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Ethical experience and the idea of politics in Karl Jaspers

In many authors, the relation between ethics and politics or, more precisely, between moral and political philosophy, represents a continuum. This may be confirmed by researching the legacies of the most prestigious philosophers. In many of them, the fundamental building blocks supporting the postulates of their so-called practical philosophy provide the springboard that drives the subsequent political and communitarian reflection forward. Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel are paradigmatic in this respect. But what occurs with those thinkers in which a systematic ethics is difficult to identify? How can we sketch a fundamental ethical reflection scheme that might subsequently allow us to trace their political conception?

Karl Jaspers' work hardly allows for an elaborate ethical system, if by such we were to imply a unified and cartographic reflection on components intended to serve as guides for practical life. Now, it is equally true that in Jaspers there is no systematic ethical reflection as such, and that his entire philosophy may be considered an ethical reflection on existence¹, in the sense that it conjugates the fundamental dialectic between finitude and absolute interpellation that is transversally displayed in his metaphysical, scientific and anthropological considerations, which obviously include the political dimension.

In this article we want to trace two main concepts that function as vectors, indeed, almost as regulatory ideas, of Jaspers' political reflection: freedom and authority². Thus, we not only intend to approach two of the

* The first parts of this paper have been published before in: SEGURÓ, M.: *Alienació i llibertat en temps convulsos*, in: *Qüestions de vida cristiana* (2018), and SEGURÓ, M.: *Europa, una xifra ètico-política (Karl Jaspers)*, in: *Anuari de la Societat Catalana de Filosofia XXX* (2019) [translation by Cristina Basili and Federico Corriente].

¹ HAYASHIDA, S.: The Ethical Significance of Jaspers' Philosophy, in: WISSEN, R./EHRLICH, L.H. (Hgg.): *Karl Jaspers*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 1993, 235; DUFRENNE, M./RICCEUR, P.: *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l'existence*. Paris: Seuil 1947, 210.

² These two concepts were, in fact, also fundamental for Hannah Arendt in her book: *Between Past and Future* (1961), in which she asked: *What is Authority?* and *What is Freedom?* in two of the eight chapters that conform the book.

Hannah Arendt wrote her PhD dissertation on the concept of love in Augustine of Hippo under the supervision of Jaspers. Henceforth began a relationship based on mutual respect and philosophical influence. The extensive correspondence between Arendt and Jaspers bears witness to it and perhaps to this thematic confluence too.

central components that articulate his socio-political reflection³, but we intend to divine what might constitute the nucleus of the ethical experience for Karl Jaspers as well. In order to do so, we will turn to the author's major and minor works, which his critical reflection on the idea of Europe also pertains to. In so doing, we not only wish to conceptually delimit his proposition, but also to echo one of his maxims: if philosophy tends toward the universal, it always remains historical nonetheless. A final critical section will bring the itinerary proposed here to a close.

FREEDOM AND EXISTENCE

Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) was one of the most transversal and versatile thinkers of the previous century. His life⁴ provides us with enough evidence to understand that for him the issue of freedom was no theoretical matter. On the contrary, it was an anthropological possibility with profound ontological and political implications. The question of freedom, as he says in the second volume of his great work *Philosophie* (1932), originates in oneself, from what one wishes it to be⁵. That is why phenomena such as the execrable Nazi death camps are episodes that must be confronted in all their gravity and understood for what they are: an amendment to the totality of the mere possibility of being human.

To ask oneself about freedom is, therefore, to confront the possibility that it might cease to exist and, therefore, that man may lose himself. This is what Jaspers warned against in his 1949 book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*⁶. There is no need to get melodramatic, he says, but nonetheless, man can only face his future by struggling against the adverse possibilities taking place in the very world in which he intends to realize himself, because he himself is the source of his own salvation or condemnation. Oblivion is the worst way to revert a bad experience or a wrong, which is why freedom is not an automatic, pre-established task. Freedom is also anguish, because anguish „*ist ein Grund zur Hoffnung*“⁷.

³ LANGNER, A.: *Philosophie und Politik bei Karl Jaspers*, in: *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 10 (1969), states: „*Jasper's Philosophie umgreift, wie schon angedeutet, eine geschlossene politische Theorie*“ (279) in the sense that his philosophy has direct implications for conceptual ideas, political praxis and communitarian life. In fact, the article offers a reconstruction of his political thought that emphasizes the connection of his thinking to the political and social events of his time, specifically to the post-war contradictions of the German Federal Republic.

⁴ To this day, the most thorough biography remains the one authored by KIRKBRIGHT, S.: *Karl Jaspers: A Biography – Navigations in Truth*. London: Yale University Press 2004.

⁵ „Die Frage, ob sie sei, hat ihren Ursprung in mir selbst, der ich will, dass sie sei“ (JASPER, K.: *Philosophie II. Existenzherhellung*. Berlin: Springer 1973, 175).

⁶ JASPER, K.: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei 1955, 143.

⁷ JASPER: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 147.

If we move on to the sphere of politics, where the issue of freedom tends to dominate the majority of debates, the pattern repeats itself. Freedom of expression, freedom to vote, personal liberties, social liberties, national liberties, historical liberties... as we are accustomed to hear in the course of parliamentary or press debates, refer to a possibility. But have we clarified what freedom means in the sphere of politics? In general, we might say: not a great deal, despite the fact that we accept and presume that freedom must mean something relative to participation in the decisions of the totality, as Jaspers says. In other words, it is eminently the capacity—or rather the right to exercise the capacity—to influence the decisions of the totality.

This, which seems so obvious, is, however, a specifically Western concept of political freedom, along with which we accept and take for granted a series of first-level assumptions that are in no way as spontaneously taken for granted elsewhere, for example, the fact that everyone has the right to vote in order that we may all have a say in regarding to what concerns us, or that everyone has the right to express their point of view because nothing could be less democratic than the imposition of someone's particular opinion. Freedom always develops in context: it is historical⁸.

Jaspers repeatedly emphasizes that freedom, as a political concept, is a Western attainment. And it is important to do so, because this has direct implications for its clarification. Freedom, as we (pre)suppose it, is linked to the notion of autonomy, so central to the tradition of the Enlightenment⁹. That is why freedom can only be such if one accepts that it must prevail as „*das eigentliche Sein und Tun des Menschen*“¹⁰. Jaspers emphasizes this not just as a historical fact, but also as an inherent aspect of our anthropological experience of freedom. Hence the double nature of freedom: it is both historical and endowed with a trans-historical outlook. Hence not all freedoms are valid, because freedom does not mean doing whatever one wants in the absolute sense of the word. Freedom is only such when one questions its authenticity, its demand for realization, and there are no pre-established recipes or general recommendations valid for all. Freedom is anguish, as we said before, because it begs questions concerning true interiority, the overcoming of arbitrariness, the openness to the community, the dialectic between opinions, the consciousness of one's own existence, fallibility and openness to that which always transcends it.

⁸ JASPERS: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 149.

⁹ On the genesis of the concept of autonomy, see SCHNEEWIND, J.B.: *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press 1998.

¹⁰ JASPERS: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 150.

The political freedom Jaspers proposes is directly rooted in such a constitutive vision of freedom, ethical freedom¹¹. The community can only be free if each of its members can cultivate their own freedom, their own path to authenticity¹². Jaspers insists to the highest degree on this point, because for him individual freedom presupposes otherness. There can be no development of one's own freedom without communication, without the true exchange of inner, intimate and truthful experiences. The path of solipsism is as false as that of communitarianism. There are two poles which are impossible without one another, the individual and the group, and both must be coordinated with the other. This is why only democracy guarantees the possibility of a project of freedoms, given that it presupposes the need for dialogue (as a „community of reasonable beings“¹³), the possibility of disagreements regarding the ideals of the projects of community (political parties) and securing a common sphere for political interaction (that is to say, the separation of politics and worldview, the aforementioned *Weltanschauung*¹⁴).

Freedom must not be employed to destroy freedom, either one's own or that of others, which is why education is a key aspect for the management of both poles, our own freedom and that of our fellows, and thus implies the acceptance of the inevitable frustration entailed by the realization of

¹¹ Freedom, ethical experience and Politics are related each other in Jaspers's thought. Ethics without Politics is not possible, and Politics without an existential consideration on Ethics neither (Cfr. TARMANN, Paul R.: *Ethik in Freiheit: Zur Grundlegung politischen Denkens bei Karl Jaspers*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang 2016).

¹² Especially relevant is Jaspers' opposition to the idea of 'mass'. In *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (1931) is critical in relation to the inauthenticity that it represents. The spiritual situation is given by the relationship that single and communicative *Dasein* maintained with the radicalism itself (authenticity) with the possible freedom and its communication with another possible freedom.

As Elena Alessiato highlights, the intimate relationship between this work and his major work, *Philosophie* (1932) is direct. And both published before to 1933, that is important to take into account: „Il rapporto tra le due opere è di reciproca chiarificazione: da una parte *La situazione spirituale del tempo* rappresenta un caso esemplare della riflessione filosofica jaspersiana, in quanto contiene la stessa terminologia, gli appelli, le contrapposizioni che caratterizzano la summa speculativa del 1932, dall'altra mostra come gli strumenti concettuali di tal filosofia possano essere applicati all'analisi del presente“ (Considerazioni critiche su *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, in: *Studi Jaspersiani. Rivista annuale della Società Italiana Karl Jaspers I* [2013], 327).

¹³ „Gemeinschaft der Vernünftigen“, writes A. Langner (LANGNER: *Philosophie und Politik bei Karl Jaspers*, 283) as a precondition (*Vorbedingung*) of any political community, particularly the democratic community.

„Für die Politik ist die Vernunft wesentlich“ JASPER highlights in: *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen* (Munich: Pieper Verlag 1982², 301). A reasonableness that incorporates as further we will see the communicative dimension in all its aspects: community (Gemeinschaft), social (Gesellschaft) and, today we could say, global (Organization der Welt) (*Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, 303–318). In this important and central work he introduces the notion of *Überpolitische* as an important matter in the reflection on Politics.

¹⁴ JASPER: *Vom Urprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 159.

the collective project. Freedom always involves costs, which is why we must accept that the desire for freedom cannot be fully realized. The milestone transcends the world's possibilities, but nonetheless, for Jaspers, we mustn't fail to carry the realization of the ideals of the projects of freedom as far as possible. In fact, the characteristic feature of a free State is its faith in freedom.

At this stage, however, it is advisable to caution that the only thing we do as existing beings is to bring to light, to free from the darkness, the great mystery of the being we represent. That is why Jaspers does not claim (neither did Kant in his day) to bring the issue of the "essence" of freedom to conclusion: „Wissen wir nun nach solchen Erörterungen, was Freiheit ist? Nein. Aber das liegt am Wesen der Freiheit“¹⁵. Freedom, as we have already pointed out, has to do with our own openness and willingness to direct it towards that which transcends it, towards that which Jaspers calls Transcendence¹⁶.

AUTHORITY AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VECTOR

For Jaspers, Transcendence is being¹⁷. That is why true Transcendence is beyond any system and any reduction to categories. The only way to refer to it is by means of a hermeneutical dialectic originating in its manifestations, *ciphers*. Ciphers, or figures, are symbols, and it is through their recognition or *reading* (*Lesen der Chiffreschrift*) that metaphysics can understand myths, art and poetry as metaphorical revelations of Transcendence.

The Jaspersian concept of authority also pertains to this dialectical framework. On the one hand, in order to freely develop our freedom, we need authority as a reference; this is an anthropological necessity. On the other hand, no one can represent this authority in a completely satisfactory manner.

Given that each individual constructs his own universe of figures through existential communication with the fellow citizens, there is no such thing as a unique and universally valid worldview. What fundamentally unites each person with everyone else is the quest, the need to construct a world in which to develop their sense of self. That is why,

¹⁵ JASPERS: *Vom Urprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, 153.

¹⁶ Jaspers is the philosopher of Transcendence, but we would not grasp the meaning he ascribes to this term if we were to take it to mean that it refers to God or divinity in general. Transcendence is essentially indefinable and every name, form or metaphor we might apply to it will fall into the figure playing of human language, as Jaspers tried to specify.

In our *Sendas de finitud. Analogía y diferencia* (Barcelona: Herder 2015) we dedicate a chapter to the issue of Transcendence and its complex status regarding the critiques that Jaspers deploys against mystical experience.

¹⁷ „Das eigentliche Sein ist die Transzendenz“ writes JASPERS in: *Der philosophische Glaube*. Frankfurt: Fischer Bücherei 1958, 30.

according to Jaspers, we can only discover our own world through genuine dialogue (i.e., communication). This is an infinite process in which the individual's life experience and openness to otherness circularly feed into each other on the transversal path towards the enlightenment of existence. Therefore, just as an isolated individual cannot develop his existence, because to exist is to emerge out of oneself and to reach towards others and towards that which transcends us, neither is it possible to live a communal life devoid of otherness, devoid of authority¹⁸.

The crucial question for Jaspers is: how can the contemporary world—and the Western world in particular—develop a project of individual freedom within the framework of a legitimate and universal authority? The requisite is precisely to go beyond the particular authority of any single group or worldview¹⁹. If freedom requires authority in order to develop and to avoid turning into arbitrariness, likewise, substantial authority can only exist when it is actually united with freedom²⁰; therefore, the need for universality presents itself as the necessary correlate of both experiences.

This echoes the logic of the Kantian imperative (Kant was a referent for Jaspers²¹) and thus is more ideal than real²². The ideal unity of freedom and authority doesn't last long, and fratricidal struggle never ceases (indeed, this is one of the explanations of history and its avatars). Both wish to assert their independence from each other. The desire of authority as power destroys freedom, and freedom conceived as arbitrariness denies

¹⁸ This conviction was repeated several times in his works. For example, in the one cited *Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, where he writes: „Freiheit ist unablässbar von Autorität“ (297).

Jaspers devoted as well the first pages of his last major systematic work, *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, (1962), to the question of authority. We shall refer to them here: „in Gemeinschaft aber ist er nie ohne eine verbindende Autorität“ (*Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*. Munich: Piper V. 1962, 64).

¹⁹ JASPERS: *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 69.

²⁰ JASPERS: *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 71.

²¹ ARENDT, Hannah: *Karl Jaspers. Citizen of the World?*, in: *Men in Dark Times*. New York: Harcourt Brace & Company 2011, 170.

²² Elena Alessiato has researched in the relationship between ethics and politics in Jaspers, and argues: „La matrice kantiana del pensiero e del metodo di Jaspers è evidente nel fatto che il suo interrogare verte sulle tre idee della ragione trattate da Kant nella «Dialetica» della Critica della ragion pura, ossia il mondo, l'anima (l'uomo), Dio“ (*Karl Jaspers e la politica*. Naples: Orthotes Ed. 2012, 77). And from this framework she concludes regarding the ethico-political jaspersian consideration: „Karl Jaspers mostra di completare Max Weber con Immanuel Kant: il realismo della forza del primo insieme con l'idealità etica del secondo [...] Dall'elaborazione e dall'integrazione di questi spunti risulta, tipica di Jaspers, una filosofia di connotazione esistenzialistica e di forte valenza morale, la quale si propone di fondare una politica che trova nell'uomo il proprio limite e il proprio valore“ (ALESSIATO: *Karl Jaspers e la politica*, 234–235).

See as well: THORNHILL, Chris: *Karl Jaspers. Politics and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge 2002), the chapter 2, entitled: Jaspers and Kant: The Ideas of Existence.

authority its very possibility of existing. In persisting in their respective absolutisms, each of them self-destructs²³.

If freedom revolves around existence opening up to itself and listening to that which transcends it, authority can only be understood when approached in an analogous fashion, i.e., problematically. Authority cannot be the will of a particular. Authority encompasses, and therefore binds, specific freedoms to its own destiny. That is why a prevailing authority is the union of spontaneity and power; it is oriented not towards a particular end but towards a total one, in such a way that it is dependent on and linked to the freedoms it preserves²⁴. Its openness is what prevents it from it, and for this same reason it can never consider itself fully established.

Thus we see that the dynamic relation between authority and freedom entails the existence of a never-ending and constant tension between them. And just as freedom will always question authority, the latter will always channel and redirect arbitrary excesses of freedom. Both will do so in the name of universality and the necessity of transcending particularity. Therefore, the heart of the matter does not revolve around which one of them comes out on top, but around the capacity of each of them to accept the intrinsic need for the other, because both of them can be understood only in relation to Transcendence.

In 1951, Jaspers stated this with utmost clarity in a conference titled 'Freiheit und Autorität'. Shortly after the introduction, we come across the statement that the origin of authority's power resides in Transcendence²⁵. Therefore, beyond the specific historical forms it adopts, authority's ultimate foundation lies in that which by definition saturates all concrete and temporal logics, in an unconditioned (*unbedingt*) source²⁶.

That is why freedom and authority pertain to each other for Jaspers. The risk of authority turning into authoritarianism materializes when they ignore their mutually shared reference to Transcendence and the wish to incline the balance in their favor ends up in terror, the phenomenon which blends and confuses power and violence with each other.

²³ JASPERS: *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 72.

²⁴ JASPERS: *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 88.

²⁵ *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*. Munich: Pieper, 1958, 44. He writes: „Der Ursprung aber dieser zusammenhaltenden Autorität ist die Transzendenz [...], das gründet die Kraft der Autorität“. Previously, in his work *Von der Wahrheit* (1947), Jaspers dedicates a paragraph (third paragraph, point 2, section 2) to the question of authority and the tensions that it implies for existential and personal experience, topics recovered in this conference. In *Von der Wahrheit* he links authority directly to the pretension to truth. „In der Autorität ergreife ich Wahrheit“, he states (JASPERS, K.: *Von der Wahrheit*. Munich: Piper V. 1947, 784).

²⁶ JASPERS: *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*, 50.

The true problem of authority lies not so much in its conceptual structure, given that, according to Jaspers, freedom is first found in authority²⁷, but precisely in the fact that it must adopt specific temporal forms that have to come to terms with two premises: first, that authority cannot succeed without freedom, and second, that it can never succeed in a satisfactory way.

Thus emerges a transversal aspect; authority, like freedom, unfolds in the world on the basis of its mutability and plurality, through historical²⁸, temporal and relative events that are also diachronic. Authority adopts many, sometimes contradictory, forms in the world. However, these forms exist now, and cease to be tomorrow; they are figures that give way to other forms of authority. Authority is an open reality, in perpetual *dynamis*, always attentive to otherness. Just as freedom requires communication with others in order to realize itself, the forms of authority must also constitute themselves on the foundation of this mutually communicative dynamic²⁹.

With this in mind, and precisely in order to avoid totalitarian situations, Jaspers points out that the form of political authority must always promote a culture that embraces the tension between the ideal and the real, so as to uphold the ideal without renouncing it. Therefore, or precisely as the result of this, we may demand an intentional politics, a politics referred to a context, to a concrete development, to a history, while always keeping in mind that, first and foremost, politics must be concerned with allowing the diversity of freedoms to coexist in an atmosphere of authentic communication, hence the necessary separation of politics and beliefs or ideals³⁰.

Since man inhabits two spheres, the individual or private sphere, and the communitarian or social sphere, his constitution is polarized. And since this dynamic can never be fully settled, politics, as the very condition of its possibility, must ensure that the tensions that may arise within a community follow the path of harmony and respect, and this can only be achieved if the search to secure plurality is placed first and foremost.

EUROPE, ETHICAL-POLITICAL FIGURE

To oppose freedom, as a synonym of authenticity, to authority, as equivalent to alienation, is to falsify reality. There is inauthentic freedom as

²⁷ „[...] sondern sich erst findet in der Autorität“ (JASPERS: *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*, 55).

²⁸ JASPERS: *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*, 56.

²⁹ „[...] in Kommunikation zu anderer Autorität“ (JASPERS: *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*, 58).

³⁰ JASPERS: *Freiheit und Autorität*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie und die Welt. Reden und Aufsätze*, 60.

well as inauthentic authority. And in particularly troubled times it is capital not to forget that both can be falsified.

The essential meaning of political freedom is to be found in existence: political freedom becomes insubstantial when it is not linked to the boundless freedom of humanity as such. This is why the State must never place itself before the individual: freedom lies only where inner freedom grows³¹. If we were to crystallize this general nature of political freedom into a series of actual characteristics, we might say that for Jaspers authentic freedom must contain the following ingredients³²: an individual dialogic freedom guaranteed by a State governed by the rule of law which actively encourages democratic participation, an unlimited freedom of debate channeled by a party system, in which politics and worldview (*Weltanschauung*) are clearly separated and an ethics of the public sphere which is that of a citizenry nurtured by the communicative and communitarian *ethos*.

Nonetheless, given the profound rootedness of this political freedom in existential freedom, this project may appear almost utopian. Ultimately, Jaspers is proposing something akin to the Kantian kingdom of ends, the ethical-political matrix of the idea of universal citizenship, a notion that implicitly embraces the belief that humanity is one and universal. In his book on the question of guilt, a collection of his courses during the academic year 1945–46, written shortly after the end of World War II and right after the shocking discovery of the existence of extermination camps, he refers to metaphysical guilt, which he conceives as the absolute absence of solidarity with humanity as such, i.e., as contempt for the notion of man as an end in himself and therefore, as contempt for him as a means as well. A metaphysical demand that remains valid even when the political and even moral claim (both relative to the context they refer to) has already been extinguished³³.

The idea of a free coexistence of all individuals, open to the presence of the other and to existential communication, translates to a political facticity in which the self-determination of communities takes the shape of a worldwide confederation³⁴. In this free union within multiplicity, political ordinance refers to authentic existential experience that is self-evident and devoid of any external action, and is therefore rooted in the depth of historical goals that point to the universal dimension of the community's destiny, towards paradoxical openness, to Transcendence.

³¹ JASPERS: *Der philosophische Glaube angesichts der Offenbarung*, 449–450.

³² We follow here J.M. Zapater Carón's proposal in *La libertad en Jaspers* (Zaragoza: Librería General 1981, 200ss).

³³ JASPERS, Karl: *Die Schuldfrage. Von der politischen Hoffnung Deutschlands*. Munich: Piper V. 2012, 54.

³⁴ Cf. JASPERS, Karl: *Freiheit und Wiedervereinigung*, quoted in: ZAPATER, J.M.: *La libertad en Jaspers*, 205.

Transcendence saturates any system, any reduction to categories. The only way to refer to it is to realize a hermeneutical dialectic originated in its manifestations, figures. Ciphers are symbols, and it is in their acknowledgement or reading (Lesen der Chiffreschrift³⁵) where metaphysics can fleetingly grasp Transcendence “through” art, poetry or myths. Nevertheless, these symbolizations cannot be referred to argumentation, since they remain enclosed within circularity and paradox, and therefore, grounded in the infinite openness where all philosophical faith oriented towards Transcendence remains.

The same prescript is to be applied to the political dynamic: there is no concretion capable of sufficiently reflecting the depth of the elements underlying it, much less so if we focus on the ambivalence from the perspective suggested by Jaspers.

Let us take the case of Europe. The sixtieth anniversary of the ‘Treaty of Rome’ has recently come to pass amidst hefty arguments on all sides wielded against what Europe should be. In Geneva, in 1946 Jaspers pronounced a conference titled: ‘On the European Spirit’, which was published one year later, in 1947, and included in a volume titled *Europe in the Present*, where he analyzes the lack of faith in humanism, in modern civilization and in the German legacy. More than seven decades separate the recent European post-war period from the present, but Europe’s reality conveys the same matrix of absence of certainty and legitimacy. Europe, as Jaspers said in his time, inhabits the ambivalent space that makes it aware of its contrasts, and consequently, of its relativity, and therefore of its peculiar civilizing element³⁶. When we speak about what makes Europe peculiar (eigentümlich), Jaspers is basically thinking of three elements: freedom, history and science.

Freedom, as a European characteristic, represents the overcoming of arbitrariness: man is free when convinced that he is certain, when he has gained access to reason or understanding (Gewinn der Einsicht)³⁷. However, this does not mean that truth has been attained. On the contrary, it means that we have gained access to the path of its attainment and that we have to traverse it in its entirety, with the ambiguity between certainty and falsity that this entails. This polarity, which is consubstantial to the experience of freedom, also affects European freedom, and proves that freedom is gained only by experiencing the tensions and contradictions implicit in this. And above all, it is gained by experiencing otherness, which is then

³⁵ JASPERS, Karl: *Philosophie I. Philosophische Weltorientierung*. Berlin: Springer 1973, 58.

³⁶ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*. Munich: Piper V. 1951, 236.

³⁷ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 239ss.

permanently confronted by Transcendence. Freedom, thus, is exposed, as a condition of its own possibility, to otherness (and to Otherness).

The other two elements that make European circumstance explicit originate from this foundation: history and science³⁸. The concrete aspiration of liberty is harmony between concrete freedoms (individuals) and in its totality. This means incorporating the idea of the “aspiration” to be free, that makes us open to the perspective, to the “history” of the movement towards political freedom. Thus “history” appears as a theme, not as a closed and given process, but as the space for communication between freedoms in search of their full realization by way of the dialectic of what is possible and actual. In this regard, Jaspers observes that science is part of this aspiration to gain freedom and knowledge. However, we must not forget that both in science and in the political struggle and the libertarian yearning, the goal is never fully achieved, which is why Europe, as a project, never reaches its culmination. It can always bring about a political model that displays the yearnings that constitute it in an improved manner.

One must resist, therefore, the temptation of reductionism. Jaspers warns us against mass politics and the divinization of technique, a recurrent anthropological motif of concern of the first half of the century³⁹, to which he opposes individuality and self-consciousness as a guarantee of an authentic and communicational life experience. For this reason, in a scenario filled with remorse at its own incapacity to successfully fulfill the demand for its own freedom, the role that Europe must play in the world ('Europe' being self-understood as a figure of the political project that embraces freedom and its paradoxes) inevitably entails a reconsideration of the concept of sovereignty.

The etymological matrix of this term is the Latin *superanus*, an authority above all else, which is why sovereignty originally resided in God, as the Apostle Saint Paul wrote (*Romans*, 13). Thus, Medieval European kings were intermediate authorities that received the blessing of the true sovereign, God, through the mediation of the Pope. In the 16th century, Jean Bodin formulated the present-day, secular concept of sovereignty. He defined it as the absolute and perpetual power of a republic, i.e., the utmost power of command possible. Sovereignty was absolute and perpetual because it was not limited by any power and was uninterrupted at all times, with a single exception: the lords of the Earth were also subjected to

³⁸ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 242–246.

³⁹ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 252. On the problem of technique in Jaspers considered from an anthropological perspective, see: SEGURÓ, Miquel: *El ethos de la ciencia y el estatuto de la bioética*, in: *Acta Bioethica* 21 (2015) 2.

the laws of God and nature⁴⁰, and thus, in the end, they reflected the finitude of human power.

The figure of divinity faded until it disappeared and sovereignty, now devoid of metaphysical borders, became the Nation-State's most prized possession. Jaspers has no doubts as to the danger that the idea of sovereignty represents for the development of a communicational community: the absence of freedom begins where sovereignty establishes itself not as the will of an ordering of humanity in its totality, but does so in a confrontational form⁴¹. The reason is that the pretension to sovereignty paves the way to dialectical self-affirmation (I-non I) and thus to lack of communication, since the other is seen mostly as an obstacle or a threat, and the consequences of this already became clear during the age of Absolutism. To this model of sovereignty, Jaspers opposes the moderation (Bescheidung)⁴² of politics resulting from the expansion of the communicative, and therefore existential, will, which is the expression of humanity's existential contingency and relativity.

Jaspers' observation that the future of the idea of Europe requires a reformulation of Christianity is closely linked to this, not as an accessory phenomenon, but as a central one for the construction of life and its concept in our time. What does he mean by this? For Jaspers, the Bible sets out a polarity of open antitheses that must be recovered because these are the expression of existential passion and its limits. Amongst others, he points out the following: cultural and prophetic religion; the religion of law and the religion of love; the religion of the chosen people and the religion of all humanity; the religion of Christ and the religion of Jesus...⁴³. All of these are central elements of the Biblical experience that remind us how difficult it is to achieve the ideal of free communication with our fellow human beings, to use dialogic rationality and to acknowledge love as the ultimate guide to ethical-political relations. And they are also cen-

⁴⁰ BODIN, Jean: *Rep.* vol. I, Chapter 8.

⁴¹ „Der Anspruch voller Souveränität erwächst der Energie kommunikationsloser Selbstbehauptung, deren Konsequenzen im Zeitalter des Absolutismus, als der Begriff der Souveränität bestimmt wurde, rücksichtslos bewusst gemacht sind“, states Jaspers (JASPERS, Karl: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 255). Nowadays, political theology has acquired new prominence due to the axiological turn of contemporary politics (Cf. MATE, R./ZAMORA, J.A. [eds.]: *Nuevas teologías políticas. Pablo de Tarso en la construcción de Occidente*. Barcelona: Anthropos 2006). Far from contractualism, politics is now moving in the more elemental patterns of populism (cf. VALLESPÍN, F./BASCUÑÁN, M.: *Populismos*. Madrid: Alianza 2017), a fact that facilitates the use and abuse of binary and opposing categories, such as sovereignty. On the concept of sovereignty and an archaeology of its genesis, see JACKSON, Robert: *Sovereignty: Evolution of an Idea*. Cambridge: Polity Press 2007.

⁴² JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 254-257.

⁴³ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 261.

tral because they remind us that when everything else falls, only 'Transcendence' remains. „Es ist genug, dass Transzendenz ist“⁴⁴.

In conclusion, for Jaspers Europe is not the ultimate goal to be pursued. Moreover, one can only be European if one accepts the condition that authentic humanity (namely, humanity in radical consonance with its origin and its goal) points beyond itself, to what transcends it, to Transcendence itself, of which we can only speak in mediate, symbolic and figurative terms⁴⁵, and of which the European political project is just one more cipher.

EXISTENCE AND POLITICS: A FEW CRITICAL ANNOTATIONS

Existence does not follow clear and distinct coordinates. Therefore, it is difficult to find a systematic reflection in Jaspers, because after all, reflection is existential. The hermeneutics to orientate oneself in the world, the clarification of the aporetic reality of freedom, and the fundamental and inconclusive openness to the political question, are part of the philosophical itinerary inasmuch as they transcend themselves and remain open. This is what can be inferred from Jaspers' proposition. Keeping this in mind, the fact that in his work there is no detailed cartography of what ethics is or of what must constitute politics, is part of this same spirit and understanding of what philosophy is. Philosophical thought, wrote Jaspers in the afterward of his major work, *Philosophie*, is achieved in motion, and therefore its *ethos* is confirmed through action in both the private and the political sphere⁴⁶. This is why authority⁴⁷ and freedom⁴⁸ act as figures; as ciphers of Transcendence and as the expression of the '(omni)comprehensive' (Umgreifende).

Hans Saner, Jaspers' personal assistant from 1962 to 1969, considered Jasper's philosophy of the world to be unfinished. Thus, it is in line with the communicative conviction of his fundamental position, in which politics is based on the belief of a will and a faith: freedom⁴⁹. Consequently, absolute consciousness is nothing other than the consciousness of the figurative relativity of any process of deliberation, which includes rationality itself,

⁴⁴ JASPERS: *Vom Europäischen Geist*, in: JASPERS, Karl: *Rechenschaft und Ausblick. Reden und Aufsätze*, 264.

⁴⁵ *Idem*.

⁴⁶ JASPERS, Karl: *Nachwort zu meiner Philosophie* (1955), in: *Philosophie I. Philosophische Weltorientierung*, XXVI.

⁴⁷ BÖVERSEN, F.: *Der einzelne, die Gemeinschaft und die Autorität. Zum Autoritätsbegriff von Karl Jaspers*, in: SALAMUN, K. (ed.): *Karl Jaspers. Zur Aktualität seines Denkens*. Munich: Piper 1991, 114.

⁴⁸ OLSON, Alan M.: *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*. La Haia: M. Nijhoff 1979, 24.

⁴⁹ SANER, Hans: *Karl Jaspers*. Hamburg: Rowohlt V. 1970, 108ss.

now understood as the temporality that determines its historicity, i.e., possible existence⁵⁰.

Ricœur and Dufrenne put it as follows: “il faut plutôt que l’exteriorité de l’obéissance cède le pas à l’intérieurité de l’exister”⁵¹, thus connecting ethics and decision, and leaving the moral system behind by way of the radical experience of existential uncertainty. In Jasper’s own words, absolute consciousness combines the dialectic between the certainty of being and the uncertainty of its destiny, a tension that is at the origin of philosophical thought, and which culminates in the dialectic between temporality and unobjectionable historical depth, between the unconditioned nature of existence and the revelation of transcendence⁵². This is why Ricœur and Dufrenne classify Jasper’s ethics as an ethics of restlessness⁵³, in which the profound gravity of the echo of Kierkegaard is undoubtedly recognizable.

Jasper’s philosophy, therefore, is a vindication of the impossibility of reducing existence to singular formal categories (all of them would be figures, and all figures are remote from Transcendence). Nevertheless, does this allow for the realization of a concrete project?

Even if it were possible to explore transposing Jaspers’ conviction to a contractual model in the way that John Rawls defends his theory of justice (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971), for example, or in the form of Habermas’ communicative action (*Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 1981), we would soon come up against the obstacle of the ultimate foundation. In the major works of both these two authors we encounter the proposition whereby an objectively shared rationality allows us to discover certain ‘objective’ and self-evident elements or principles. In other words, recognition takes place through intersubjective participation in the rational faculty of discovering the regulating principles of communicative, and consequently, social life. In Jaspers, this communicative openness is fundamental to human rationality, but he does not stipulate the discovery of universally sharable and reasonable principles. Rather, he invites us to consider the opposite scenario: everything becomes a figure of Transcendence (the very idea of the State also) and the last figure of all is, at any rate, that of failure (*Scheitern*)⁵⁴.

From an equally liberal perspective one might identify a parallelism with the liberalism of fear (Judith Shklar⁵⁵), that is not founded on moral pluralism, but which sets out from the serious issue of the *summum mali*.

⁵⁰ OLSON, Alan M.: *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, 26.

⁵¹ DUFRENNE/RICŒUR: *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence*, 214.

⁵² JASPER: *Philosophie II. Existenzherhellung*, 260.

⁵³ DUFRENNE/RICŒUR: *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence*. 233.

⁵⁴ JASPER, Karl: *Philosophie III. Metaphysik*. Berlin: Springer 1973, 234.

⁵⁵ SHKLAR, Judith: *The Liberalism of Fear*, in: ROSENBLUM, Nancy L. (ed.): *Liberalism and the Moral Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1989, 27ss.

*lum*⁵⁶, i.e., cruelty and fear. If liberalism's goal is to safeguard the minimal political requirements necessary for the exercise of freedom⁵⁷, then eradicating fear and cruelty would be one of its vital elements, given the compulsion these exert on individuals. This perspective, that Jaspers himself would probably have upheld, would nevertheless become dialectical from a Jaspersian viewpoint: 1) once again, the very dynamic of experience and its relativity, the figure of what would be the *summum malum* or not, and 2) the 'qualitative negativity'⁵⁸ embraced by Jaspers' philosophy.

Concerning the first point, there is no need to add anything at all to the dynamic set out with regard to the universal and the particular in the perspective of Transcendence, exchanging, in this case, the figurative concept for that of *summum malum*. As far as the second point is concerned, however, we must return to the experience of extreme situations, particularly death, developed by Jaspers in the second volume of his *Philosophie*⁵⁹. Extreme situations are the embodied reflex of the *Dasein*'s existential reality, and thus they manifest the tension inherent to all historicity and cognitive positivity. When possible, existence is shattered, the *objective* consolidation of the narrative of *worldly-knowledge* loses its impersonal dimension, which surfaces in all its profundity in extreme situations (death, pain, struggle and guilt). That is why these extreme situations entail a leap (Sprung)—Kierkegaard once again—into a new space or, rather, into a non-space: the 'in-itself of personal experience that leads us from 'experience' to 'existence'.

In this leap, that these situations bring about—and that is why we can speak of qualitative negativity—existence clarifies itself, even if only at an early stage and as a mere possibility, as openness. The collapse of objective experience ('the world') brought about by these situations gives way to anguish depending on the resistance they meet with. Existence, in the specifics of each of these situations, is called upon to decide its own fate. The *ethos* of being expresses itself here in all its nudity, manifesting itself as a possibility that leads us from the calm of the totality's objectivity to its own realization, opening itself to the profundity that objectivity allows us to glimpse⁶⁰.

In other words, this refers to how each of us relates to our own source; something immutable, recognisable, in our being-in-the-world, that none-

⁵⁶ SHKLAR: *The Liberalism of Fear*, in: ROSENBLUM, Nancy L. (ed.): *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, 29.

⁵⁷ SHKLAR: *The Liberalism of Fear*, in: ROSENBLUM, Nancy L. (ed.): *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, 21.

⁵⁸ We are echoing the apt coinage of Alan M. Olson here (OLSON, Alan M.: *Transcendence and Hermeneutics*, 1955).

⁵⁹ JASPERS: *Philosophie II. Existenzerhellung*, 205.

⁶⁰ JASPERS: *Philosophie II. Existenzerhellung*, 211.

theless defines our relation to the world: if we remain attuned to it, we realize ourselves; if we do not, we lose ourselves⁶¹.

Consequently, we find ourselves before a taking on board of negativity that regards it as a condition of the possibility of self-realization, also possible, without which existence becomes blurred, if not bypassed, beneath the forms of objective appearance. If we accept the general Jaspersian framework of ciphers and the inability of all of them to express anything objective, it is chimerical to establish the limits of what brings about the clarification of experience and what makes it impossible. The limit could not be more personal, more particular, because existence, as constantly reminds us, is always non-transferrable: there is nothing *de facto* universal about existence, and therefore no instance can be considered but particular, before the universal concept⁶². One of the two poles, either particularism or universalism, ends up prevailing.

Thus, we find ourselves before a socio-political proposition that, according to its own definition, is beyond the reach of praxis. Hence certain critics⁶³ reproach the Jaspersian proposition for its scant capacity to influence society, given that it is a notion of existence that cannot translate to a concrete political praxis (at the end of the day, all of them are figures) and which may also entail a certain elitism regarding its socio-political ideal. In Jaspers, democracy would only be possible if it were qualitative, i.e., authentic. And this is where a typically Enlightened element that runs counter to the general tone of Jaspers' philosophy comes to the fore: if authenticity exists, it is because inauthenticity exists also, and therefore only those who are capable of understanding that the structure of existence is thus and not otherwise (a true universal which is paradoxically valid for every particular human being) and who have come to experience it as such, are capable of plumbing the depths which the communitarian experience tends to. Perhaps this aristocracy of political wisdom might not completely rupture the communicative reality of what we are, but it would leave no doubt that there are different qualities and levels of communication. And this has implications for the management of power and access to it.

Philosophy, says Jaspers, does not express a valid truth for everyone. Nonetheless, it realizes itself in a communication that is oriented toward the recovery of that which is authentic, which is formally the same for everyone: the openness of freedom to the call (*Appell*)⁶⁴ of its own authenticity (a concept, 'authenticity', that has accused by Th. Adorno of being an

⁶¹ JASPERS: *Philosophie II. Existenzherellung*, 215ss.

⁶² JASPERS: *Philosophie II. Existenzherellung*, 4.

⁶³ A. Langner (LANGNER: *Philosophie und Politik bei Karl Jaspers*, 294) echoes this and other critiques addressed to Jaspers' philosophical-political reflection by his contemporaries (such as, for example, J. Habermas, J-P. Sartre or U. Thaysen).

⁶⁴ JASPERS: *Philosophie I. Philosophische Weltorientierung*, 46ss.

ideological, bourgeois, abstraction of the concrete reality⁶⁵). And despite the fact that existence is not an objective category at all and that I can only speak about possible experience when I am accepted and listened to, the prerequisite of this is the individual-alterity tension entailed by experience and existence. It has to be said, however, that this leap beyond the limit in order to enter the sphere of existence cannot expect to possess either a universal validity or an ordering, because its starting point begs a question that demands to be clarified through participation, which is always indirect⁶⁶.

Philosophy is a first-hand way of life that turns living and shared anguish into the necessary path towards experiencing oneself as existence. Undoubtedly, this is a noble and surely desirable *desideratum* for society as a whole, which we endorse, but it also implies an alienating restriction. Indeed, how are we to coexist with those who do not perceive the reality of the existential dynamic in this manner, i.e., those who do not see existence as a wound, a task or a possibility? If we accept that there is no unique valid idea of humanity and that we move in the realm of figures, the temptation to diminish their field of political action could give way to an absolute and arbitrary injustice.

Therefore, not even Jaspers' philosophy is exempt from the dynamics it describes. The tension between subjectivism and communitarianism, which is difficult to sustain, may fall prey to the temptation of resolving itself unilaterally, on the basis of the arbitrariness of the former or as a result of the depersonalization implicit in the mass. Far from this, Jaspers' upholding of democracy and the rule of law warns us that this must not come to pass. For this reason, what this conviction bequeaths to us is the need to explore the figure, as an analogy leading to the consideration of its own relativity, and in a propositional perspective as well, i.e., that not every figure is equally remote from Transcendence. Particularly if one speaks, as Jaspers does, of authenticity, which *per se* implies a certain hierarchy.

Ciphers do not merely express a distance, and therefore a difference, regarding a concrete and definite content. They also point to an identity, a relative one no doubt, but which all human beings in a state of community 'are party to'. Transcendental, Kantian style elements, but nonetheless capable of being shared and recognized by all human beings, that would make communitarian communication possible. How might we establish them? Probably not by appealing so much to rationality (Rawls, Habermas) or heteronomous duties (Kant), as by referring to the dialogic, the metaphysics of experience that constitutes us. This is a difficult task to accomplish in all its magnitude, as Jaspers cautions us, but in any case, it is already im-

⁶⁵ ADORNO, Th.W.: *Obras completas 6. Dialéctica Negativa. La jerga de la autenticidad*. Madrid: Akal 2005, 405, 422, 492.

⁶⁶ JASPERS: *Philosophie II. Existenzherhellung*, 22–23.

plicit in the analogical play of figures (which is neither entirely univocal or entirely equivocal)⁶⁷, the goal of which is ultimately at the very heart of any political reflection on democracy: unity within diversity, along with the reasons for it.

Abstract

One of the most direct spheres of application of Karl Jaspers' philosophy lies in politics. However, nothing resembling a systematic political philosophy can be found in his work. This article traces the key components of Jaspers' proposition in this sphere, particularly the concepts of freedom and authority, which sketch a clear anthropological dialectic in relation to Transcendence. Finally, we approach the Jaspersian conception of the idea of Europe as a political destiny, where the fundamental dialectic that traverses human finitude is expressed again and, consequently, led to the contradiction and the relativity of its "existential orientation".

⁶⁷ In our above mentioned book, *Sendas de finitud. Analogía y diferencia* (Barcelona: Herder 2015), we attempt to critically assess the question of resemblance and difference in several authors, Jaspers among them.