

## **Karl Jaspers: Unbounded communication as a philosophy of values**

*“Human reason calls for boundless communication; it is itself the comprehensive will to communicate.”*

(Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube* (1948), Munich 1954, p. 38)

“Like others, Karl Jaspers, who was born in Oldenburg in 1883 and died in Basel in 1969, developed his philosophy under the impact of the crises of the times between the World Wars, the rise and fall of National Socialism, and the emerging threat of atomic destruction during the Cold War of the 1950’s. He began his career in 1916 as extraordinary professor for psychology in Heidelberg. As a physician and psychiatrist, he published important books. [...] In 1920, as an autodidact, he increasingly turned to philosophy, and in 1922 he was named ordinary professor of philosophy in Heidelberg. During the Nazi period, he suffered persecution, especially under the massive threats to his wife, who was of Jewish descent. In 1937, he was expelled from the university; in 1938, he was forbidden to publish. [...] After the War, in 1948, he was called to a professorship in Basel. Though he had left Germany, he often intervened, especially in his later years, in the political discussions of the post-war German Republic.

With Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers was one of the two most important German representatives of Existentialism. Like Gabriel Marcel, he sought a religious grounding for philosophy. For Marcel, it was the lack of religious faith in modern times that was responsible for people finding life meaningless, for their increasing loss of ethical orientation, and for their susceptibility for atheistic ideologies. Jaspers, in the 1940’s, wrote particularly against Sartre’s atheism: ‘The conditions of the age of technology are conducive to the outbreak of a nihilistic potential in a population reduced to masses. [...] Today the world is fascinated by a way of doing philosophy that looks for truth in Nihilism and calls forth a bizarre form of heroic existence without comfort and without hope, affirming hardness and mercilessness in a purely this-worldly Humanism.’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Munich 1949, p. 168.

Karl Jaspers sought ways to overcome the nihilistic crisis of the Western World. His philosophy ranges from the question of individual existence to the quest for an all-encompassing philosophy of the world. His thinking poses the fundamental question: how can one confront the major ideological conflicts in such a way as to prevent the self-destruction of mankind? How can one learn to live together under extremely threatening conditions?"<sup>2</sup>

"Jaspers speaks out against a long line of philosophical tradition. Rationality does not take its origin in the interiority of the individual person. A person does not gain the truth by means of an internal monologue in which his reason alone decides what is true and what is false. Rationality demands discussion with other persons; it needs communication – a central theme in Jaspers' philosophy. Communication needs both truth and freedom. Communication can only decide what the truth is, when those involved in it are free to act according to their own way of thinking. Freedom, however, does not mean the blind arbitrariness of the individual that allows him to pursue things or give them up however it pleases him. On the contrary, freedom rests on reason and insight, precisely as they take form in communication. 'Freedom becomes real only in community. I can only be free to the extent that the others are also free.'<sup>3</sup>"<sup>4</sup>

"With his program of boundless communication on the basis of philosophical faith, Jaspers does not only respond to the changed existential living conditions of human beings in modern industrial society. He also responds to the political signs of decay in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to the dangers latent in international politics in the face of atomic threat, and to the difficult path to democracy in post-Nazi Germany. The recourse to a philosophical faith is intended to stabilize the ordering structures politically and socially."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 136f.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, Munich 1949, p. 196.

<sup>4</sup> Hans-Martin Schönherr-Mann, *Weltethos in philosophischer Perspektive*, Munich 2008, p. 141f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.