



Editor's Note on Translating *Umkehr*

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Abstract: This present editorial concern addresses a critical distinction in translating Jaspers' use of the German word *Umkehr* in the context of his book *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, published in 1960. In the essay by Ola Sigurdson that is included in this issue of *Existenz*, *Umkehr* is being translated as "conversion." Reasons are provided why choosing "conversion" is, at best, an infelicitous translation of *Umkehr*.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; translation; conversion; reversion; German; English.

The editors consider it of scholarly importance to point out that one of the quoted passages in Ola Sigurdson's essay appears in a section in which Jaspers addresses politics. Jaspers writes,

Ohne Umkehr ist das Leben der Menschen verloren.
Will der Mensch weiterleben, so muß er sich wandeln.¹

Sigurdson translates this passage with the words:

Without conversion, human life is lost. If the human being wants to continue living, he must change.

He leads up to this quotation by referring to an atomic-bomb-related threat of annihilation, partly interpreting Jaspers as showing

concern for the transformation of one's way of thinking away from being a mere individual...and the need for conversion (*Umkehr*) to survive as humanity...

The philosopher is there to help us human beings to achieve just that.²

Jaspers contrasts in chapter two—*Im Versagen der Politik Die Überpolitische Macht der Sittlichen Idee* (In the Breakdown of Politics The Suprapolitical Clout of the Moral Idea)—the personal moral shortcomings of politicians that inform their use of political power with the importance of upholding moral and civic laws that had been communicated, albeit always only for brief periods of time, by visionaries of the past. These shining examples of human ingenuity quickly eroded into the debris field of history (AZM 52), but their inspiration for living a human life with dignity and honor remains a memory that makes an appeal to action (AZM 52).

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen: Politisches Bewußtsein in unserer Zeit*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1960, p. 17.

² Ola Sigurdson, "Colleagues with Conflicting Perspectives: Karl Barth and Karl Jaspers on Responsibility," *Existenz* 20/1 (Spring 2025) 24-32, here p. 29.

This means *Umkehr* does not refer to a religious or theological mandate to convert to some belief system. Instead, it signifies a turning back to reason in an effort to cope with this demanding memory. In the context of the atomic bomb, this *Umkehr* is the safeguard to protect from nuclear annihilation. Jaspers is not writing about a human being's conversion to something.

It is equally important to note that there is an English translation of the book by E. B. Ashton; unfortunately, he truncated this very passage. Nonetheless, although there are 89 instances of *Umkehr* or suitable inflections thereof in the German text, Ashton has not used "conversion" in any of these instances. Hence, "turning back" or "reversion" should be used. What's more, Ashton has used "conversion" only once in the entire book, namely in the chapter, *The End of Colonialism*. Here, Jaspers writes,

The others, the savages, were, at best, human beings whose conversion to the Christian faith – that is, to one of the contending Christian sects – and consequent salvation was a Christian duty.³

Clearly, this use of conversion is not compatible with *Umkehr*. In the text, Jaspers defines *Umkehr* as an instance of being a turning point, a change, a leap

from understanding to reason. Most instances in the book use *Umkehr* in the context of reason.

It is understandable that in the context of Karl Barth, *Umkehr* is to be read most commonly as relating to religious faith and subsequently, its translation as conversion appears to be suitable for most instances in Barth's texts. In contrast, Jaspers uses *Umkehr* in the context of philosophical faith, which differs from religious faith insofar as it posits reason as the ultimate arbiter in matters of knowledge. This is a serious matter with regard to Jaspers scholarship. Hence, there is a need to include this editorial note.

We offer the following translation for the quote in question:

Without turning back, humanity's life is lost. If human beings want to continue living, they must transform themselves.

This passage could have been suitably introduced with the words:

the concern for the transformation of one's way of thinking away from being a mere individual...and the need for turning back (*Umkehr*) to reason in order to survive as humanity.

We respect the author's decision to uphold his original wording.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, transl. A. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1961, p. 69.