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**Book Review: Anton Hügli, *Karl Jaspers on Truth and Dialogue*
A Rethinking of His Philosophy of Universal Communication,
Lexington Books 2025, hardback, 238 pages**

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Abstract: Anton Hügli argues that Karl Jaspers' intense focus on global understanding expresses his passionate commitment to communication. He credits Jaspers with recognizing that obstacles to communication arise from both our nature as humans and the ineffability of some concepts. Unfortunately, Hügli's abstract writing style obstructs rather than abets the effort to understand communication.

Keywords: ineffable; indirect; counterexamples; perplexity; language; loneliness.

Anton Hügli, if you're not familiar with him, is a retired 86-year-old Professor of Philosophy and Education at the University of Basel. Because I've been teaching a seminar titled "Failure to Communicate" for a number of years at the University of Pennsylvania, am currently the Vice-President of the North American Jaspers Society, and harbor some skepticism toward the idea of universal communication, I decided to buy a copy, at its ungodly price, of Hügli's *Karl Jaspers on Truth and Dialogue: A Rethinking of his Philosophy of Universal Communication* (Lexington Books, 2025) so I might speak about it here.

Unfortunately, I discovered that Hügli employs a style of writing philosophy I don't like—an endless bombardment of abstract philosophical blimps, many of them amorphous neologisms, that my own mentor, Richard Rorty, would have pulled a gun on and shot out of the sky, or off the page. To make matters more indigestible to this reader, Hügli's book in English

capitalizes and italicizes all the blimp abstractions, perhaps to communicate the feel of German.

In addition, I discovered, to my regret, that very little of the book focuses on communication or universal communication. The Jaspers I like is a thinker with his heart in the right place, an existentialist speaking in favor of individual freedom, opposed to ideologies imposed by authority. Hügli argues that communication supports such an existentialist figure. Much of Hügli's book, however, focuses on epistemology and metaphysics with, to use a word very much in Jaspers' lexicon, only an "indirect" addressing of communication.

So what I've decided to do, in my brief space here, is to tease out some of what does deal with communication in Hügli and Jaspers, and offer some comments on that from the point of view of a philosopher/journalist—namely, me, myself and I—who believes common sense puts in question the author's view of communication.

Hügli begins accessibly enough in his introduction, by far the clearest part of the book. He bemoans that "the inability to communicate extends to all areas of life" today.¹ That leaves him with

The question of all questions...Is global understanding possible at all? If so, under what conditions? [TD xix]

Those questions cannot be answered, for Hügli, without pondering the deeper question of "what kinds of beings we humans are" (TD xix), which tips him toward the philosophy of Jaspers writ large.

For Hügli, Jaspers is the philosopher who

in particular...linked the question of what it means to be a human being with the question of the possibility of communication...For him, the will to communicate became a driving force behind his philosophizing, and making communication possible became the goal of his philosophical work. As a result, he enabled us to sharpen our awareness of the extent to which communication has been part of philosophy from the very beginning: in that philosophy urges to communicate, wants to express itself, and wants to be heard. [TD xx]

All of that sounds reasonable and down-to-earth enough, excluding perhaps that personification at the end of philosophy as a subject who has free-speech desires. But allow me to quote at some length from the introduction, which indicates Hügli's sensible and real-world grasp of aspects of communication before he descends into a maelstrom of abstractions. His comments there betoken some of the premises he seems to share with Jaspers that, in my view, tilt him toward an unconvincing view of the concept and phenomenon of communication. In any case, it is the deeper question Hügli mentions that leads him to endlessly foreground Jaspers' epistemological and metaphysical views before zeroing in on the announced subject of communication.

"Communication," Hügli continues,

begins when we feel addressed and try to meet that demand. We can also be addressed by a face, a gesture, or a landscape, but being addressed is only a metaphor for the claim that one person makes on another. [TD xx]

He acknowledges that

there are ways of understanding that are not on the linguistic level, such as understanding feelings, intentions, moods, physiognomies, and the like, [TD xx-xxi]

yet, he notes he will focus on linguistic understanding.

Here, Hügli begins to tip into generalizations that do not enjoy much consensus:

The ability to understand presupposes the will to understand and be understood. Everything else depends on this condition, and it, in turn, depends on the very first condition: that we allow ourselves to be addressed at all, that is, that the person addressing us is not indifferent to us but is significant and important. [TD xxi]

A first caveat here, and you can devise your own counterexamples. The situation Hügli describes plainly captures just one conventional kind of communication. We may initiate communication ourselves, so it does not necessarily begin when another addresses us. While the ability to understand may presuppose the will to understand, it clearly does not imply a will to be understood, as one may purposely wish to confuse and create perplexity. This tendency to declare questionable generalizations about communication continues throughout the book.

Hügli next gives a nice list of specific

sources of misunderstanding and incomprehension that actually exist: that we live in different worlds, that we do not speak the same language or speak unclearly, that we have not listened carefully, that we give different meanings to words, that we are not talking about one and the same thing but about different things or contradicting each other, and so on. [TD xxi]

That common-sense litany spurs hope that Hügli, in interpreting Jaspers, will confront the idea of universal communication, considering such thorny obstacles.

Instead, he swerves into a fascinating topic itself in the philosophy of communication—the ineffable—and comes back at the end of the introduction to just one parting suspicious generalization:

Whoever seriously wants to communicate can only do so with the will to be truthful and with the expectation that the other person wants to be truthful as well. [TD xxii]

¹ Anton Hügli, *Karl Jaspers on Truth and Dialogue: A Rethinking of His Philosophy of Universal Communication*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2025, p. xix. [Henceforth cited as TD]

Accurate, perhaps, in a world inhabited solely by Immanuel Kants. Not so accurate in a world of Donald Trumps.

That deeper question of "what kinds of beings we humans are" then pulls Hügli into scores of pages about *Consciousness in General*, Encompassing, Modes of Being, Modes of Encompassing, Transcendence, Chiffers, Dasein (which stays in German), Borderline Situations (that is, *Grenzsituationen*, usually translated as limit situations), Ground Situations (that is, *Grundsituationen*, usually translated as basic conditions), Inner Action, Unconditionality, Illumination, Signs of Existence, the Absolute, the One, and other categories familiar from Jaspers, but rendered more bloodless here, with only stray nods to communication.

In this scholar's prose, even *World and Spirit* are always in caps and italics. Hügli, at one point, exclaims, using an actual exclamation point:

As a reader of Jaspers, one can't really complain about a lack of *Unconcreteness*! [TD 99]

Yet he much outstrips his master in that regard. Stylistically, a word like "periechontologically" (an exotic adverb in continental philosophy standing for "from the standpoint of the encompassing conditions of existence or being") slides in just fine.

At long last, the concept of communication becomes a focus in Chapter 4 on "Loneliness (Einsamkeit) and Communication," Chapter 7 on "The Decision between Direct and Indirect Communication," and Chapter 8 on "Jaspers's Philosophy as Unconditional Will to Communicate." There we get some exposition of Jaspers on communication.

In Chapter 4, Hügli describes the "paradoxical relationship between *Loneliness* and communication" as "a key to understanding the kind of communication that Jaspers calls *Existential Communication*" (TD 39). In a phrase, it is

no *Loneliness* without communication, no communication without *Loneliness*. [TD 39]

Or as Hügli restates it,

Communication requires *Loneliness*, *Loneliness* requires communication. [TD 40]

My only comment: If posted on the cell wall of a prisoner in solitary confinement, I imagine the prisoner would swiftly tear it down, regarding it as

an attempt to seriously damage the prisoner's mind.

Indeed, the chapter adds some further adventitious elements to the definition of *Existential Communication*: "What sustains *Existential Communication*," Hügli explains, "is love" (TD 40). It is "a gift of fate" (TD 41). Not hard to find counterexamples there. In these cases, Hügli seems regularly to take a slice of the communication iceberg for the whole.

Chapters 7 and 8 allow Hügli to present his broadest account of Jaspers on communication. "For Jaspers," Hügli writes,

the distinction and decision between *Direct* and *Indirect Communication* is the fundamental philosophical decision par excellence. [TD 89]

He then explains this distinction:

Directly communicable, as much is immediately clear, are thoughts that have no connection to ourselves and that anyone can think in the same way that anyone else could think them. Indirectly communicable, on the other hand, is when the thought concerns me personally, that is, when it is of such a nature that it makes a significant difference in my life how I react to the thought, both as the communicator and as the recipient of the communication. In the way I think the matter, I change myself and at the same time change the matter I am thinking about. [TD 90]

As Hügli points out, Jaspers put forth the distinction early in his work, in somewhat different form with historical examples, in his *Die Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. There, Jaspers cited philosophers such as Aristotle, Aquinas, and Hegel as direct communicators who require—in Hügli's interpretation—"loyalty and obedience to the truth as seen and formulated" (TD 89), distinguishing them from thinkers such as Socrates, Kant, and Kierkegaard, who—in Hügli's words—

push back when one wants to follow them worshipfully, they love the freedom of the other. [TD 89]

To be sure, the direct/indirect distinction captures a difference in types of communication. We all recognize the difference between unemotionally taking in a proposition with information that does not galvanize our feelings and absorbing a communication that does. But the value of indirect communication in philosophy, let alone in everyday life, is questionable as Hügli describes it. He writes about *Indirect Communication*,

one cannot move the other person by simply telling him that he should go this way, and even less can one suggest it by compelling arguments. The most I can do is hope that if he follows my train of thought, something will be awakened in him and set in motion. The appeal of philosophical communication, of which Jaspers repeatedly speaks, lies in the inherent possibility of hearing what is demanded of me. [TD 98]

Here, as elsewhere, the laudable wish of both Jaspers and Hügli for all people of good will to openly communicate with one another, to think for themselves, to integrate messages into one's own life and values, is welcome as a moral goal, but it falls way short as a description of how many types of communication take place, and perhaps should take place. If compelling arguments—or just arguments—are not a part of philosophical communication, then a large part of the practice drops away. And the arbitrary elements of communication keep coming from Hügli as he ends the chapter by writing,

Whatever I think must therefore remain in constant communication with everything that has ever been thought. [TD 100]

Oh, really? That makes me feel kind of tired.

I think I'll stop here by noting two other deviations from a comprehensive overview of communication. First, Hügli concentrates on what, with apologies to Buber for the secular extension, I'd call I-Thou situations. Communication from one to the many, as in political speeches, or the few to the many, as in broadcasting, gets no airtime. That's a major lacuna.

Second, among many insertions of questionable aspects into the notion of communication, there is a large assumption here about the ordinary intellectual wishes of human beings. Hügli closes Chapter 8 thus:

Since all philosophizing that is born of love aims at the One, it's the search for the One that connects people as human beings in universal communication. [TD 119]

He quotes Jaspers for support: "What connects leads to the One" (TD 119). A more accurate paraphrasing of this passage in Jaspers would be: What creates connection among people gives rise to the One.²

Well, I confess that, as a good nominalist, I've connected to many people in my life and career, but without any wish for or belief in the One. Many others and I are not, in the language of both Jaspers and Hügli, "pulled toward" the One. I don't believe in the One. I'd say what connects leads to that which one connects to.

In conclusion, the constant introduction of arbitrary elements into the concept of communication, as well as the awful vocabulary of Hügli's book—perhaps predictable if I'd bothered to notice that it was part of a series titled "Contemporary Studies in Idealism"—renders it of little use to any intellectuals or others who would like to think about the idea of universal communication, or, for that matter, small "c" communication.

² Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1970, p. 53.