



An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics, and the Arts

Volume 4, No 2, Fall 2009

ISSN 1932-1066

Heidegger and Jaspers on the Tragic

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Abstract: Heidegger and Jaspers advanced different strategies for grasping "the tragic" and how to integrate it into the whole of one's philosophy. Their strategies worked in concert with the separate political paths that they chose in response to National Socialism. Moreover, their approaches to the tragic illustrate different ontological commitments. Heidegger adopts a tragic absolute—an ontological framework whereby being itself remains tragic. But Jaspers assigns tragedy to the immanence of human finitude, surrounded in turn by a non-tragic source of transcendence. All of this comes to bear on the two philosophers' salvation motifs for history. Heidegger does not anticipate a historical deliverance that eclipses the tragic so much as a saving power that grows within it. Jaspers, however, argues after the war that "tragedy is not enough" for understanding the historical development of human consciousness. I make the case in this essay that Heidegger's tragic ontology better equips him for addressing the gravity of human finitude. Nevertheless, he could have gained political and historical perspective from Jaspers' openness to cross-cultural influences.

In a letter dated December 22, 1945, Karl Jaspers offered his advice to the denazification committee overseeing the academic fate of Martin Heidegger. One of the committee members, Friedrich Oehlkers, had turned to him for assistance on the matter. Jaspers submitted a report that contained several observations crucial to evaluating his colleague's involvement with National Socialism. Heidegger had failed to grasp the dangerous intentions of the party's leadership, Jaspers contended. On the other hand, Heidegger remained culpable, much like Alfred Baeumler and Carl Schmitt, for deliberately assisting the political movement by philosophical means. "They brought their very real intellectual abilities to the task, only to end up blackening the reputation of German philosophy. So I agree with you," Jaspers says, "that there is a touch of the tragedy of evil about it all."¹

The fact that Jaspers would use this phrase, "a touch of the tragedy of evil," says something significant about how he judged Heidegger's political and philosophical ambitions. Both philosophers were intensely devoted to understanding the tragic, and wrestled with its application for their immediate time. Their different approaches to the tragic paralleled the divergent political postures that they assumed during and after the war.

At first glance, the similarities between Heidegger and Jaspers with respect to the tragic appear to be so great that any differences would seem trivial. Both philosophers resort to tragic language in order to make sense of the historical struggle of the ecstatic human being. This includes a profound sense of the limitations besetting human knowledge and human existence. People can challenge these limitations by forming authentic decisions about their place within a particular historical topography. Also, both philosophers eventually gravitate toward something akin to historical deliverance, whereby another revelation of

¹ Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: A Political Life*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: HarperCollins Publishers, Ltd., 1993), 244.

being takes hold. Nevertheless, the points upon which they differ are equally critical for thinking about the essence of tragedy. Much of their disagreement has to do with the limits of tragedy itself, whether tragic descriptions suffice for explaining historical transitions in human thought. Heidegger accepts the sufficiency of tragic descriptions and in so doing manages to preserve the gravity of a Western history plagued by its own nothingness, through finitude and the forgetfulness of being. Jaspers argues for the insufficiency of tragic descriptions about historical transformation as he seeks to establish an increasing openness to transcendence accomplished through communication. In what follows below, I outline these different positions about the tragic and explain how we can forge a tragic vision that preserves the gravity of nothingness while simultaneously remaining open to the expansion of meaning through cross-cultural influence.

Heidegger's Approach to the Tragic

We begin with Heidegger, whose best efforts to understand the tragic came during a highly transitional stage in his philosophy. Moreover, it was no accident that he was most actively engaged with tragedy while the Nazi regime was in power. He was convinced, for a short while, that a moment of vision had come for the German *Volk*, one that they needed to seize with heroic resolve for the sake of welcoming another historical inception of being. At the same time, this encounter with the tragic was more than a political exercise for Heidegger. It provided him with a language whereby he could rework some of his most basic concepts from his magnum opus *Being and Time*. In that earlier work, Heidegger had introduced the term *Da-sein* to describe the entire ecstatic process of being here, present within a world that affords no permanent residence—in total, the being of the human being. He had described the perpetual estrangement of the human being in the midst of beings as an "uncanny" phenomenon.² This much would remain crucial for the development of his thought about tragedy in succeeding years. What he sought to transform from *Being and Time* was the manner in which Dasein stands within its world and receives its habitation. Issues of freedom and necessity would be essential for this so that Heidegger could

distinguish Dasein's performance more clearly from the specific role that being plays in the unfolding of history. This causes him to develop two successive strategies during the period of National Socialism for conceptualizing the tragic. In the first strategy, he emphasizes a violent, primordial struggle whereby Dasein attempts to break through prevailing commitments to meaning. In the second strategy, he prescribes the more subdued theme of waiting upon being, whereby Dasein prepares for the arrival of another historical revelation.

The first of the two approaches pitted the agents of creativity against the imposing ontological restraints that engulf them. This antagonism was evident in the infamous rectoral address of 1933, when Heidegger characterized the spiritual mission of the university in terms of a heroic self-assertion that "stands in the storm" of the historical crisis of nihilism.³ This self-assertion of the German university amounted to a Promethean defiance aimed against the ordinary, sleepy ways of thinking that had come to dominate the sciences. In order to prepare for another revelation of being, the community must wrestle with the appearances, question the essences of beings, remain open to their mystery, and set this receptivity to work for the university. The same sense of struggle (*Kampf*) dominates Heidegger's first lecture course on Hölderlin in the Winter semester of 1934-35.⁴ Hölderlin ascribes an "excessive inwardness" to the poet, which Heidegger interprets as a deep intimacy with what is essential to beings. On the basis of this intimacy (*Innigkeit*), the poet has the ability to challenge the prevailing ontological order, i.e., the way that beings fit together into a meaningful structure. More specifically, he recognizes a fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*) that hangs over beings for their particular historical epoch, and thereby lends its own particular reception of the being of beings. The poet provides a language through which beings can step forth once again, from their mysterious essences, into another single, cohesive world of appearances.

In the 1935 *Introduction to Metaphysics* lectures, Heidegger elaborates further on this struggle for the appearances while interacting closely with Greek

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 233.

³ Martin Heidegger, "The Self-Assertion of the German University," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 39.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germanien" und "Der Rhein"* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klosterman, 1999).

sources. The crisis takes the form of a *polemos*, following Heraclitus' saying, "War (*polemos*) is the father of all and king of all, and some he shows as gods, others as humans; some he makes slaves, others free."⁵ Heidegger explains the *polemos* as a violent exchange that opens into oppositional but interdependent forces, literally a setting out and apart from one another (*Aus-einander-setzung*).⁶ On one side of the opposition is *dikē*, the ontological violence that overwhelms human beings with a world-context, a fugue of the appearances, and simultaneously presses them into conformity with that fittingness. On the other side of the opposition is *technē*, the creative knowledge whereby human beings crash against the current semblance of meaning with new possibilities for thinking. In order to make an impact on their surroundings, these creators must be willing to sacrifice their familiarity with everything that previously made their lives meaningful; they must be willing to take a leap over the abyss of their own nothingness (*IM* 188). Heidegger finds inspiration for this double violence in the tragic poetry of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the drama whose heroine speaks on behalf of the ground of the *polis*, contrary to the prerogatives of the king. One of the choral poems in the drama, the so-called "Ode to Man" passage, caught Heidegger's attention. The chorus describes a man who reworks his environment for the purpose of making his way differently within it: he fashions a boat from timber growing along the shoreline; he cultivates the earth for the sake of growing crops; he tames the wild animals and sets them to work; and he develops a language from which he can reason. In Heidegger's interpretation of the poem, the human being is "most uncanny" because of his ability to perpetually tear away one type of dwelling for the purpose of creating another.⁷ Meanwhile, the tragic nature of this cycle is reinforced by how the human being, despite all of his creative accomplishments, remains homeless—estranged from the hearth of being.

The tragedy of human existence was not something that Heidegger was willing to limit to just

confrontation and homelessness. The forgetting of being played an equally crucial role for him: it allowed him to develop a broader narrative about the downfall of human history. The *Introduction to Metaphysics* includes warnings about contaminating forces that have crept into the Western tradition and choked its possibilities for an original encounter with being. Among these contaminants is the growing power of technology, which threatens to prevent beings from showing themselves as they are. Instrumentalism plays a role in this by reducing all beings to their usefulness, to the point where intelligence itself supposedly functions as a tool in the service of some task. Marxism, positivism, and biologism exemplify instrumental thinking since they seek to organize and regulate an observable world without questioning the ontological origins behind what they encounter (*IM* 49). All of this has contributed to a steady withdrawal of beings into concealment, hidden beneath a cloak of nihilism—what Hölderlin already identified in his time as "the flight of the gods." Heidegger reasons that in order for Germany to lead Europe in another spiritual direction, it must guard itself against foreign influences operating on behalf of instrumentalism. "Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man" (*IM* 40). The exclusivity of Germany's spiritual mission seems to swell for Heidegger to the point where he quickly dismisses, and in some cases demonizes, other people groups. It is an exclusivity that convinces him, more and more, that Germany shares a common fate with the Greeks.

In subsequent years, Heidegger developed a second strategy for understanding the tragic. One can see this most clearly in his 1942 lecture course on Hölderlin's hymn, *Der Ister*—a lecture course that facilitated a more extensive analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*.⁸ By this point, Heidegger had abandoned the polemic of an ontological violence shared by the creators of the state and their larger world-context. He replaces the violence with a preparatory vigil, one that borrows from Hölderlin's distinction between the "proper" and the "foreign." This dynamic explains how the historical debts of a community linger within its current way of being. Thusly, that which is foreign to being German—namely,

⁵ Patricia Curd, ed., *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, trans. Richard D. McKirahan, Jr. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996), fragment 79, 37.

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 65 [henceforth cited as *IM*].

⁷ Heidegger renders Sophocles' *deinon* human being as *unheimlich*—in English, uncanny or unhomely (*IM* 159).

⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* trans. William McNeill and Julia Davis (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

the holy pathos of the Greeks—remains present within what is proper to being German. Heidegger explains that the transition from one ontological configuration to another depends upon a remembrance or re-thinking (*An-denken*) of this otherwise concealed ground-within-the-ground of Dasein's historical situation. The poet plays an integral role in the turning of ground, not by violently forcing open another beginning, but by patiently welcoming another arrival of being to take hold through language. The heroine Antigone embodies the loyalty to the ground required by great poets like Sophocles or Hölderlin to fulfill their historical callings. What makes this turning of ground tragic is that uncanny Dasein remains perpetually homeless—condemned to the finite space of its limited knowledge and existence—regardless of whatever inception of being or "homecoming" may open for it next. Sophocles describes the ecstatic nature of Dasein rather well in Heidegger's estimation: the human being is already underway with no way out (*pantaporos-aporos*); the city loses its site at the same time that it rises high (*hupsipolis-apolis*).

The second strategy for grasping the tragic differs from the first by placing Dasein's fate more in the hands of being itself. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the division between creators and their imposing world was somewhat more balanced. By the time of the Ister lectures, the unfolding of the history of being comes largely on its own accord, its poets lending their voices. Already the poet's responsibilities resemble what Heidegger would later term *Gelassenheit*, the releasement that lets the being of beings be.⁹ The fact that he wants to prepare for the arrival of another being instead of forcing it through violence also suggests a change in political perspective. National Socialism simply was not going to facilitate a rejuvenation of Western thought on a scale that mirrored what the Greeks had accomplished. Of course, this did not keep Heidegger from holding Germany's neighbors in contempt, or from imagining that its heritage was primarily a Greek one. But it was, at least, a mournful remembrance of the past that eagerly anticipates a future deliverance. This motif of waiting still allowed him to maintain his historical narrative of descent, whereby an admirable Greek beginning had steadily given way to the forces of nihilism. The tragic drama "commences with the down-going," he says when commenting on the opening lines of the *Antigone*.¹⁰

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*, (Pfullingen: Neske, 1992).

¹⁰ Heidegger, Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister," 103.

Jaspers' Approach to the Tragic

Jaspers' approach to the tragic shares many of the same basic features, largely as a result of his commitments to existentialism. Much of the similarity stems from his willingness to associate the tragic with the ecstatic nature of the human being. Yet Jaspers has his own unique way of describing how being speaks from beyond the limits of human knowledge and existence. He recognizes these boundaries as limit-situations (*Grenzsituationen*) marked by the inescapable realities of struggle, suffering, guilt, and death.¹¹ As humans wrestle with boundaries, one sometimes becomes aware of possibilities that lie beyond the immanence of mundane existence. Such experiences of transcendence are made possible by the singularity and otherness of being at the source of what Jaspers calls the Encompassing—the unlimited provision of a limited world-structure. The Encompassing is not merely some particular horizon of meaning, but ultimately a deeper, comprehensive whole that engulfs all passing horizons.¹² Likewise, every individual person harbors within himself or herself the secret of infinite being, the self-concealing origin for a finite existence. Jaspers uses the term *Existenz* to describe this recurring potential to *be*, not to mention a necessity to be, within some particular enclosure of meaning. Fortunately *Existenz* has the freedom—indeed, it is the freedom—to challenge the limits of its current knowledge, and in a moment of transcendence, to temporarily break these bonds asunder (*RE* 32).

Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were important to Jaspers precisely because of their ability to stand at the margins of philosophical systems, in ways that opened them to transcendence. They were "scandalous exceptions" in their own era, Jaspers explains in a series of 1935 lectures, later published as *Reason and Existenz* (*RE* 29). They preferred to confront the limitations of reason, and to live in a manner cognizant of its underlying abyss; the self-enclosed rationality of the philosophical system no longer satisfied. What followed was the need for more authentic decisions,

¹¹ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. II., trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) [henceforth cited as *P2*]. For an in-depth analysis of these categories, see Alan M. Olson, "Metaphysical Guilt," *Existenz* 3/1 (Spring 2008).

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, trans. William Earle (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1997), 52 [henceforth cited as *RE*].

ones that accepted the shipwreck of previous systems of thought, and then reached into the infinite and non-rational depths of Existenz for the sake of accomplishing something different.¹³ But Jaspers observes that this dwelling at the margins had a debilitating effect upon Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Neither of these figures was particularly successful at opening alternative worlds that succeeding generations could inherit. Yet their recognition of groundlessness—the dismissal of every *terra firma*—continues to threaten the wider philosophical tradition with a similar impotence. As a result, Jaspers recommends that philosophy proceed from the margins without remaining entrapped within its loneliness. It must speak from a philosophical faith that leaps beyond the immanence of an already accepted rational totality, toward the transcendence of eternal being.¹⁴ The confrontation with the infinite then yields one of two results: either the despair of nothingness, wholly blind and meaningless, or the welcoming of being, which brings another fulfillment of the self (*PE* 28-29).

These ideas pertaining to the tragic provided Jaspers with the conceptual apparatus for making sense of the National Socialist era, as well as the responsibilities for Germans in its aftermath. In particular, guilt would be essential for grasping their shared limit-situation, accepting responsibility, and making progress toward another beginning. Before the Nazi regime had even come to power, Jaspers had addressed the importance of guilt by identifying it as a necessary component of the human condition. Every individual human being is guilty of living the exploitation of others, simply by means of one's communal interdependencies (*P2* 215). The individual who takes responsibility demonstrates an awareness of his or her limit-situation and bears the guilt formed within it. In *The Question of German Guilt*, 1946, Jaspers reformulates this under the rubric of "metaphysical guilt," which he distinguishes from other spheres of guilt, the criminal, political, and moral. "Metaphysical guilt is the lack of absolute solidarity with the human being as such—an indelible claim beyond morally

meaningful duty."¹⁵ Jaspers concludes that, since he and his compatriots survived where others had died, those who remained were "guilty of being alive" (*QGG* 71-72). One year later, in *Von der Wahrheit*, Jaspers observes a parallel principle of guilt among the Greeks whereby individuals stand guilty of being born.¹⁶ Antigone bears the curse of having been born the descendent of Oedipus' incestuous union (*TNE* 55). The cursed daughter embraces the guilt of who she is, and as a result, lives an exceptional life, as one prepared for her own death.

Jaspers offers his most sophisticated treatment of the tragic in this same section of *Von der Wahrheit*, which was published separately under the title of *Tragedy is Not Enough*. In this analysis, he reiterates the cyclical logic of confronting limit-situations for the sake of surpassing them. The tragic hero stands at the border between two eras, the sacrificial victim for a new principle, as in the case of Socrates or Julius Caesar (*TNE* 49). Still, tragedy wants more than just the perpetual replacement of shared horizons according to Jaspers; in its greatest moments tragedy seeks, through a catharsis of the soul, for deliverance (*TNE* 36). The Greeks exhibit this in the ways that they juxtapose the finite and the infinite, either as a conflict shared by mortals and gods, or all beings positioned against fate. The breach opened by the finite and the infinite, so necessary for tragic knowledge, always implies a kernel of hope—"a sense of the infinite vastness of what is beyond our grasp" (*TNE* 48). This sense of infinite being allows for a burst of transcendence that makes possible a deliverance from specific limit-situations and brings tragic knowledge to another fulfillment. Jaspers rejects any absolute tragedy, which would eliminate deliverance from the logic of historical transition. Any tragic vision that rests in the despair of nothingness risks apathy about the limit-situation; it assumes the irresponsible aestheticism of the removed spectator (*TNE* 72). Moreover, Jaspers refuses to accept that the ground of all being is tragic, as though being itself has a crack running through it (*TNE* 93-94). Proponents of this particular view—and Heidegger must be chief

¹³ "In action, I truly accomplish something out of potential Existenz only if I am consciously prepared to accept its shipwreck." (*RE* 118).

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Richard F. Grabau (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 24-25 [henceforth cited as *PE*].

¹⁵ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Capricorn Books, 1947), 71 [henceforth cited as *QGG*].

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Tragedy is Not Enough*, trans. Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch (Boston: Archon Books, 1969), 53 [henceforth cited as *TNE*].

among them—have supposedly made the mistake of reinserting a characteristic of the phenomenal world back into being itself.

The emphasis upon deliverance allows Jaspers to situate tragic knowledge within a larger historical continuum. The pre-tragic civilization recognizes suffering as a cosmological fact, yet without pressing the boundaries of its own limit-situation. When a civilization adopts tragic knowledge, it becomes restless about its limitations in a way that replaces the primitive complacency that once dominated. But the deliverance that the hero yearns for in tragic knowledge anticipates another realization, one more cognizant of the power of transcendence. Revealed religion accomplishes this by introducing a deeper liberation, one that provides deliverance or redemption by means of special revelatory claims. World saviors enter the scene, not simply to bring human beings into another momentary release from their bonds, but to lead them toward deliverance as a whole (*TNE* 73). They accomplish this by introducing messages of love that allow a community to achieve mutual goals. The solidarity of human beings struggling together and loving one another makes possible a communication that opens greater possibilities for deliverance than those once afforded by the tragic (*TNE* 87). Participants in dialogue are more likely to arrive at a moment of transcendence if they are "keeping faith to the end" (*P2* 66). On the basis of their loving struggle, communication gives rise to shared horizons that are more encompassing and less constrictive.¹⁷ As a result of this expansion of meaning, the deliverance once experienced within tragic knowledge must give way to a deliverance from tragic knowledge.

Jaspers ascribes a progressive trajectory to history in that civilization increases its openness to being and expands its world consciousness. This historical ascendancy has many features in common with Hegel, including the perspective that Western thought advances beyond tragedy. Of course, when Jaspers describes how revealed religion eclipses tragic knowledge, he does not attempt the transition by sublimating previous forms of thought. Instead, he requires that an irreconcilable opposition persist as the basis for the tragic, lest one trivialize its significance (*TNE* 5, 79). Nevertheless, he does share with Hegel the sense that tragedy occupies a particular stage within

the ongoing development of human consciousness. In Jaspers' case, this means that the tradition journeys through the tragic in order to experience deliverance from it (*TNE* 76). Without passing through this stage, human beings fail to recognize and take responsibility for their limit-situations in a way that can open them to post-tragic possibilities. Moreover, Jaspers acknowledges that something about the tragic remains steadfast despite the many historical developments directed toward infinite being. Insofar as being resides as the background of all backgrounds, it inevitably turns every structure of meaning into a ruinous heap. Ironically, even tragic knowledge cannot escape this fate: it becomes one of those steppingstones toward deliverance that also meets its own demise.

The Tragedy and Grace of Being

The differences shared by Heidegger and Jaspers with respect to the tragic run as deep as their ontological commitments. Chief among these ontological matters is the relationship between being and nothingness, so that every major issue pertaining to the tragic seems to follow from it. Both philosophers accept the groundlessness of the empirical world as an important component for what constitutes a tragic philosophy. The ecstatic nature of human existence allows all beings to present themselves meaningfully, through language, albeit in ways that simultaneously conceal their ontological origins. This means that at the bottom of every something lay the secret of its no-thing. The nothingness underlying all beings has an oppressive quality about it because it reminds people that they can never completely belong within their particular meaning-structure. Where the two philosophers differ has more to do with the intimacy that being and nothingness share with each other. Heidegger accepts a much closer affinity between being and nothingness than just the abyss underlying the appearances. He describes being as though it were actually punctured by nothingness; he welcomes the notion that being has a crack running through it. He does this by attributing a more temporal status to being than most philosophers had hitherto been willing to accept, one where he sets being into the motion of its own primordial time. Jaspers on the other hand remains firmly rooted within the Kantian tradition of thinking about time as the formal a priori condition for all appearances. He honors this approach by restricting temporality to the realm of the phenomena, surrounded in turn by an everlasting present. These decisions about how it stands with

¹⁷ Alan M. Olson, *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, (Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 20.

being—choices pertaining to nothingness and temporality—stem from deeply held convictions about the starting points for ontology and philosophy in general. They explain why one philosopher would keep vigil for being from within the darkness of tragedy, whereas the other would continually attempt to step away from it.

The contrasting positions held by Heidegger and Jaspers about the proximity of being and nothingness also lead them to different accounts about the history of being. Heidegger's historical account borrows heavily from Hölderlin's sense of a turning of the fatherland, which depends upon the reworking of a foreign past that hides itself within a proper present. The nostalgia allows Heidegger to entertain a tragic decline of history that falls from some primordial site—in this case the Greeks—only to unravel itself in the apocalyptic ruins of nihilism. More importantly, he mirrors Hölderlin's refusal to submit nothingness to the healing actualization of spirit that one encounters in Hegelian dialectic. Jaspers recognizes the need to move past the sublimation of opposites and in this regard to preserve nothingness as unresolved breach. This does not prevent him, however, from retaining the hollowed shell of Hegelian optimism, supported by another perspective on historical redemption. Jaspers' views about deliverance resemble the teleology of the absolute insofar as history passes through successive stages aimed toward what is infinite. He does not bring the progress of history to closure in the absolute, nor does he suggest that civilization *must* receive deliverance at any of its transitional points. But he does trace the trajectory of history in the general direction of increasing redemption—most notably, in the progress from pre-tragic knowledge to tragic knowledge to revealed religion. This redemptive scheme still smacks of "the system" that he wants philosophers to avoid when doing philosophy from the margins. When existentialists appropriate the tragic into their philosophies, they usually do so with the aim of opposing redemption narratives of this sort—the type that passes through ascending stages of enlightenment.

Although Heidegger manages to preserve the gravity of the tragic in his historical account, this does not keep him from committing serious errors of his own. For example, he ties the destiny of Germans so directly to idyllic Greek origins that he has the tendency to exclude other important historical contributions. In so doing, he completely ignores the impact of cross-cultural sources when discussing the early

development of Greek thought. He would rather portray the Greeks as though their arts and philosophy sprang entirely from their own native soil, i.e., without recourse to what must have been foreign within what was proper to being Greek. Along the path from the Greeks to their German successors, Heidegger mostly downplays Judeo-Christian and Latin influences by relegating them to the role of contaminants. As for his own time period, he eliminates the possibility of constructive discourse with America and Russia on the basis that they represent metaphysical dispositions that threaten to steer Germany away from capitalizing upon its historical potential. This contrasts sharply with Hölderlin's descriptions of German identity, which were far more open to positive complications: he brought the Occident and the Orient into discourse, as though the West sang all the way from the Indus; he identified Christian and Latin sources quite liberally, as the necessary lens for observing the Greeks; and he benefited from the foreign voices of his day by observing the social upheavals of the American and French revolutions. Yet none of this cross-cultural openness required him to relinquish his hold upon the tragic. Heidegger could have expanded his notion of the foreign in a similar way and thereby avoided the unilinear appearance of a pure Greco-Germanic connection. In fact, he might have argued for an historical ground that becomes increasingly complicated over generations of time. Such a ground would be open to more viable resources for retrieval and yet, tragically, all the more difficult to disentangle.

Both Heidegger and Jaspers integrate Christian themes of redemption into their descriptions of tragedy. This suggests, much to their credit, that they see more to tragedy than what Greek drama alone has to offer. Unfortunately, they still struggle to bring the Jerusalem and Athens axes together appropriately on matters of the tragic. The two philosophers actually share a common error whereby they refuse to attribute to Christianity a tragic vision of its own. In Heidegger's case, the problem manifests itself in the form of an odd subterfuge—the elevation of all things Greek despite the concealment of many things Christian. He often pushes Christianity to the periphery of the European experience for the sake of maintaining his historical narrative that originates with the Greeks. Meanwhile, this whole mythology of a superior Greek commencement, poured out into its historical dissolution, resembles the Christian motif of an original "fall" rooted in the paradise of God. Also, as Heidegger

adopts a posture of waiting for the arrival of being, his dependencies upon notions of Catholic grace become all the more obvious. His descriptions for the turning of historical ground gradually assume a Eucharistic tone, so that remembrance results in transformation, and thinking (*Denken*) reveals itself as a kind of thanking (*Danken*).¹⁸ In the years following the war, he employs the language of salvation in order to explain the tragic nature of history. He speaks of the "saving power" that grows alongside the dangers of technology; he concludes that "Only a god can save us," in his interview with *Der Spiegel*.¹⁹ One gets the impression that he relies upon Jerusalem for grace and redemption—and this somewhat covertly—while he depends upon Athens for all things tragic.

Jaspers is more transparent about his religious debts, and yet he also fails to appreciate the tragic vision that Christianity has to offer. He claims in *Tragedy is Not Enough* that Christian salvation stands in opposition to tragic knowledge, and therefore no genuinely Christian tragedy can ever exist (*TNE* 38). He presents Christian redemption as though it replaces the challenges besetting the tragic hero with the teleological framework of an eventual payoff. Even the guilt that the believer takes responsibility for becomes a necessary ingredient for salvation—a *felix culpa* or happy fault (*TNE* 40). As for bearing the cross, the believer "no longer merely endures the sorrows of existence, its discrepancies and tearing conflicts—he deliberately chooses them. This is tragedy no longer" (*TNE* 38). Yet this is precisely where Christianity *does* offer its own tragic vision, and not simply a deliverance from it. For instance, Christ's descent and return from Hades actually parallels the cycle of the Greek hero with astonishing accuracy. He descends into the depths, not for the purpose of eliminating death, but so that he might emerge as its victor, bringing death and Hades with him.²⁰ In other words, the tragic hero willingly embraces the sorrows of existence, and ultimately death itself, for the sake of

becoming them. The Greek hero, Christ, and the Christian martyr all share at least this much in common. The tragic vision offered by Christianity involves a catharsis that ushers the believer through the abyss, all the while holding open the mystery of its suffering. It does not and certainly cannot justify all suffering in advance by promising an end result that makes good on the believer's misfortunes. Instead of promising deliverance from the tragic drama of human existence, it brings the cycle of death and life to victorious fulfillment.

The differences that Heidegger and Jaspers had with respect to the tragic—and this includes issues of salvation—reverberated even within their strained personal relationship. On the basis of Jaspers' recommendation, the denazification committee overseeing Heidegger's case suspended him from teaching while still allowing him to publish. No doubt this reflected Jaspers' trust in redemption for anyone who might experience deliverance from the tragic. The comment about Heidegger's Nazi involvement having "a touch of the tragedy of evil" about it probably reveals Jaspers' concern for the tragic knowledge that ends in despair rather than transcendence. Heidegger on the other hand seems to have sought out his salvation from within the tragedy of his situation. He indicates as much in one of his infrequent letters to Jaspers—this one in the summer of 1949, from his retreat in the Black Forest. (The infrequency shows, sadly, that Heidegger was less willing to participate in the "loving struggle" of communication than was Jaspers.)

Coming to terms with the German disaster and its entanglement in world history and modernity will take the rest of our lives! It is the same as being conscious of what is uncanny: that however more essentially we take what is essential, its accomplishment must alienate itself in something factual, and this lays waste almost relentlessly to everything essential today.²¹

Something uncanny or strange had been at work in the destruction of Germany and Heidegger sounded determined to investigate it. Maybe such an investigation was supposed to help him to better prepare for the arrival of another revelation of being. After all, the salvation of Germany and its brightest philosophers may have been at stake. Regardless, Heidegger would not be looking to overcome the tragic itself.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1968), 145.

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977). Martin Heidegger, "Only a God Can Save Us: *Der Spiegel*'s Interview with Martin Heidegger," in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), 107.

²⁰ Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale: The Mystery of Easter*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 156.

²¹ Walter Biemel and Hans Saner, eds., *The Heidegger-Jaspers Correspondence (1920-1963)*, trans. Gary E. Aylesworth (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 165.