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Karl Jaspers: Gandhi, the Asian Values Debate, Reformation, and Modernity

Gerrit A. J. Steunebrink

Radboud University, Netherlands

gerritsteunebrink@gmail.com

Abstract: In this essay, I explore Jaspers' surprising interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi, who perceived him not as an Indian but as an English phenomenon against the background of his theory of modernity being a Western phenomenon. This means it is the Western elaboration of the ideas pertaining to an Axial Age. Hence, it was not the result of the mystical Indian and Chinese elaboration of these ideas. Yet Gandhi's philosophy is the result of an Indian reform movement, namely the neo-Vedantic movement, which must be interpreted as an elaboration of the ideas emerging in the Axial Age. A comparison with the debate about Asian values proves fruitful, for in that debate, the possibility of modern Confucianism is grounded in Jaspers' idea of the Axial Age. Modern Confucianism and Hinduism are reform movements. For oriental cultures, reforms are not, as Jaspers fears, a change of identity, but rather their reformulation. From within this perspective, I discuss Jaspers' theory of intercultural communication and the universalization of modernity.

Keywords: Roy, Ram Mohun; Vivekānanda; Śāṅkara, Ādi; Axial Age; Confucianism; Europe; Christianity.

In his book on the atom bomb, Karl Jaspers makes an interpretation of the life of Mahatma Gandhi. And it is a surprising one. Far from being an Indian phenomenon, Gandhi as a pacifist, in Jaspers' analysis and against all expectations, is above all else an English phenomenon. Yet this interpretation becomes understandable and interesting when considered from the perspective of Jaspers' philosophy of interculturality, communication, and modernity. Departing from this perspective, Jaspers draws a distinction between the mystically oriented East in India, and the technological West. This essay addresses the meaning of this distinction in Jaspers' interpretation of modern Western history and the history of India in the light of his well-known idea of an Axial Age. Jaspers' idea is used in the so-called "Asian values" debate that emerged in Singapore in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a model for reform –

specifically, the reform of Confucianism. Yet it is also applicable to India, especially to Gandhi's world. The phenomenon of reformation in non-Western cultures is important. It has its roots, as I will evidence, in the idea of the Axial Age, although Jaspers himself does not use it in this way; this determines his unusual interpretation of Gandhi. The essay explores what Jaspers expects of the intercultural contact made possible by the advent of modernity. Its focus lies on the relation between cultural change and cultural identity in Jaspers' theory. The expansion of modernity, as a Western phenomenon worldwide is a key problem for Jaspers. On the one hand, it introduces the possibility of intercultural contact on a global scale; on the other hand, it poses a threat to the identity of non-Western cultures. Whether this contact leads to a change and a loss of identity, or whether as with Gandhi in my interpretation, a reformation from

within is possible, is here under investigation here. The conclusion sheds light on the problem of the end of modernity, a problem which Jaspers was strongly interested in.

Gandhi: An Indian or an English Phenomenon?

The destructive power of the nuclear weapon prompts Jaspers in his book *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* to reflect on the possibility of pacifism. This leads him to pay special attention to Mahatma Gandhi's pacifism. For Jaspers, the question of the atom bomb necessarily manifests the necessity for politics to relate itself to that which transcends politics, that which Jaspers calls *das Überpolitische* (the suprapolitical). This is the ethical idea of politics which emerges within politics itself, but which does not originate from politics. However, this idea is absent in what Jaspers calls pragmatic pacifism, namely, a purely pragmatic refusal, as a country, to use weapons against other countries. This is a stance which Jaspers detests, believing instead that one must be willing to sacrifice one's life for the sake of freedom. Albeit, Jaspers advises also taking the following point into consideration:

But the question remains unanswered as to what sacrifice and death in themselves mean. For they can by no means be sufficiently justified by their purpose in the world.¹

Adherence to this ethical principle is evident throughout Gandhi's life and thought. His pacifism is a manifestation of that ethos. Jaspers recognizes this in Gandhi's idea of non-violence (*ahimsa*). Yet, surprisingly, he does not interpret this idea and Gandhi's political application thereof as a phenomenon of Indian spirituality; instead, he identifies it as an attribute of British democracy and its political ethos. Gandhi is, so to speak, not an Indian, but an English gentleman acting in an Indian context. Of Gandhi's achievement, the independence of India, Jaspers writes the following:

In short, it resulted far more from the British political state of mind than from Gandhi's, who seems almost like a tool in the course of English history;

adding that:

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, München, DE: Piper & Co Verlag 1958, p. 55. [Henceforth cited as AZ; all translations are mine.]

The liberation of India, brought about by Gandhi's policy of non-violence, is far more an event within English politics, far more the result of a struggle of England with itself, than it is an Indian feat. [AZ 67]

This means that India's independence is not the result of an Indian initiative but rather an outcome of the British political mentality! Jaspers refuses to interpret Gandhi and India's independence as being the result of Hindu reformist thinking known as the neo-Vedantic movement, which is part of the Bengal Renaissance at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Why this refusal? I shall first have a look at this point of view in Indological studies; it will reveal that, for Jaspers, the idea of a modern India or modern China is a kind of anomaly.

Indian Mysticism in Politics: Ram Mohun Roy, Vivekananda, and Gandhi

The so-called neo-Vedantic movement is a part of the Bengal renaissance, that is, India's rediscovery of itself during the period of English colonization. It is a modernization movement that is called a reformation movement, that is also sometimes referred to as Neo-Hinduism.² The texts that were the point of departure for this movement were the so-called *Upanishads*. These texts have a mystical and philosophical character; they are elaborated in different Vedantic philosophical schools. Jaspers refers to them, of course, as central texts of Indian culture. Yet Hindu reformist thinkers such as Ram Mohun Roy (1772–1833), who was a predecessor and spiritual forefather of Gandhi, referred to this tradition for its potential to help modernize Indian politics. This, hence, did not happen by accident and not without inspiration by the British rulers.

British politicians stimulated this movement. For instance, Lord Wellesley (1760–1840) had political reasons for attempting to persuade British-educated Indian intellectuals to study their own intellectual tradition. The reason being that the British could not live with the superstitious folk religion being in place that often was the source of rebellions and caused tensions with the Christian churches. By persuading the Indian intellectuals who had passed through the British school system to explore their own intellectual tradition, their "philosophy," so to speak, they hoped

² Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 2007, pp. 419–20.

to create an Indian elite that could take responsibility within the country. That elite, of course, wanted to show that India had its own philosophy. Not merely the British, but that Indian elite itself felt the need for a reform of Hinduism, a purification that would undo the historical misconceptions introduced by popular folk religion in the name of true Hinduism. The editing of Hindu texts, done in collaboration with Western British scholars was vital to this work. Through this process of editing, these texts left the world of monks and convents and became available to everybody who could read and write. In short, the British hoped to create a class of intellectuals with whom they could work together. What the British had not foreseen, however, was that this movement would result in people starting to think about Indian independence.

Being the father of this thinking, Roy tried to find the essence of Hindu thinking in the mystical tradition of the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* are a series of treatises, called the Vedanta, following at the end of the Vedas, the original scriptures of Hinduism. They are characterized by expounding the mysticism of the inner relation or the identity of Brahman, the name of God, and atman, the name for the human soul. Not stories or mythology, but thoughts become essential in them. Roy and his followers considered this mysticism of the Vedanta, in the interpretation of Ādi Śaṅkara (at c. 800 CE) as the essence of Indian thinking, called Hinduism. This Vedanta thinking was foreseen to become the source of the reformation of Hinduism and its purification from the accretions of popular religion. By so doing, he turned a philosophy, originally developed for monks living outside society, into a philosophy that was politically useful within society. In the name of that thinking, the practice of widow burning was criticized by Roy as not belonging to the true Indian tradition. The Vedanta is a universalistic type of religion that does not condemn other religions but embraces them. He thus tried to include into his Vedantic religion purified forms of Hinduism such as the devotional Bhakti mysticism. On the same basis, the equality of those religions characterized, according to Roy, by monotheism—Christianity, Buddhism and Islam—could likewise be upheld, so that freedom of religion could become a real possibility in India. Roy promoted a universal religious brotherhood of men that forbids discrimination. Further, he was pleading for a respect for life that forbids the sacrifices of men

and animals, while allowing Muslims their special *kurban* sacrifices. This respect for life together with the fostering of universal brotherhood of men and the refusal of religious discrimination comes very close to the idea of human rights. His thoughts seem to have inspired the secularistic constitution of India.³

It is important to notice that this mystical tradition becomes political and replaces the traditional Indian philosophy of politics as represented in the treatise *Arthashastra*. This latter philosophy was an entirely authoritarian philosophy legitimizing the power of the Indian kings and princes. In its stead Vedanta thinking became the new point of departure for politics.

The next influential person in this Vedantic revival is Swami Vivekānanda (1863–1902). With his speeches on the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, he made a great impression in the West.

Vivekānanda combined Vedantic mysticism with social reformation. An important aspect to consider in this context is the tendency to provide support to Indian nationalism. The mystical tradition is an Indian identity marker harnessed against the West, its materialism and technological-industrial culture. In short, Vivekānanda made a distinction between the mystical East and the materialistic West, since the former constituted an identity project in competition with the West. It is remarkable that this influence happened at a time when India adopted nearly everything from the West, especially its science and technology. Vivekānanda did not reject the modernity of the West, thinking of it not in terms of opposition but of complementarity. One could say that he wanted India to be a European state with an Indian religion.⁴

The renowned Mahatma Gandhi developed his spirituality of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, in this context. He is also a critic of modern Western technological and industrial culture. Yet interestingly, he does not identify the West with this modern culture. It

³ Victor A. Van Bijlert, "Raja Rammohun Roy's Thought and its Relevance for Human Rights," in *Human Rights and Religious Values. An Uneasy Relationship?*, eds. Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, Hendrik M. Vroom, Amsterdam, NL: Editions Rodopi 1995, pp. 93–109, here p. 100.

⁴ "Vivekānanda," in *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism, Volume II M-Z*, ed. Benjamin Walker, London: Allen & Unwin 1968, II, pp. 579–581.

originated in the West, but it is not identical to the West; rather, it is a kind of aberration. In his view, the West should return to its true premodern identity. In this perspective, India and the West have the same problem with modern scientific and technological culture.⁵ Neither Vivekananda nor Gandhi wanted to return to the reign of the pre-British Indian princes and emperors. They were both modern Indian nationalists who rejected the old political philosophy. The difference with present-day India under Narendra Modi is that India is now a Hindu nationalist state. That is what Gandhi and the Vedanta thinkers did not want. Rather, they were universalistic, based on the Vedanta tradition.

There has been much discussion about whether Gandhi was really a Vedanta thinker, what kind of Vedantist he was, and so on. Certainly, he wanted to include folk religion in his thought too. But it was always a purified folk religion. Doubtlessly, the influence of the neo-Vedanta tradition is always there. He combined it with social action. The political importance of this mystical neo-Vedanta philosophy becomes clear when one considers that the first president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), was a professional Vedanta scholar. So, one can speak here of mysticism in politics. It is in this context that it is needful to inquire what Jaspers' estimation of Indian mysticism and of Western politics is, and what this circumstance reveals about Jaspers' interpretation of Gandhi.

Vedanta and the Axial Age according to Jaspers

Jaspers has a positive estimation of Vedanta thinking. And it is his point of departure for understanding India as mystical India. He neglects or does not understand its political application in modern Hinduism. To understand Jaspers' point of view, it is essential to take into consideration that he interprets Vedanta thinking as being a product of the Axial Age. In his book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (*The Origin and Goal of History*), he developed that idea, which is essential for Jaspers' understanding of India and of Western modernity. This book was written on the occasion of the founding of the United Nations and the Declaration of Human Rights. The Axial Age, according to Jaspers, is a sign of the unity of mankind. In that age, around 500 BC, the

idea emerges—independently in different places around the world—of a universal human nature grounded in the individual. Mankind transcends the tribal character of its international and intersocial relations and recognizes the universal human nature in everyone. And mankind understood in this sense shows a kind of unity. The places of this emergence are Persia, with its prophet Zarathustra, and Israel, with the prophets of the Old Testament. Christianity and Islam will follow them. In India, the Upanishads and Buddhism will discover universal humanism.⁶ The world religions are manifestations of this universality, for to become a Muslim or a Buddhist one need not belong to a particular people or tribe. By making an individual decision, everyone can become a Muslim, a Buddhist, or a Christian. In Indian Hinduism, the Vedanta mysticism of the Upanishads represents this tendency. Jaspers thus weds his interest in the United Nations to the idea of the unity of mankind as such. It is for him a speculative or regulative idea in the Kantian sense: One must think it, but one cannot really know this unity. Its effects are nevertheless evident. The Axial Age is precisely such an effect. Jaspers' next question is whether there could be, in modern times, more effects of this unity, namely a real unity, regarding the spread of modern culture all over the world? Political unity, as represented by the United Nations, is one such effect. But at the same time, for Jaspers, the idea of technological and political freedom is a typical product of the West, as it represents not Eastern but Western developments of the idea of the Axial Age. Those Western developments created a unified world in which everyone can communicate with everyone. And what is more, mankind must communicate now. This modern culture, meanwhile, has become one-sided and is criticized by Jaspers for that reason. But what, in his estimation, is intercultural communication? It presupposes different cultures and identities that should understand one another. They meet in modern times, yet the differences should not be made to disappear. How does the Orient maintain itself in this process? Here is where Jaspers' distinction between the East and the technological West comes into play. The way he deals with this problem is the

⁵ Mahatma Gandhi, *Freiheit ohne Gewalt*, transl. and ed. Klaus Klostermaier, Köln, DE: Jakob Hegner 1968, p. 31.

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co Verlag 1963, pp. 20–5. [Henceforth cited as *UZG*; all translations are mine.] <https://archive.org/details/vomursprungundzi0000jasp/page/24/mode/2up>.

source of his misunderstanding of Gandhi. This is the point where one sees that Jaspers cannot accept the idea of reformation as a means of preserving identity in a new context.

The Mystical East, the Technological West, and Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is a specific topic in Jaspers' book *The Origin and Goal of History*. While this is a book in the spirit of the philosophy of history as expounded by Immanuel Kant and G. F. W. Hegel, Jaspers wants to avoid the Eurocentric consequences Hegel drew from his reading of Kant. For Hegel, the discovery of the individual was the effect that Christianity had as an absolute religion. According to Jaspers, the discovery of the individual is the discovery of all the world religions and of philosophy in the Axial Age. Another difference is that there is no absolute religion. No religion can claim absolute truth, for metaphysical absoluteness is impossible in Jaspers' existentialism. In Jaspers' existentialism, all worldviews rely on practical existential choices in the light of absolute truth that can never be reached. In this context, a religion—a cultural phenomenon—is one possibility of being human. Yet Jaspers does not understand these possibilities in an abstract way as different possibilities of mankind in general; rather, these possibilities, conceived in an existential way, are always "my possibilities." Another culture is my real possibility, but not my actuality. Hegel is here replaced by Wilhelm Dilthey, who constituted a major influence on Jaspers. A culture as a way of being human is always to be seen as my possibility as an individual and calls for personal reflection and choice. This determines the relation between East and West, the Orient and the Occident, and the knowledge of the other as a source of self-discovery and self-knowledge.

This means, as a possibility, the Orient is still within the Occident. Therefore, Asia is Europe's possibility that Europeans did not realize. The Europeans have made, in a certain sense, more progress than other cultures. Yet this progress has come at a price. A look at other cultures can make clear what the Europeans have lost. Asia, therefore, according to Jaspers, is a necessary completion for Europe. Jaspers elaborates:

Given that, for example, the philosophical history of China and India is not an object in which what

we also have is superfluously doubled up, and not merely an actuality within which we study interesting sociological impacts, but something by which we ourselves are affected, since it instructs us about human possibilities that we ourselves have not realized, and brings us in touch with the genuine origin of another way of being human that we are not and yet potentially are too, which is an own not substitutable entity regarding historical existence. [UZG 95]

But the result of this interaction can also be that we still renew our choice, for example, of being European. And that is exactly what Jaspers often does in his confrontation with Asia. In his essay on Nagarjuna and in other essays on "Ciphers of Transcendence," he argues that we in the West, "we want the world."⁷ In Jaspers' interpretation Westerners do not want to leave the world as mystics do, especially as Hindu and Buddhist mystics do. And the difficulty of this opposition becomes clear in his interpretation of Gandhi and of India. How is his "mysticism in the world" possible to be lived? Jaspers never says that Western culture is a possibility for the Indian subcontinent, comparable to the manner in which mysticism is a critical possibility for the West. On the contrary, Jaspers fears, very understandably, that other cultures lose their identity in contact with the West. Yet therefore, he misses the point of the neo-Vedantic reformation and the phenomenon of reformation as such in the non-Western world. The question that needs addressing is how Jaspers understands the West.

Europe and India

What, then, is for Jaspers the essence of that European identity? In his book *The Origin and Goal of History*, he describes the identity of the Western world as being determined by modernity, by the discovery of science and technology in modern times. It is the result of a rupture in European history, yet it is already predetermined by European history. He details:

The main steps leading up to it are: The prophetic religion of the Jews, liberated from magic, from tangible transcendence... The Greeks created a clarity of distinctions, a plasticity of forms, a consistency of the rational that had never been achieved anywhere else in the world. – Christianity realized the becoming aware of the most extreme transcendence – as India

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, München, DE: R. Piper & Co. Verlag 1970, p. 95. My translation.

and China also succeeded in doing—but with the difference that Christianity fettered this realization to the world of immanence and thereby caused permanent unrest regarding the task of shaping the Christian world. [UZG 102]

Essential here is the positive relation to the world of transcendence in immanence; this is what makes the difference between the Christian West and India and China. Christianity, according to Jaspers, also contributed in another way to modern European politics. Put in his words, it reads:

To counteract its own liberty and immense fluidity, the West has now, once again, taken things to the extreme through the claim to exclusivity of religious truth in the biblical religions, including Islam. The totality of this claim has merely emerged here in the West as a principle that has persisted throughout history. [UZG 91]

The result of the Reformation's split of the churches in European history was a struggle between church and state that called for compromise. In this way, according to Jaspers, the West learned useful lessons in managing tensions within society, by contrast with the

unity and lack of tension in all oriental empires, from Byzantium to China. [UZG 91]

Jaspers writes:

Political liberty is an occidental phenomenon. If one compares with *Indian* and *Chinese* manifestations, liberty in both cultural spaces is devoid of principle and continuity of a people, it is random and personal. Hence, one may ask whether political liberty is a precondition for any kind of elevated mode of being human. [UZG 214-5]

The idea of political liberty is important in this history, yet, according to Jaspers, it is unknown in India and China despite their having a high level of humanity.

Against this background, Jaspers' interpretation of India and Gandhi becomes conspicuous. In his book on the atom bomb too, Jaspers makes it clear that the politics of freedom is typical and essential for the West; in this work he is, of course, in discussion with the phenomenon of communism, for the totalitarian worldview of Marxism is his true opponent. And he depicts Western liberty in comparison with this totalitarianism. He cannot find support for this freedom in the traditions of Asia, since they lack that tradition of political philosophy. But then the political

ethicist Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as Mahatma Gandhi, emerges. Gandhi's pacifism becomes an important new factor to consider, and—with him—the world of Indian thought must likewise be included in the considerations outlined here. The question is whether one can find in him a real Indian philosophy of freedom that can match the European ideas. Jaspers does not think so; indeed, quite the contrary. Gandhi is, to a certain extent, an Indian phenomenon, but with differences. According to Jaspers, one key difference about Gandhi is that he did not step outside the world; he was not an unworldly, indifferent saint but stayed within it. Jaspers emphasizes:

Gandhi might be reminiscent of the Indian ascetics of the millennia. Yet he differs from them all, first, in that he does not leave the world, but rather takes on responsibility within the world. [AZ 65]

And he stayed within it and worked with the people. He did not want to be considered a saint. He had a political strategy that combined non-cooperation, civil disobedience, and non-violence. Did this represent an Indian inspiration? Not according to Jaspers. He argues:

For Gandhi's politics stands in contrast to both the ancient way of life of the Indian ascetics and the equally ancient Indian politics of the political Dharma that is under its own law, in which everything that increases one's own power is permitted and demanded. [AZ 67]

Gandhi's behavior is at odds not only with Indian mysticism but also with the old Indian political theory of the behavior of the princes. Jaspers refers here implicitly to the old political teachings of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (AZ 57) that confirmed the absolute power of the Indian princes. One should note that Jaspers was a personal friend of the renowned Indologist Heinrich Zimmer, who protested against the identification of Indian philosophy with mystical philosophy, citing the *Arthashastra*.⁸

However, the essence of the Bengal Renaissance and the neo-Vedantic reformation is that it left behind this old political philosophy. It did not want to go back to the precolonial position of the princes. Rather, it did politics inspired by Vedanta

⁸ Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophie und Religion Indiens*, transl. Lucy Heyer-Grote, Frankfurt a. M., DE: Suhrkamp 1976, p. 93.

mysticism, which made the promise of uniting all religions in a modern state of India. Gandhi belongs to this movement. Yet for Jaspers, Gandhi does not represent a new Indian political thinking. He is, above all else, a unique person, yet a person who could only live under British conditions. His behavior and the result of it, India's independence, is a purely personal merit, not an Indian deed. And this personal merit was only possible under British political conditions. It is British liberalism that gave Gandhi a chance to make a difference, and it is this political principle that convinced England to give India independence. The British, according to Jaspers, did not want to sin their own principle and subdue the Indian population by terror, as autocratic regimes would have done. The high esteem in which he holds British politics in India is surprising and perhaps too idealistic, but it does not amount to a glorification of Western civilization as such. To a certain extent, Jaspers recognizes the relativity of Western political freedom, arguing that high-level humanity is possible under different conditions. But, especially regarding Western technological culture, he wants to stay open to critical inspiration from the Orient. Yet again, the price is that the wholesale adoption of this culture by the Orient is seen only as a threat to its non-Western identity. The phenomenon of reformation, once again, cannot be thought of in this conception. Jaspers thus writes the following about China, generalizing it to all non-Western cultures, with a reference to the famous 1912 book by J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religion of the Chinese*:

What de Groot says is: If "China experiences a renewal, a rebirth" through modern science and technology, then "China will no longer be China, the Chinese will no longer be Chinese," this applies to all peoples of the earth. [AZ 170]

Yet he has expectations:

Given such a past, we may hope that China will generate its own new form of freedom in the technological age. [AZ 171]

But how is this to be effectuated? The fact and necessity of change in non-Western cultures are often reflected by Jaspers. The threat of identity loss through change is often considered, as is the necessity of this change, yet how can this change be realized without a loss of identity? This is the essence of reform movements such as the Bengal

Renaissance, but the same processes occur in the Chinese world. Let's have a look at this Asian values debate. There, Jaspers and his theory of the Axial Age are used to think about and legitimize reform.

Confucianism, Asian Values, and the Axial Age

Of course, like Japan and India, China also first learned about Western technology in the form of war technology. China, too, developed its nineteenth-century theories about its identity in relation to the West. The break with tradition in China by Sun Yat-sen and Mao Zedong was far greater than in India, owing to the imperial house's resistance to reform. After the fall of the imperial house in 1912, Western thinking and eventually Marxism became dominant. Yet elements of Confucianism were still present. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the father of the Republic of China and its first president, for example, praises – in his *Three Principles of the People* – the traditional Chinese values such as filial piety and loyalty, as superior to the values of the West, which he identifies as being individualism and freedom.⁹

This theme reemerged in the so-called "Asian values debate" in the 1990s. However, nowadays there is a trend to harmonize precisely the Western ideas of individual freedom with Confucianism. This debate shows a growing interest in the revival of Confucianism, above all outside continental China, in Singapore, but it is still important for the relationship between democracy and economy in continental China, too.

The former president of independent Singapore who served from 1965 to 1990 and is credited with the island city-state's economic success, Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015), came under criticism for the way he governed Singapore without respect for human rights or freedom. He answered his critics by pointing out that modern human rights are based on Western individualistic freedom. Yet, according to him, Singapore's success was based not on Western individualism but on the traditional communal values of Confucianism. This political issue sparked a hermeneutical debate about the nature of Confucianism that was not confined to Singapore.

⁹ Rana Mitter, "Mao Zedong and Charismatic Maoism," in *Makers of Modern Asia*, ed. Ramachandra Guha, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2014, pp. 93–116, here p. 95.

The discussion played out in China and among the Chinese in the United States too, where they had to think about their Confucianism in relation to the American culture in which they lived. Jaspers became important in interpreting this debate. The question was whether this communal ethos was the only message that Confucius had to offer in this debate. And whether this communal ethos was originally Confucian or the result of a specific historical reinterpretation of Confucius. In his book *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, the sinologist Heiner Roetz sought to clarify Confucius' original position in comparison with later Confucianism. And Jaspers' work proved useful to him, especially Jaspers' idea of the Axial Age and the place of Confucius within it. He showed that Confucius' original position is a genuine result of the Axial Age. It is a way of thinking that emancipates itself from traditional, conventional communitarian ethics.¹⁰ It is reflexive and gives the individual a place within this ethos. For Roetz, Confucianism in its original form is a postconventional ethics that has a direct relation to the Enlightenment. On this basis, the opponents of Lee Kuan Yew can invoke Confucius to defend human rights. According to Michael Barr, the Confucianism to which Lee Kuan Yew refers is a later systematized kind of state ideology.¹¹ It is interesting to note that Roetz's modern rethinking of historical Confucianism makes the same move that the Indian people made with their traditional philosophy. But despite using Jaspers, he goes one step further by making a direct link between the Axial Age and modernity or the Enlightenment. Roetz shifts the discussion to one focused on being modern or enlightened in a Chinese way. This is exactly what happened in India in the neo-Vedantic movement, and it is what Jaspers wanted for China, yet he could not think of it as a reform movement. It is important to recognize here that Jaspers does not oppose China to the West as being a mystical

country. The opposition between Chinese and European thinking is one between harmony and conflict.¹² Jaspers' historical and systematic motives of identity and change are not internally related. Identity in change poses a difficulty. He sees that all cultures change in response to modernity and wishes a new beginning for them and for Europe too. But he does not notice that this is happening in reform movements that change their culture by returning to old roots, rooted in the Axial Age. As Roetz has shown, Jaspers' theory of the Axial Age transcends Jaspers' own thinking. The same can be said of the neo-Vedantic, Bengal Renaissance and of Gandhi. These, too, can be considered within the framework of the Axial Age, although Jaspers himself does not.

Conclusion: Jaspers and the Dialectics of Modernity

The case regarding Gandhi and the Asian values debate shows how it is possible, contrary to Jaspers' expectations, to relate modernity positively to the identity of non-Western cultures based on the Axial Age. But when making this move, one can also see what Jaspers feared: the diffusion of modern technological and industrial culture across the world. Jaspers already mentions the bad consequences of this culture for ecology (UZG 185). Modernity, therefore, cannot be what Jaspers expects to occur, namely a novel Axial Age. It is a precondition for it insofar as it makes universal, intercultural communication possible and necessary, but it is not its reality; this transformed reality must transcend modernity. But one could also add, based on Jaspers, that the reception and the criticism of modernity, with all its vicissitudes, became universal. The West and the East, as Gandhi observed, are now in the same process, one that could be the end of modernity. This could either mean the completion of modernity all over the world or the transcendence of modernity by a new world viewed as the ultimate goal of modernity.

¹⁰ Heiner Roetz, *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age: A Reconstruction under the Aspect of the Breakthrough toward Postconventional Thinking*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1993, p. 24.

¹¹ Michael D. Barr, "Lee Kuan Yew and the 'Asian Values' Debate," in *Asian Studies Review* 24/3 (September 2000), 309–334, here p. 311.

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Lao-Tse, Nagarjuna, Zwei Asatische Metaphysiker*, München, DE: R. Piper 1978, p. 60.