



Jaspers and Murty on the Transcendence of Metaphysical Reality

An Indo-German Perspective

Krishna Mani Pathak

Hindu College, University of Delhi, India

kmpathak@philosophy.du.ac.in

Abstract: In the introduction of his academically acclaimed work *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta* (1959), the eminent modern Indian philosopher K. Satchidananda Murty mentions his acquaintance with Karl Jaspers, a noted Heidelberger Kantian philosopher who, according to Murty, told him in 1954 that "there was no metaphysics superior to that of Śaṅkara." This philosophical acknowledgement by Jaspers made in the presence of Murty, speaks volumes about the nature and depth of Indian metaphysics, which is elaborated so eruditely in most of Murty's philosophical works that it leaves a clear mark on Indo-German intellectual relations. This essay stems from my reading of Jaspers, who has pithy knowledge of Indian philosophy, and of Murty whose contribution to Indian philosophical literature is historic. I intend to present an illustrative account of the modern Indo-German understanding of the transcendental nature of the metaphysical reality as envisaged and conceptualized in the philosophies of Jaspers and Murty. In the first part, I share two preliminary observations on the Indo-German philosophical connection and briefly sketch why German philosophers such as Jaspers find Indian philosophy, particularly Śaṅkara's non-dualistic and monistic metaphysics, so fascinating and superior to the metaphysics of other traditions. The second part outlines Jaspers' and Murty's understanding of Transcendental Reality as well as their philosophical stances and intellectual parallels. This section focuses on excerpts from Murty's major writings and his conceptual affinity with Jaspers. In the third part, I aim to reflect on Murty's intellectual vigor and his philosophical methodology as an inspirational takeaway for present and future researchers who are interested in Indian philosophical studies.

Keywords: Śaṅkara; Murty, Kotha Satchidananda; Jaspers, Karl; metaphysics; reality; German Idealism; Indian Monism.

Two Preliminary Observations

Let me begin this essay with two preliminary observations on Indo-German intellectual relations that are vital to one's understanding of the pattern of thinking in both Indian and German philosophical traditions on the one hand and the conceptual affinity in their metaphysics on the other: First, German Indologists, regardless whether idealists

or realists, they all recognized the philosophical depth of Indian minds across various schools of thought. Second, since the history of German philosophy is only approximately 600 years old, beginning with the ideas of Jakob Böhme, a sixteenth-century Christian mystic and theologian whom G. F. W. Hegel described as being the first German philosopher, it is quite likely that German philosophers were in one way or another greatly

influenced by Indian philosophical schools, namely mainly by Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta. A significant number of textual references support the argument that German philosophers must have drawn on or borrowed philosophical ideas from India. Works by most notable German Indologists, such as Friedrich Schlegel, Aurther Schopenhauer, Max Müller, Paul Deussen, Heinrich Zimmer, and others, clearly display the influence of Indian thinking on German philosophy, albeit not always explicitly.

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) was among those German philosophers of his time who were deeply interested not only in Indian philosophy but also in Indian history, religion, and culture. Jaspers' frank intellectual opinion on the merits of the Indian way of thinking and its contribution to the history of philosophy impressed K. Satchidananda Murty (1924-2011), a contemporary of Jaspers, who extensively taught and wrote about Indian philosophy and its history, thereby making references to both popular Indian and Western philosophers. Advaita Vedānta was Murty's main intellectual domain in his writings and research. Murty's mentioning of Jaspers in his *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*¹ and in *The Realm of Between*,² substantiates the view that Jaspers' knowledge of the history of Indian philosophy must have shaped his own philosophy. Malhotra (1962, p. 52) makes the same point when he writes that

Of all the contemporary philosophes of the West, Karl Jaspers is the most interested in Indian philosophy. And although Jaspers himself has not said that his thought is influenced by Indian philosophy, it strongly resembles Indian thought in its general traits as well as in its answers to a number of problems.³

What Malhotra goes on to show is what one can see in Jaspers' landmark book *The Origin and Goal of History*, in which Jaspers has frequently spoken about Indian history and wisdom in the context of

his Axial Age theory.⁴ Identifying the Axial Age as a crucial period of development in human thought and the emergence of new concepts and ideas as the foundation of human civilizations, Jaspers regarded Indian philosophy, along with other Eastern and Western traditions, as a major source of spiritual discourse, human wisdom, and transformation.

The subsequent sections of this paper will present the views of both Jaspers and Murty on the transcendental character of metaphysical reality, on the one hand, and their philosophical conceptual affinity, on the other. I argue that just as Jaspers was influenced by Indian philosophy, Murty was also inspired by Jaspers' philosophical methodology and framework for understanding human freedom, the self, and God as a transcendental reality, which he used in his own teaching and writings.

Jaspers and Murty on Transcendental Reality

Murty viewed Jaspers' philosophical work as a landmark approach to one's understanding of human freedom, action, and renunciation in terms of renouncing material self-interest. Both scholars, in one form or another, emphasized that the way humans encounter worldly experiences is a point of departure from the physical world toward the transcendental world of ultimate reality. The influential history of Indian philosophy led both Jaspers and Murty to think about God and transcendence in similar ways, yet Murty followed the monistic view of Advaita Vedānta which resembles Jaspers' idealistic view of the dual character of ultimate reality and the world. Inspired by Jaspers's views on human existence and essence, God, transcendence, and freedom, Murty expounds the view in his major philosophical writings that Ātman (soul), Īśvara (God), and Brahman (Pure Being) are the ultimate spiritual realities and exist as a non-dual unified reality, and that the ultimate reality lies in the existence of humanity.

For Jaspers, transcendental reality is the primordial aspect of human existence and essence that lies fundamentally beyond the phenomenal world of experience. Transcendence of reality is perceived in the physical world, helping humans transcend all their thinking. This transcendental

¹ K. Satchidananda Murty, *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, Bombay, IN: Asia Publishing House 1959, pp. xvii, 272. [Henceforth cited as RR]

² K. Satchidananda Murty, *The Realm of Between: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Shimla, IN: Indian Institute of Advanced Study 1973, pp. 33-8.

³ M. K. Malhotra, "Karl Jaspers and Indian Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 6/1 (Spring 1962), 52-69, here p. 52.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1953, pp. 18-24.

reality is what he calls the realm of *Existenz*, where beings, including human beings, can find the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. Transcendental reality is exceeding mere *Dasein* (the Heideggerian Being). The existence of transcendental reality can be experienced within and beyond the phenomenal world and can be accessed through intellectual and spiritual faith and symbolic and metaphorical language, through which authentic communication and unity can be established with it. In Jaspers' philosophy, a metaphysical synthesis of Kantianism and existentialism can be seen in his foundational idea of the existential whole, which he calls the Encompassing (*das Umgreifende*).

This encompassing whole includes the idea of experiencing infinity (*Unendlichkeit*) from one's physical finitude, on the one hand, and the idea of experiencing eternity (*Ewigkeit*) and/or transcendence (*Transzendenz*) from one's timeless continuity in the world, on the other. This is what he meant when he writes in *Reason and Existenz* that

In all modes of the Encompassing, the self can become genuinely certain of itself only as *Existenz*...Without *Existenz* the meaning of Transcendence is lost.⁵

Filiz Peach correctly observes and highlights diverse ontological horizons of the Jaspersian idea of existential being that touches transcendence by going beyond the subject/object dichotomy, as she writes:

In Jaspers' metaphysics the concepts of the Encompassing, Being and Transcendence are intimately connected. For Jaspers, the Encompassing is not only that which embraces and underlies everything empirically knowable and objectionable in the world, but is also that which transcends the subject/object dichotomy.⁶

With this understanding of Jaspers' philosophy of infinity and eternality of the existential reality, it can be said that limited and finite scientific knowledge of human beings is of no help in accessing the realm of the all-encompassing transcendence that connects humans to the absolute One, which appears to be like the unknowable God of Plotinus. In *Reason and Existenz*, Jaspers writes:

Thus, as I am conscious only insofar as I have something else as an objective being before me by which I then am determined and with which I am concerned, so also I am *Existenz* only as I know Transcendence as the power through which I genuinely am myself. The Other is either the being which is in the world for consciousness as such, or it is Transcendence for *Existenz*...*Existenz* is like the counterpart to spirit. Spirit is the will to become whole; potential *Existenz* is the will to be authentic. [RE 61-2]

Stressing upon the core of man's *Existenz* in terms of it being transcendence, in *Existenzphilosophie*, Jaspers explains:

Man, however, is not a self-sufficient separate entity, but is constituted by the things he makes his own. In every form of his being man is related to something other than himself: as a being to his world, as consciousness to objects, as spirit to the idea of whatever constitutes totality, as *Existenz* to Transcendence. Man always becomes man by devoting himself to this other. Only through his absorption in the world of Being, in the immeasurable space of objects, in ideas, in Transcendence, does he become real to himself.⁷

Murty's understanding of the transcendence of metaphysical reality is quite similar to Jaspers' idea that *Existenz* and Transcendence form a unity. Murty argues that transcendental reality is the ultimate truth that surpasses physical existence and encompasses a singular essence that connects all consciousness. Since Transcendence is the existence of the reality or truth beyond our physical world, it is unusual in the Indian tradition to believe merely in empirical reality, whilst the possibility of the existence of a trans-empirical or absolute reality is completely ignored. Although Murty has written on various aspects of empirical and transcendental reality in different contexts, discussing the philosophical perspectives of the various schools of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Buddhism, and Vedānta, his reflections on transcendental reality are scattered in his texts.

However, unlike Jaspers, Murty has not been detailed in his writing on existence and transcendence. It is to be noted that Śaṅkara's Brahman is not a transcendental reality; rather,

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz. Five Lectures by Karl Jaspers*, transl. William Earle, New York, NY: The Noonday Press 1955, pp. 61. [Henceforth cited as RE]

⁶ Filiz Peach, *Death, "Deathlessness" and Existenz in Karl Jaspers' Philosophy*, Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press 2008, p. 38.

⁷ Karl Jaspers, "On My Philosophy," transl. Felix Kaufmann, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, New York, NY: Meridian Book 1956, pp. 131-58, here p. 141.

it coincides with the absolute immanent reality that is not beyond us as Ātmana. Similarly, Buddhism does not believe in any transcendental or immanent reality as God or Brahman; rather, it believes that things are either empirically real (*sarvāstivādā*) or mentally real (*viññānavādā*). Only schools such as Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, Yoga, and Vedāntic schools other than Advaita Vedānta, hold, to some extent, that God as the ultimate reality is transcendental and can be known through intuitive or direct realization. The transcendental God is not this-worldly but other-worldly, thus requiring nonscientific approach of intuition and apperception to know him. On the other hand, regarding knowledge of ourselves or Ātman (Brahman), Murty seems to believe that the idea and knowledge of the nondual Brahman involve a holistic awareness of all selves and their knowledges along with the knowledge of the Supreme Self, that is, Brahman or Ātman. Murty takes a Vedāntic position, yet conjoined with a different interpretation when he elaborates:

The next question is, how do we know ourselves? Here, I think, Śankara's answer is fundamentally correct. According to him the self is not known through inference, but through an immediate apprehension. He asserts that the self is never the object, but always the knower...In all cognition there is an awareness of all these: the self, other selves, the world experienced by all these, and the Supreme Self.⁸

Murty's examination and philosophical views are actually closer to those of the Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, and Buddhist schools of thought, as he presents on several occasions a critique of Vedānta philosophy; yet it cannot be said that he did not believe in a transcendental reality. In the preface of his *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, he writes the following not only about his anti-Vedāntic approach but also about the influence of European philosophers on his own thoughts:

In Part Two of Book Two, I have attempted to make an independent criticism of the Advaita metaphysics, theology and "Vedic revelation," and have also displayed the temerity to indicate in brief how more satisfactory solutions of these problems are possible.

⁸ K. Satchidananda Murty, "Our Knowledge of God," in *Readings in Indian History Politics and Philosophy*, ed. K. Satchidananda Murty, London, UK: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1967, pp. 289-96, here pp. 290-1.

In general, my views on Revelation in this book are in agreement with those of the Nyāya writer Jayanta, while my conception of God differs very little from that of Rāmānuja. In writing this Part, my studies of European thinkers have been very helpful in suggesting critical reflections and positive comments. [RR viii-ix]

Daya Krishna (1924-2007), a contemporary to Murty, observed that Murty must have faced major conceptual problems in addressing philosophical questions related to metaphysics and epistemology. Krishna argues that Murty's position appears to be rather Hegelian and Sāṃkhyāyik, when he writes that

Murty is a philosopher and though he plays the usual game of the philosopher of religion, he is not totally immune to the lure of conceptual puzzles and paradoxes and the attempts at their resolution or dissolution.

Surprisingly, the second person whom Murty quotes is Hegel and one is astounded to read that Hegel's view of philosophy was almost the same as that of the Buddha and that he viewed the task of philosophy in almost the same terms as the Sāṃkhya or some other schools of Indian philosophy are said to have formulated it.⁹

Intellectual Parallels between Murty and Jaspers

Jaspers and Murty both appear idealistic and realistic in their respective approaches to reality and existence as their philosophies are quite similar. Jaspers' philosophy, primarily his metaphysics, which addresses questions of existence and reality, is deeply rooted in Kantianism and existentialism and is replete with a variety of concepts concerning two conceptually distinct worlds: the empirical world and the other world of transcendence. In Jaspers' philosophy, one can find Kantian concepts such as Transcendence and freedom, Sartrean concepts such as being and existential crisis, and his own concepts such as *Existenz*, the "Encompassing," and Ciphers as signs of the unknowable. With the aid of all these

⁹ Daya Krishna, "The Realms of Between: Some Reflections on Murty's The Realm of Between," in *The Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, eds. Sibajiban Bhattacharyya and Ashok Vohra, New Delhi, IN: Indian Council of Philosophical Research 1995, pp. 169-76, here p. 170.

concepts, Jaspers focuses on an existential analysis to confront fundamental life questions about suffering, guilt, despair, and death. Further, he proposes moving beyond our thoughts in order to access the transcendental *Existenz* that is the source of all forms of life.

However, as an existentialist, he offers a subjective philosophical method that focuses on the individual's search for meaning in life and on how to authenticate one's existence. In brief, Jaspers' philosophical works seem to oscillate between the realm of objective reality and the realm of non-objectifiable truth and meaning, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human existence and human freedom. Following Jean-Paul Sartre and Martin Heidegger, Jaspers has attempted to reflect on the issue of individuals' search and quest for the meaning of life, which is fraught with existential crises in the empirical world. In fact, issues related to individuals' freedom in the empirical world and their existential crisis are one of the major metaphysical concerns for Jaspers.

I may be wrong to call Murty a Jaspersian, but Murty's philosophical methodology and his comprehensive approach to understanding human existence and the existence of other beings clearly show that both Jaspers and Murty share core philosophical ideas. Specifically, I would like to submit that Murty's contribution to the legacy of Indian philosophy is proven by his extensive writings on the Vedas and Upaniṣads, Bhagavad Gītā, Vedānta, Buddhism, philosophical historiography, education, ethics, divinity, spirituality, metaphysics, freedom, and hermeneutics among many other fields. In fact, his knowledge and insight spanned most of the important topics in classical, medieval, and contemporary Indian history and philosophy.

This is the reason why some scholars portray him as being an established philosopher of one school of thought or another. For example, some Indian scholars such as Keshav Kumar and K. Ramakrishna Rao consider Murty to be a Vedāntin, while he appears to be a non-Vedāntin when he criticizes Vedānta philosophy. There are, indeed, a variety of views and opinions about Murty in the world of philosophy. From the preface to his *Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta*, one can infer that Murty was not a hardcore Vedāntin. For instance, Kumar views Murty as being

an advaitin of different kind. His engagement with advaita is more social than metaphysical and logical.¹⁰

On the other hand, K. Ramakrishna Rao considers him a Vedantin in a broader sense when he writes:

He was a Vedantin in a very broad sense...Prof. Murty's Vedanta was stained with a theistic shade and submerged in significant ways in secular waters.¹¹

Rao appears to be correct in presenting Murty as a theistic Vedāntin for whom reality was both existential and transcendental. This can be surmised on the basis of numerous references to an interview of Murty by Arvind Sharma, in which Murty allegedly replies to the question of where he stands philosophically:

I oscillate between Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja.¹²

I have argued elsewhere that Jaspers' neo-Kantianism and existentialism can help one understand the modern German approach to transcendental reality;¹³ similarly, Murty's profound scholarship in Indian philosophy and philosophical historiography provides multiple Indian perspectives on empirical and transcendental reality and guidance on how to approach their realms to prospective researchers who are interested in traditional or comparative philosophy from Eastern and Western perspectives. In short, it can be concluded that although Murty's philosophical underpinnings shaped his views on the history of Indian philosophy and his critical approach to Indian history, his ideas and methods of investigation were

¹⁰ P. Kesava Kumar, "K. Satchidananda Murty's Approach to Indian Philosophy," in *Reason, Revelation and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Ashok Vohra, Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Motilal Banarsidass 2020, pp. 223-39, here p. 223.

¹¹ K. Ramakrishna Rao, "Foreword," in *Reason, Revelation and Peace: Evaluations of the Philosophy of K. Satchidananda Murty*, ed. Ashok Vohra, Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research and Motilal Banarsidass 2020, pp. ix-xiii, here p. ix.

¹² Ashok Vohra, "An Iconoclast and a Heterodox Thinker," *The Hans India* 19 November 2023, <https://www.thehansindia.com/hans/opinion/news-analysis/an-iconoclast-and-a-heterodox-thinker-838903>.

¹³ Krishna Mani Pathak, "Understanding Plotinus' Mysticism through Jaspers' Concept of Existenz and Śāṅkara's Concept of Pure Consciousness: A Meta-ontological Approach," *Existenz* 19/2 (Fall 2024), 34-39.

strengthened by the philosophy of Jaspers. His intellectual erudition is evident in his writings in Tamil, Sanskrit, and English. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, for Murty, philosophy was a passion, and writing down his thoughts was a concern to which he dedicated himself.

Jaspers' and Murty's Philosophical Contribution

Just as Jaspers continued the intellectual legacy of notable German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and Heidegger by offering a synthesis of rationalism and existentialism, Murty continued the intellectual legacy of the classical schools of Indian orthodox traditions by offering a more critical approach to reality, one that is both internal and external. Both Jaspers and Murty attach existential significance to the empirical world and, in one sense or another, spiritual significance to the transcendental world. However, a slight difference between them is that while Jaspers' philosophy displays an existentialist framework when presenting existence and its relationship to the world, Murty's philosophy displays both theistic and non-theistic frameworks when presenting reality and its relationship to the material world.

Perhaps this is why some modern scholars, such as Ashok Vohra and Kotta Ramesh (Murty's son), call Murty "a doyen among philosophers of his time" and present Murty's public image as viewed by people of his time, who, according to Vohra and Ramesh,

considered him to be a "unique," "rare," "dazzling," "creative," "heterodox" and "critical traditionalist" at the same time, and also an "iconoclast," and "bold" philosopher.¹⁴

Needless to say, the philosophical discourses and methodologies of both Jaspers and Murty help one refine one's metaphysical understanding of being-in-time and expand one's perspective beyond traditional theoretical boundaries. This is what connects them and what helps humans know themselves as transcendental beings within the context of humankind's timeless journey as the continuum of existence (or *Existenz*) as living beings in this world.

¹⁴ Ashok Vohra and Kotta Ramesh, "Introduction," in *Vedānta and Bhagavadgītā: The Unpublished Writings of K. Satchidananda Murty*, eds. Ashok Vohra and Kotta Ramesh, London, UK: Routledge 2024, pp. 1-3, here p. 1.