



Jaspers' Thought
Its Meaning, Effect, Timeliness

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Abstract: Jaspers' thinking is motivated by transcending reason, radical time-consciousness, and the phenomenon of spiritual creativity and value-directedness. The fundamental question of truth for time-bound man is at the core of Jaspers' thinking, which he takes up with respect to mankind's age-old experience with the tradition of philosophical, religious, and literary thought. His works attain significance when historically diverse fundamental truths meet in communicative openness and tolerance. This pertains to Jaspers' history of philosophy, to political thought, the philosophy of religion, and his vision of a "world philosophy" no less than to his systematic works. Jaspers' influence can be measured by his world-wide appeal.

Three features of Karl Jaspers' thinking have to be kept in mind, without which his philosophy would be difficult to understand.¹

Transcending reason must be considered the first. It is a kind of thinking about a phenomenon or a state of things that asks how it is at all possible. As in the case of Kant's transcendental deduction, it is the opposite of deductive reasoning, namely a reverse reasoning to an indication or foundation of the possibility of something under consideration. Kant would say that it is a reverse deduction to the major premise of a syllogism (Kant: *Vernunftschluss*), which provides the foundation of the conclusion. Jaspers would rather characterize such

thinking as unifying or bonding, and basically as the motive of the One. The modalities of transcending reason are the fundamental theme of Jaspers' first main work, i.e., the three volumes of *Philosophy*.

The second is the theme of time; one can say that Jaspers' thinking is motivated by a *radical consciousness of time*. On the one hand, time refers to a person's own limited and limiting temporality, in which he takes the risk of choice, and which he offers up for the realization of whatever he recognizes as truth. Only in this way, i.e. in the proof of man's activity, does truth depart from timeless possibility and become historic. The being of truth through man's becoming in time, is the subject matter of what Jaspers means by *Existenz*, to wit: the venture of freedom; communication as the way to truth for time-bound man; man's situationality; and also his confrontation with the limits of what is possible for man; absolute consciousness, including the phenomenon of faith as absolute point of departure for man who, being temporal, is never at the absolute beginning. On the other hand, time also refers to

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thinking beyond the present: to the past, in that one finds oneself within an ongoing spiritual history that molds one's mind, through tradition, descent, association, memory; and to the future: obligation, legacy, responsibility, and again memory.

The third feature is the prevalence of the *phenomenon of spirit* in Jaspers' writings. The history of this phenomenon reaches far into pre-history and reverberates in Jaspers, from the biblical *ruah Elohim* (God's spirit at the beginning of Genesis), the Greek concepts of *nous* and the *logoi spermatikoi*, and the *spiritus sanctus*, to Hegel's apotheosis of the spirit, which, in its spatial-temporal exteriorization, returns to itself through the dialectical sequence of the stages of world history. Jaspers, like Hegel, shows that any idea through which spirit is articulated is more comprehensive than any human realization of it. However, Jaspers departs from Hegel's conceiving man and human history as instrument and arena of the spirit's realization in a spiral of successive stages, the later superseding the previous. For Hegel, the World Spirit is divine. Jaspers, for his part, regards spirit as a significant mode of being human. One can discern this in Jaspers' methodology of *Verstehen*; in his use of ideas as the principal philosophical language of metaphysics—in his sense and in distinction from tradition; and in his operation with "measure," a category characteristic of spirit. Whether with regard to political thought, or to contemporary or historical thinkers, with Jaspers the question of niveau, of intellectual or character caliber is ever present.

Transcending reason, radical time consciousness, spiritual measure: With these three features in mind we can approach the question of the meaning, the influence and the timeliness of Jaspers' thought.

Gadamer was one of the main participants at the observances in Heidelberg, Basel, and at the UNESCO (Paris) that were held on the occasion of Jaspers' hundredth birthday. Gadamer thought that Jaspers' philosophy was not a matter of something novel, but a matter of a new melody. Hans Saner, in his exemplary interpretations of Jaspers' history of philosophy, pointed to the novelty of Jaspers' six-fold approach to that history, and to the originality of several of these approaches.

Jaspers himself thought that novelty in philosophy occurred only once in 1000 years. Once I asked him where one might find him, some time in the future, in his scheme of *The Great Philosophers*. In his response he opined that greatness did not apply to him, and with

self-irony thought one might find him near the end of the scheme, among the professors of philosophy. (The theologians occupy last place).

Of course, some features of his philosophy can also easily be traced to predecessors; however, there is no need here to adduce examples.

All this leads to the question as to whether our understanding of Jaspers is reduced to a matter of judging his originality. A number of years ago I presented a paper about history and the idea of axial times. A colleague asked whether that idea is original with Jaspers. I responded that I had become aware of the remarkable historical simultaneity of the Buddha, Confucius, and the Jewish prophets when, as a 13-year old (1937), I received H. G. Wells' *World History* as a gift. Moreover, Jaspers consciously adopts Hegel's concept of an "axis of world history" with respect to that simultaneity; to him, however, it marks the decisive historical turn in the mode of thought to transcending reason. Therein consists Jaspers' originality, not in the formulation of the term.

Viewed from the perspective of Gadamer's remark, we are hard put to distinguish what in Jaspers' thinking is to be seen as unoriginal substance, and what as supposedly new melody.

We would miss the meaning of Jaspers' work if we merely pick out items that we evaluate with respect to specific topics, aspects or concepts, instead of viewing them from the purview of their coherence.

In this connection we note an aberration in the reception of Jaspers that arose when, after the Second World War and in the wake of Sartre's fame, Jaspers (and Kierkegaard) became known as well. It is a recurrent misconception that has to be countered again and again. One example: In the mid-eighties I presented a paper about Jaspers; I felt honored when the venerable Professor J. N. Findlay came to comment on my paper. Findlay was highly regarded for standing up to the destructive straying of the analysts. Hence I was taken aback when, with reference to Jaspers' *Philosophy*, he asserted that at that time Jaspers had been an "existentialist." How does one correct someone with the stature of Findlay? The only thing that came to mind at the spur of the moment was, "Jaspers on the left bank of the Seine? Dear Professor Findley, I must confess, I cannot visualize it and cannot respond." In fact, Jaspers' philosophy cannot be likened to existentialism. The latter neither recognizes nor accounts for phenomena that are essential for Jaspers' conception of Existenz, namely the transcendence-

relatedness of Existenz in its freedom; and absolute consciousness, i.e., love, faith, and spiritual creativity that flows out of the fullness of love and faith.

There is also the opinion abroad according to which the concept of Existenz was a mark of the early Jaspers, and that of Reason of the later period. This myth can easily be disproved simply by reading Jaspers. One of many possible examples: In the chapter "Existential Relations to Transcendence," in volume 3 of *Philosophy*, he discusses the opposites "Law of Day" vs. "Passion for Night."² According to Jaspers' subtle formulation, with the law of day, i.e. the light of reason, Existenz is at one with itself; but Existenz is removed from its integrity in the passion for night, i.e. in the darkness of human drives, in what is natural, in imponderable nature.

Near the beginning of my book *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, I report a memorable encounter in 1963. At that time Dr. Meyer, the director of cultural programming of the Basel Radio Studio, arranged for a festive program as homage to Jaspers on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Speakers from all over the world were invited, including Professor Masao Kusanagi from Tokyo.

The next day I had a chance meeting with Kusanagi at the Basel Art Museum, where we continued our conversation of the night before. We were standing in the hall in which panels of Konrad Witz's *Heilsspiegelaltar* (mirror-of-salvation altar from 1435) were displayed, in particular the two panels representing Ecclesia and Synagoga. Ecclesia is depicted as a lady at court, dressed in modest garb; seated, she offers the chalice with the host to Synagoga. Synagoga with her broken staff is depicted with crass invidiousness: According to the then current emblematic, the open and loose hair, the ear fully exposed, the loose yellow gown, suggest whorishness.

In the course of our conversation I asked Kusanagi what there is in Jaspers that captivated the Japanese philosophers. He said, the idea of the Encompassing. The striking contrast of Kusanagi's response to the fatal intolerance speaking from the imagery of those two panels gave me pause.

I found it marvelous that a decidedly Western thinker's idea, engendered by his reflection on the experience of the tradition in which he is firmly rooted, should strike a familiar chord in a thinker similarly confirmed in a wholly different and equally profound tradition. [It became clear to me that] Jaspers' interpretation of his tradition as offering a bridge between visions of truth, affirmed in their diversity in virtue of the insight that truth in its absolute unity is transcendent [and, as it were, encompasses that diversity] has borne fruit.³

Moreover, the encounter showed me that the effect of Jaspers' idea of the encompassing transcends the boundaries of nation and tradition.

From the beginning Jaspers' thought aimed at the unfolding of the idea that Being and the modes of Being have to be thought as encompassing. I mention a few of the decisive marks: the methodological pluralism of his *General Psychopathology*; the surrender of the realm of objective cognition to the sciences, especially the natural sciences; connected with this is the significance of symbols as "ciphers of transcendence"; finally, the phenomenology of existential temporality as basis for a post-metaphysical renewal of the age-old fundamental philosophy. The Encompassing is the idea that whatever is of ultimate import to the being in time transcends time; symbolically speaking, it is the horizon within which men of different fundamental orientation meet.

Other ideas that are typical for Jaspers are tied to the idea of the Encompassing. First to be mentioned is the idea of *world-philosophy*, which, as idea, is neither a project nor definable. Instead, world-philosophy is the idea of openness for future communication among modes of fundamental thought that do not originate only in Western traditions. For Jaspers, this idea is connected with the end of Western philosophy as the absolute standard of philosophic thought. This does not mean, and it would be a gross misunderstanding to think that, by envisaging this idea, Jaspers can be regarded, much less regarded himself, as a world-philosopher. On the contrary, Jaspers is consciously and decidedly a man of the West, moreover a German (of Friesian descent). Thus Paul Ricoeur misunderstood Jaspers' related idea, namely the idea that expressions about transcendence, in particular about God, are to be

² German: *Gesetz des Tages* and *Leidenschaft zur Nacht*. In Ashton's incorrect translation: "Diurnal Law" vs. "Nocturnal Passion," Ashton, as well as the translator of the French edition, miss the subtlety of Jaspers' formulation, and, instead of "passion for night," they speak, without embarrassment, of "passion of the night."

³ See my *Karl Jaspers: Philosophy as Faith*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press 1975, p. 10.

understood as ciphers. Ricoeur understood this to mean that Jaspers would be a theological Don Juan: serve this God today, tomorrow an other one.

The idea of "ciphers of transcendence" has, in fact, aroused opposition especially among philosophers of religion. Martin Buber thought that where there are ciphers there had to be a decipherer. The Swiss theologian Fritz Buri thought that the Encompassing, together with the idea of the language of ciphers, constituted a Trojan horse planted in doctrinal theology. Jaspers' response to this accusation was not to contradict it, for the questions that Jaspers poses to the believer in revealed faith are: Is it necessary for the certitude of my fundamental faith that the other believe likewise? Does, what is absolutely valid for me, have to be absolutely valid for the other? Or is it possible for me to gather the strength from the sources of my own faith to accept—not the faith of the other—but the validity of the other in his other faith? The reason is that God in His absoluteness absolutely transcends what is absolutely valid for men in their temporality as well as within human historicity. Jaspers thought that in view of the God who is near he cannot forget the far God, who alone is absolutely One.

Related to this is the idea of a general fundamental knowledge, and, connected with it, the idea of a philosophic faith. A young German colleague declared in a paper he delivered at the international Jaspers conference in Istanbul (2003): "[let's have] more political philosophy and less philosophic faith." One cannot but wonder: Didn't the speaker read the basic principles of the new German constitution on which the whole document (*Grundgesetz* = Basic Law) is founded, the principle of the dignity of every single human being? What is this other than philosophic faith? And how can one confront the fundamentalism of our days without awareness that there is something ultimate that human beings take seriously, and, as the case may be, without there being something that is a matter of fundamental seriousness to oneself?

Another related idea is the *idea of the renewal of reason*, reason being the concept definitive of Jaspers' idea of the axial era, an idea that had repercussions in the literature. However, as Jaspers himself reports, it was Hegel who originated the idea of the axis of world history, who saw the great turn in history in the event of the divine spirit become man. However, the idea is treated quite differently in Jaspers. His concept of "axial times" fascinated writers more than any other, even those authors who had not read Jaspers. Yet those who

refer to Jaspers tend to miss what plays a decisive role in Jaspers' conception. For example, the author of a recent book bases herself on Jaspers, and claims that he sees the significance of those times in the rise of the religions of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism, while aside from these developments there arose the critical-logical thinking among the Greeks. However, in her primary concern over religion, the author departs from Jaspers' intent. For Jaspers points out that, with reference to those times, it is hardly possible to differentiate between religion, myth, and philosophically relevant thought—neither among the enlightened Greeks, nor the proclamatory prophets of the Jews, nor the Buddha's disciples who experienced his enlightenment.

Let us look at what Jaspers' axial time is really about. It is about a radical turn in thinking, one that is not reversible, which, with respect to both, religion and philosophy (as they are usually distinguished), marks a decisive step in the mode of thinking. It is the step from the merely intuitable thinking of the "understanding" that tends to lose itself in the endless multiplicity of what there is to understand, to a mode of thinking that rises above that intuitability and multiplicity so as to fathom its ground and meaningfully orient oneself. It is the motive of reason that orients itself by the transcendent connection of the immanent and is at play in the dualism of Zoroaster, as well as in the platonic idea of the Good, and the demanding one and only God of the Jews. With the breakthrough of reason into human thought, with its distance from what is intuitively understandable, there arose a sense of the non-literal and figurative use of what is understandable, in the form of myth, or metaphor, or symbol. In Jaspers this is reflected in his conceding the entire realms of what is objectively knowable to the sciences, while denying objectivity to the metaphysical and regarding it as symbolism or mythology, or at best as existentially effective cipher of transcendence. Thus Jaspers was able to criticize the theologian Bultmann by pointing out that, by means of his program of selective demythologizing, the substance and the effective meaning of the New Testament get lost. The imagery of myth has an irreplaceable power of its own.

It is the breakthrough of reason—of transcending reason that seeks to ascend to unity—and only reason that is at play in Jaspers' idea of the axial times. And Jaspers offers this idea not only in order to do philosophy of history, but to ask, with a view toward that ancient great turn of thought, whether we can

discern anything in it that speaks to us in our present situation. It is our problematic situation that is addressed, with its enormous and frightful dangers, which, fed by the constant increase in technological progress and in the encounter amongst peoples, results in a world that, for all of them, has once and for all become, as Jaspers said, *one* world, moreover a world of peoples of various and, yes, conflicting faith-convictions. Do freedom and peace have a chance in such a world? Jaspers does not mean that our situation calls for a renewal of axial times, because that situation is not ours. Does he mean a new axial era? No. Jaspers was rebellious, at times also provocative. But he was neither a revolutionary nor a utopian, and his sobriety could irritate younger minds. Thoughtful but not hesitant, Jaspers meant that the times call for a renewal of reason, yet deliberately in a new mode, namely that of what he understands by "communication." It is questionable whether and how far in the encounter of conflicting interests or revealed faiths an exchange may be possible that is mutually open, honest, with no reservations or limits. Jaspers is fully aware that in diplomatic relations the idea of communicative reason functions at best as an ideal. He is also aware that any chance of politics in our situation, that is conducted in the mode of communication, will most likely hit a wall of pragmatic considerations or intolerance. And he knows that one has to be prepared to defend oneself in the face of militant intolerance. He was one of the first, at least among philosophers who, in view of the rising cold war atomic rearmament in the early 1950s, took up the thorny problem of "better red than dead."

Now the question is: How does Jaspers address the concerns of our time through his reception of the perennial philosophy—whose concern is reason? I illustrate this with respect to his elaborate conception of the history of philosophy.

Jaspers published in part only one of the six schemes of the world history of philosophy that he had projected. It is the scheme of "The Great Philosophers." He conceived this scheme in distinction from the usual kinds of histories of philosophy. Even though such histories are pedagogically useful, he leaves these aside. The reason is that accounts of the historical development of problems, schools, traditions and types of thought fail to address the fact that it is human concerns and experiences that motivate thought. Jaspers also thought it inappropriate to approach a thinker from the perspective of historicism, i.e., purely as a representative of his times, without considering

that he may have thought against his times or perhaps beyond all time. Instead, the thought edifice of every philosopher is to be regarded as a unique testimony of a possible human view of Being, especially each philosopher to whom greatness in Jaspers' sense may be attributed, though ultimate truth escapes even these. Hans Saner relates that, even as he lay dying, Jaspers maintained that philosophers had never understood each other. Yet Jaspers knows that the creation of the thought edifice of a philosopher takes place within the scope of a critical dialogue that extends over the ages; for what is at play in philosophic thought is itself an encompassing within which that dialogue takes place. Other than in world religions, for the one who philosophizes the ultimate truth is not present in the embodiment of an authority to whom one defers.

What is at play in Jaspers' novel way of doing history of philosophy can be seen in the grouping of the "great philosophers." Two marks must be noted: First, the characteristics by which the main groups as well as the respective sub-groups are distinguished; secondly, occasionally also the sequence of groups.

Both marks are involved in the differentiation of the three main groups. These are: (1) the measures of mankind (*die massgebenden Menschen*); (2) the great thinkers, i.e., the philosophers in the usual sense; (3) persons who bring philosophical thought to bear on various areas of practice. Thus, for Jaspers even the most prominent among the philosophers stand at second place, after the four whom Jaspers identifies as the measures of mankind. Among these, Socrates can surely be considered a philosopher, possibly also Confucius, hardly the Buddha, and Jesus not at all. However, in Jaspers' scheme these four do not function as philosophers, but as human beings who, in Jaspers' words, through their personality and their presence influenced the history of mankind as no others.

Through the example of these men, who have actually lived and for millennia been esteemed and valued by untold myriads of people, can better function as measures of what man can and ought to be than the highest ideals thought by philosophers. Thus Jaspers also shows that the human actuality in which these four lived their exemplary lives is the authentic alpha and omega of philosophy, i.e. the point of departure for any philosophical reflection that is not merely a thought game but the point at which the vision of possible truth becomes historic in the proof of man's realization or else reveals itself as illusory. In Jaspers' selection of the measures of mankind it is not enough for the influence

of a historic person to have been durable and extensive; for Jaspers the other indispensable criterion of such greatness is the question of spiritual caliber.

The intertwining of the actualities of human lives and earnest philosophic thought that is expressed by the relation between the first and the second main group, also prevails in the relation between the second and third main group. Here, however, the sequence does not signify a difference in rank. After all, the greatness of Shakespeare, Galileo, or St. Paul (who appear in the third main group) is not less than that of Hume or Lessing or Origin, whom Jaspers considers among the philosophers.

Jaspers presents a subtly ramified typology of the second main group, that of the philosophers proper. It would be prolix to go into details here; but we need to point out that Jaspers' fourfold grouping of philosophers is not to be taken as a strict distinction, since perhaps every philosopher was also thinking along lines of thought characteristic of the groupings other than the one in which Jaspers places him. As Jaspers points out, philosophizing means entering the encompassing plenum of what is thinkable, and thereby participating, each within his own temporality, in the dialogue that extends over the ages. In this way Jaspers' scheme of four basic types of philosophizing is to be understood as being integrally circular: from seminal founders of philosophizing, to the many modes of magnificent metaphysical visions, to the negating types of critics, skeptics and disturbers, and finally to those who unite all that—the pro and the contra—systematically, as, for example, Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*. Parallel to his scheme of "the great philosophers," Jaspers projected a scheme of modes of truth for man in his temporality. In his second main work, *Von der Wahrheit*, he offers, among others, a phenomenology of the "breakthrough of truth," as for example in the case of prophecy, revelation, or revolution. The suggestion obtrudes itself that the circle might be closed in a step from the conclusive system to the breakthrough to a new foundation of philosophizing.

Here we venture again to pose the question, where does Jaspers belong in this scheme? As far as I can see, the path taken by Jaspers in order to unfold his thought edifice—which was never concluded, and by its nature defies conclusion—was straightforward, as he himself attests in his "Philosophical Autobiography." His thinking did not proceed by fits and starts, or in phases (least of all from an Existenz-phase to a reason-phase).

Instead, his thinking was open but integral. In his scheme of great philosophers he identified a subgroup among the critics, whose mark is their awareness of and concern over the problems specific to modernity, namely the sense of lostness of the free individual, and concomitantly the increasing loss of faith as well as the fading of credible and valid authorities, especially the failure of religion and of philosophy. Although Jaspers does not share the convictions of any of the four thinkers of this subgroup—neither Lessing nor Kierkegaard, and not at all Pascal or Nietzsche—he felt himself addressed and motivated by their concerns, and impelled to found philosophizing in a manner that is responsive to the exigencies of the times.

In the face of the confusion of schools of thought; of the preoccupation with the chaos of small problems without regard to connections, contexts, much less to unity; of the failure to tackle the burning problems of the times; of the aberrant and misplaced reliance on methods of scientific research; in the face of all this and more, I believe that Jaspers considered it to be the task of philosophizing fundamentally to renew the age-old question of the truth of Being. In this sense one could regard Jaspers as a "founder of philosophizing," even though he viewed his own philosophy as nothing other than a personal confession. Whether his thought edifice is seminal, can be judged only after generations. From the perspective of the present situation one can only say that mankind is in need of the seminal effect of a philosophizing such as his.

All the benefit that a thoughtful person derives from tradition, education and experience, is mere possibility. What counts, according to Jaspers, is proof in the actuality of time. In the last analysis this means the present, what Franz Rosenzweig so tellingly called *die zeitlichste Zeit*, i.e., the time that is most truly "time."

Upon the invitation of Dr. Meier, Jaspers presented in the year 1949/1950 a series of weekly radio talks at the Basel Broadcasting Studio for the general listener. (An English translation of the series appeared under the title *Way to Wisdom*). He ended the last of the lectures with the call that the moment could be everything, that we would miss Being if we did not take hold of the moment, for what counts in our temporal being is *Gegenwärtigkeit*, to be decisively and actively there at the present moment.