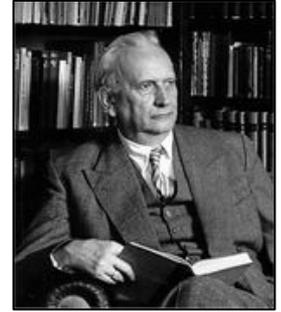




KARL JASPERS (1883 – 1969)



Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) began his academic career working as a psychiatrist and, after a period of transition, he converted to philosophy in the early 1920s. Throughout the middle decades of the twentieth century Jaspers exercised considerable influence on a number of areas of philosophical inquiry, especially on epistemology, the philosophy of religion, and political theory. His philosophy has its foundation in a subjective-experiential transformation of Kantian philosophy, which reconstructs Kantian transcendentalism as a doctrine of particular experience and spontaneous freedom, as well as emphasizing the constitutive importance of lived existence for authentic knowledge. Jaspers obtained his widest influence, not through his philosophy, but through his writings on governmental conditions in Germany. In this regard, after the collapse of the National Socialist regime he emerged as a powerful spokesperson for moral-democratic education and reorientation in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Despite Jaspers importance in the evolution of both philosophy and political theory in twentieth-century Germany, today he tends to be a neglected thinker: He did not found a particular philosophical school, he did not attract a cohort of apostles, and, outside Germany at least, his works are not often the subject of high philosophical discussion. This is partly because the philosophers who now enjoy undisputed dominance in modern German philosophical history, especially Martin Heidegger, Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, wrote disparagingly about Jaspers and were often unwilling to take his work seriously. To a perhaps still an even greater extent, his relative marginality is due to the fact that he is associated with the more prosaic periods of German political life, and his name is tarred with an aura of staid bourgeois common sense. Nonetheless, Jaspers' work set the parameters for a number of different philosophical debates, the consequences of which remain deeply influential in contemporary philosophy, and in recent years there have been signs that a more favourable reconstructive approach to his work is beginning to prevail.

Jaspers was born in the North German town of Oldenburg in 1883. His family milieu was strongly influenced by the political culture of North German liberalism, and he often referred to the climate of early liberal democratic thought as a formative aspect of his education. Moreover, although he claimed not have been influenced by any specific ecclesiastical faith, his thought was formed by the spirit of North German Protestantism, and his philosophical outlook can, in many respects, be placed in the religiously inflected tradition of Kant and Kierkegaard. His education was extremely diverse and broad-ranging. He initially enrolled as a student of law, but then decided to study medicine, obtaining his medical qualification in 1908. He obtained his second doctorate (*Habilitation*) in psychology from the Philosophy Faculty at the University of Heidelberg where he worked as a *Privatdozent*. Then, in 1921, he became a full professor of philosophy in Heidelberg. His first major publications were works of psychology; most notable among these were *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (*General Psychopathology*, 1913) and *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (*Psychology of World Views*, 1919). The latter work was a transitional work, in which his psychological method was clearly shaped by philosophical influences and objectives, and was already evolving into a consistent philosophical doctrine.



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This book consequently contains many elements, albeit in inchoate form, of his later philosophy of existential authenticity.

While he was working as a psychiatrist in Heidelberg, Jaspers came into contact with Max Weber, and the other intellectuals who were grouped around Weber, including Ernst Bloch, Emil Lask, Georg Simmel, and Lukács. His intellectual formation was marked in a number of ways by this milieu. At a political level, he integrated aspects of Weber's enthusiasm for heroic liberalism, responsible nationalism and elite democracy into his own thought and attitudes. At a more theoretical level, his ideas were determined by the increasingly critical responses to neo-Kantian philosophy, which dominated methodological discussions around Weber and Lukács, and which subsequently coloured the intellectual horizon during World War I and throughout the Weimar Republic. This period witnessed the dethroning of neo-Kantianism as the philosophical orthodoxy in the German academic establishment, and it was marked by a proliferation of philosophical models which rejected Kantian formalism and sought to integrate experiential, historical and even sociological elements into philosophical discourse. The attempt to rescue Kantian philosophy from the legalistic formalism of the South West German School of neo-Kantian philosophy, centred around Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband, became one of the central features of Jaspers' work, and in many ways his entire philosophical evolution was motivated by the desire to reconstruct Kantian thought, not as a formalist doctrine of self-legislation but as an account of metaphysical experience, spontaneously decisive freedom, and authentic inner life. His early career as professor of philosophy was also deeply (and adversely) affected by neo-Kantian hostility to his work. Indeed, both neo-Kantians and phenomenological philosophers subjected his work to trenchant criticism in the early stages of his philosophical career, and members of both these camps, especially Rickert and Edmund Husserl, accused him of importing anthropological and experiential questions into philosophy and thus of contaminating philosophical analysis with contents properly pertaining to other disciplines.

If Weber was the first decisive personal influence and Kant was the first decisive philosophical influence on Jaspers, he encountered a further figure in the early 1920s who assumed a decisive role in his formation: Martin Heidegger. It cannot be claimed without qualification that Heidegger directly determined the conceptual structure or underlying preconditions of Jaspers' work, nor that Heidegger assimilated aspects of Jaspers' thought into his own philosophy. Throughout their theoretical trajectories, the differences between Heidegger and Jaspers were in many ways greater than the similarities. Indeed, the theoretical controversies between them eventually culminated in an embittered personal and political altercation, caused by Heidegger's publicly declared sympathy for the National Socialists in 1933. Jaspers felt himself personally threatened by Heidegger's decision to support the Nazis as he was married to a Jewish woman, and he had previously attached himself to eminent liberal politicians and philosophers, most notably Weber, who were now vilified by Heidegger and other intellectuals attached to the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche ArbeiterPartei* (NSDAP) or the National Socialist German Workers Party, better known in English as the Nazi party. In 1933, Jaspers himself was briefly tempted into making certain incautiously optimistic statements about the Hitler regime. Indeed, these remarks were not entirely out of keeping with his other publications of the early 1930s. In the last years of the Weimar Republic he published a controversial political work, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit* (*The Spiritual Condition of the Age*, 1931), which - to his later acute embarrassment - contained a carefully worded critique of parliamentary democracy. Throughout this period he also stressed the relevance of Weberian ideas



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of strong leadership for the preservation of political order in Germany. The souring of his relations with Heidegger, however, seems to have hardened his mind into a strict and sustained opposition to National Socialism, and, unlike Heidegger, his works of the 1930s avoided political themes and were largely concentrated on elaborating the interior or religious aspects of his philosophy.

Despite the increasingly envenomed relations between them, however, Heidegger and Jaspers are usually associated with each other as the two founding fathers of existential philosophy in Germany. This interpretation of their philosophical status and relationship is at least questionable. Heidegger resented being described as an existentialist and Jaspers, at least after 1933, resented being identified with Heidegger. Even during their early friendship, Heidegger was very critical of Jaspers' philosophy and he wrote a commentary on *Psychology of World Views*, in which he claimed that Jaspers' methodological approach remained ensnared in the falsehoods of subjectivist metaphysics and Cartesian ontology, and that it illegitimately introduced the categories of Weberian sociology into philosophical analysis. Similarly, throughout his life, Jaspers kept a book of critical notes on Heidegger, and he routinely described Heidegger's fundamental ontology in a tone of moral-humanistic disapprobation. Nonetheless, there remains a residue of validity in the common association of Heidegger and Jaspers, and, although it requires qualification, this association is not in every respect misleading. Existentialism was, and remains, a highly diffuse theoretical movement, and it cannot be expected that two philosophers connected with this movement should hold similar views in all respects. However, existentialism had certain unifying features, and many of these were common to both Jaspers and Heidegger. In the early stages of its evolution, therefore, existentialism might be described as a theoretical stance which: a) moved philosophical discourse away from Kantian formalism and emphasized the belief that the content of thought must reside in particular experiences and decisions; b) followed Kierkegaard in defining philosophy as a passionate and deeply engaged activity, in which the integrity and the authenticity of the human being are decisively implicated; c) sought to overcome the antinomies (reason/experience; theory/praxis; pure reason/practical reason; transcendence/immanence) which determined the classical metaphysical tradition by incorporating all aspects (cognitive, practical and sensory) of human life in an encompassing account of rational and experiential existence. If this definition of existentialism is accepted, then the suggestion of a family connection between Jaspers and Heidegger cannot be entirely repudiated, for both contributed to the reorganization of philosophical questioning in the 1920s in a manner which conforms to this definition. Ultimately, however, relations between Heidegger and Jaspers degenerated to a terminal impasse, and after World War II Jaspers refused to explain or exonerate Heidegger's political actions during the Nazi years and he even recommended to a de-Nazification committee that Heidegger should be suspended from his university teaching responsibilities.

In 1937 Jaspers was removed from his professorship, and he felt himself a marked man until the end of World War II. After 1945, though, his fortunes changed dramatically, and he figured prominently on the White List of the US-American occupying forces: that is, on the list of politicians and intellectuals who were deemed untarnished by any association with the NSDAP, and who were allowed to play a public role in the process of German political re-foundation. From this time on, Jaspers defined himself primarily as a popular philosopher and educator. In the first role, he contributed extensive edifying commentaries on questions of political orientation and civic morality - first, in the interim state of 1945–1949, and then, after 1949, in the early years



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of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the second role, as one of the professors responsible for reopening the University of Heidelberg, he wrote at length on the necessity of university reforms and emphasized the role of liberal humanistic education as a means of disseminating democratic ideas throughout Germany, and he took a firm line against the rehabilitation of professors with a history of Nazi affiliation.

Of his post-1945 publications, therefore, Jaspers' political contributions are perhaps the most significant. His contribution to the promotion of a democratic civic culture in West Germany at this time was of great importance, and his writings and radio broadcasts shaped, in part, the gradually evolving democratic consensus of the early Federal Republic. In *Die Schuldfrage* (*The Question of German Guilt*, 1946), published at the time of the Nüremberg trials, he argued that, although not all Germans could be legitimately brought to trial for war crimes, all Germans should accept an implicit complicity in the holocaust and only the critical self-reflection of all Germans could lead to cultural and political renewal. In the 1950s, he supported the main policies of the liberal-conservative governments led by Konrad Adenauer (1949–1963), and he particularly endorsed the formation of the Western Alliance which he saw as a means of protecting the cultural resources of Western European culture from their colonization by the Soviet Union. Throughout this time, however, the cautiously conservative tenor of Jaspers' political thought was progressively modified by his frequent and, at times, intense intellectual exchanges with Hannah Arendt, who might well be seen as the fourth great influence on his work. Jaspers had been Arendt's tutor and supervisor before she emigrated from Germany in the 1930s. However, the period after 1945 saw something of a role reversal in this relationship which Jaspers seems to have accepted quite graciously. Influenced by Arendt's agonistic republicanism, he gradually turned against the relatively complacent spirit of political and intellectual restoration in the early Federal Republic, and he finally devoted himself to elaborating models of citizenship founded in constitutional rights and legally enshrined identities. In this respect, Jaspers can be viewed as an important precursor of Jürgen Habermas, and his works contain an early conception of the doctrine later known as *constitutional patriotism*. His views on German re-unification were also particularly influential; he opposed the dominant outlooks of the time by claiming that the demand for re-unification meant that German politics remained infected with the damaging traces of old geo-political ideas and ambitions, and it thus prevented the fundamental redirection of German political life. Finally, in symbolic demonstration of disgust at the persistence of pernicious political attitudes in Germany, he relinquished his German citizenship and, having earlier moved across the border to University of Basel, became a Swiss national. In his last works, he placed himself closer to the political left, and he argued that only a legal revolution could ensure that the German state was organized on the basis of a morally decisive constitution. He died in Basel in 1969.

Source: Adapted and abbreviated from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/jaspers/>



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