitude is not the same as social isolation, it is "a sense of readiness in possible Existenz... I cannot enter into communication without being lonely."⁹ Daring to be lonely and to live in solitude as opposed to desiring to escape loneliness and social isolation at any price, even at the price of self-deception, humiliation, and personal degradation is for Jaspers an important feature of human dignity. His appeal to lonely self-reflection can be interpreted as opposing to the growing manipulative influences of persuasive clichés and stereotypes of human self-interpretation produced by information technologies, mass media manipulation, and various forms of self-help industries.

A second attitude involves open-mindedness and frankness. Such dispositions enable a person to communicate without prejudices and veiled purposes.

A third attitude entails one's sincere intention to accept a communication partner in his or her autonomy and individual possibility for self-realisation. This means to abstain from forcing one's own habits and standards of living onto the other. Jaspers speaks in this context of "existential solidarity" with one's communication partner.

A fourth moral attitude concerns intellectual integrity and truthfulness. The individual must remain open to self-criticism, and the recognition of one's own failings and dogmatized opinions with the same force as one recognizes the failings and dogmatized opinions of others. Jaspers calls the mutual critique and mutual support of communication partners a "communicative" or "loving struggle,"¹⁰ where all kinds of power and superiority, prejudice and calculating strategic reserve against the other are eliminated.

A fifth moral attitude is grounded in the idea that substantial communication can only be realised on an equal existential level, despite all the differences of comparable qualities such as gender, ethnic origin,

social status, *etc.* One must accept the communication partner as equal in rank at the level of a self-becoming *Existenz*, and it is necessary to assess the other as a whole person.

In his hermeneutical reflections on realising the meaning of life in communication, Jaspers addresses deficiencies in communication, ruptures of communication, and communicative situations. His phenomenological descriptions are rich, containing subtle psychological insights into moods, feelings, attitudes, and emotional conditions that are relevant for constituting or preventing communication. Here it becomes clear that Jaspers incorporates his experience as psychiatrist and psychologist directly into his existential philosophy.

Realising the Meaning of Life by Reason

The concept of reason became the basic philosophical conception in Jaspers' post-war philosophy. In his comprehensive treatment of truth, *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), a book with more than a thousand pages, he conjectures on widest possible dimensions of reason. The concept of reason also has a central position in his *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man* (1958). A closer examination of this concept reveals that Jaspers uses reason highly ambivalent. Nonetheless, I conjecture that there are three dominant components at the core of Jaspers' concept of reason: First, an *anti-rationalist component* since Jaspers understands reason (*Vernunft*) in strict opposition to mere rationality (*Verstand*); second, a *critical component* that links reason to some critical attitudes; and third, a *normative component*, because Jaspers closely links his concept of reason to various moral attitudes or virtues. Here again, the normative background of an *implicit virtue ethics* is evident.

In Jaspers' post-war philosophy, the ideal of a reasonable person or reasonable individual turns out as a new ideal of realising the meaning of life. An increasing number of reasonable individuals shall constitute a *community of reasonable persons* all over the world.¹¹ The function of reason is to give the basic impulses for a radical change or conversion of common worldviews, attitudes, and modes of behavior, including the domain of politics. Jaspers envisions the future political process to be governed by "supra-

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Atombomb and the Future of Man*, E. B. Ashton trans. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 219.

political" ideals,¹² especially by reason, and no longer dominated by power politics or strictly national or ethnocentric interests. Without the dominance of reason it would not be possible to overcome the destructive twin threats of the new technological age for the future of mankind: that is, the possibility of annihilating all life on earth with the atom bomb, as well as the possibility of establishing a world-wide totalitarian regime.¹³

Let us now take a close look at two critical attitudes and a set of moral norms or virtues that Jaspers correlates with his concept of reason and ideal of a reasonable person. The two critical attitudes include the anti-totalistic and anti-monistic attitude and the anti-dogmatic and anti-fundamentalist attitude.

Anti-totalistic and Anti-monistic. The anti-totalistic attitude becomes manifest in Jaspers' critique of illusionary ideas concerning the ability of the human mind to gain complete knowledge of the world, society, human nature, or history. For Jaspers, totalistic modes of thinking have disastrous consequences in many intellectual fields and dimensions of life. They are forces counter to existential and political freedom, including all efforts for a life of human dignity in an open democratic society, and the realisation of global perpetual peace. Furthermore, they imply strong tendencies to evoke repressive political regimes and totalitarian political systems.

For comprehending the anti-monistic attitude, Jaspers' link with the ideal of a reasonable person must be kept in mind. Certainly, he refers to a unity, like the unity of mankind, the unity of Being, and the unity of the Encompassing. But the word "unity" is not used as a concept denoting an existing or realizable state or situation. It functions as a regulative idea. Jaspers emphasizes the diversity, plurality, and multiplicity of all objective being in opposition to ontological conceptions of a unity or monistic claims. We recognize this anti-monistic attitude in his philosophy of the encompassing, in his political philosophy, and in his philosophy of history, especially evident in the Axial Age thesis concerning world history.¹⁴ The Axial period in human history (800–200 BCE) reminds us not only of mankind's great cultural achievements, but also of the

threefold origin of these achievements in China, India, and the West. Jaspers' thesis is that our appreciation of universal history must be pluralistic and not monistic.

Anti-dogmatic and Anti-fundamentalist. Jaspers strongly rejects every kind of dogmatism and fundamentalism. He repeatedly warns against claims for an exclusive, absolute, knowledge or absolute true faith. Humans are, in principle, imperfect and fallible creatures who cannot reach any kind of absoluteness in life. Even the realisation of the self as *Existenz* gives us only a glimpse of absoluteness because the acts of becoming *Existenz* and becoming aware of transcendence have no constancy. These last only a short time in existence.

The function of reason is to prevent the dogmatization of any one single concept of human self-realization, any one single conception of individual freedom, truth, or God. The moral attitudes or virtues that are linked to the concept of reason and the ideal of a reasonable person include:

- composure, patience, and self-possession through which a person is able to act in political, moral, and religious affairs without fanaticism.
- intellectual integrity by which self-deception can be minimized, such as self-deception in politics about chances to change given spheres of power to one's own advantage, or self-deception about possible consequences of one's own actions. Such intellectual integrity allows one to develop a more accurate assessment for what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in a given crisis.
- A virtue which Max Weber had in mind when he talked of an "ethics of responsibility," *i.e.*, the principle of being willing to prove the consequences of one's own political actions and behavior very scrupulously and to stand up for them.
- An openness to understand divergent cultural and ethnic traditions and to be always ready for communication with representatives of those traditions. This openness also extends to such cases where the life-style or moral norms of the others are incompatible with one's own life-style and norms.

Summary and Meta-Reflection

In this essay, I discuss the three different ideas or ideals regarding the meaning of life in Jaspers' philosophy:

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 215.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 160–73.

¹⁴ See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Michael Bullock trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 88–96.

reacting to boundary situations, interpersonal existential communication, and a life of reason. Second, I claim that there is an implicit virtue ethics in Jaspers' philosophy and I justify this thesis by pointing out a number of moral attitudes or virtues that Jaspers has correlated with his three ideals of realising the meaning of life.

As a possible counterargument to my first thesis, I will now address the distinction of three different conceptions of the meaning of life in Jaspers' philosophy. One could argue that the conceptions of existential self-realisation in boundary situations and in existential communication overlap to such an extent that it makes no sense to maintain a distinction between them. For both, their central aim would be one's realisation of *Existenz*.

I agree partially to this objection, since every existential communication can be experienced as a boundary situation due to the structural components of struggle, loneliness, self-reflection, *etc.* However, and this is the crucial point, not every act of self-realisation in boundary situations is necessarily accompanied by an act of existential communication. Becoming *Existenz* in boundary situations can also be realised in an act of solitary self-reflection and self-communication without any communication partner. Jaspers does not make clear the similarities and differences between these two conceptions of self-realisation. He also did not succeed in unifying them consistently in his existentialism.

I submit that these two conceptions of the meaning of life reflect two different sources of influence to his philosophizing besides the aforementioned biographical influences. In my assessment, Jaspers' idea of becoming *Existenz* in boundary situations has its roots in his early reception of Kierkegaardian concepts. For Kierkegaard, human self-realisation is concentrated on the model of an isolated, lonely individual, totally involved in an intensive and exclusive process of self-reflection and self-communication which constitutes a religious mode of existence, that is, an exclusive subjective relation to the Christian God, who is understood principally as non-objectifiable Being.

The idea of becoming *Existenz* in existential communication was developed by Jaspers in the late 1920s and the early 1930s. During this time, the relevance of existential interpersonal communication for constituting the personal identity of individuals was a highly favored topic of philosophical discussion. For example, consider Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue in his *I and Thou* (1922), or Karl Löwith's contribution on the issue in *Das Individuum in der Rolle*

des Mitmenschen (1928). I suspect that Jaspers was highly influenced by this discussion, although he does not refer to these texts in the three volumes of *Philosophy* (1932), his main work in existentialism. Supportive evidence may be found in researching the library of Karl Jaspers in Basel, Switzerland. I regret that I have not had the opportunity to do this. However, I would like to encourage interested scholars to confirm or refute my conjecture by doing the archival study.