

# Latest Developments of Existentialism<sup>1</sup>

Luigi Pareyson

Translated by Daniele Fulvi

**Abstract:** In this paper, Luigi Pareyson provides an analysis of the existential features of the philosophies of Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger, whom he considers as the two greatest philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century. In Jaspers, Pareyson identifies the idea that truth is both singular and one, meaning that it can be grasped only through a personal interpretation and never in absolute terms. This implies that truth and person are inseparably tied to each other and that existence carries transcendence in itself: just as truth transcends our personal knowledge of it, Being itself transcends our personal existence. Moreover, Pareyson sees Heidegger as the initiator of an existential ontology that poses a fundamental relation between the human being and Being itself; hence, the philosophical discourse on human existence inevitably turns into a discourse on Being. Therefore, Heidegger finally manages to overcome traditional metaphysics and its forgetfulness of the question of Being itself, by giving this question a central role within philosophical reflection. In conclusion, Pareyson maintains that Jaspers and Heidegger are able to make the voice of Being be heard, in contrast with the humanist and nihilist tendencies of twentieth-century philosophy.

## 1. JASPERS AND HEIDEGGER TODAY

In the last few years, more than ever, German philosophy has been dominated by the two great founders of existentialism: Karl Jaspers and Martin

---

1. Translator's Note: This piece was originally delivered as a radio broadcast on 11 March, 1970, and then published in *Terzo Programma* 3 (1970), 15–24. It has since appeared in Luigi Pareyson, *Prospettive di filosofia contemporanea* (Milano: Mursia, 1993), 27–35. Reproduced and translated with kind permission from the publisher.

Heidegger. Their fame, which was already great, has increased even more, extending to all the fields of culture and establishing itself in every country of the world. Nowadays, nobody could doubt that Heidegger and Jaspers are, on a global scale, the two greatest philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century.

After World War II, their thought completely renewed itself without denying itself in its substance. Jaspers took a position on the most pressing issues of the contemporary world, from culture to politics, from science to technology, from history to religion; dealing with these particular issues, his philosophy has developed with an extraordinary wealth of topics and ideas. Heidegger carried on his arduous reflection in isolation and in silence, without being flustered by the tumultuous events of today's world; his thought, engaged in an insatiable revision process, has reached a great level of concentration and depth, which has rarely happened in the history of philosophy.

With his death on 26 February 1969 at the age of eighty-six, Jaspers left the two writings he was working on unfinished: *Logic* and *The Great Philosophers*. But the materials he published are enough to give us an idea of the grandeur of the general project. Jaspers himself, to introduce the reader to his *Logic*, writes:

Here is the situation of philosophy: a unique and total truth does not exist; we encounter, instead, several truths in a historical form. Hence, the community of all human beings is not possible through the universal profession of a unique and sole truth, but only through the common means of communication.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. UNITY AND MULTIPLICITY OF TRUTH: EXISTENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE IN JASPERS

From these words of Jaspers, it is clear that in his *Logic* he reiterates the central topics of his thought: the will to communication; the nexus between existence and reason; the issue of the plurality of truth; the unity of existence and transcendence.

The fundamental exigency of the human being is the will to communication. This is neither a mere exchange of more or less conventional views, nor a conversation aimed at reaching an agreement at any cost, through either persuasion or confutation. True communication is an encounter between

---

2. Karl Jaspers, *Autobiografia filosofica*, trans. E. Pocar (Napoli: Morano, 1969), 128. T/N: Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie* (Munich: Piper, 1977), 121.

two living persons; a dialogue in which everyone, while passionately professing *their own* truth, is able to respect *others'* truths, because they know that they are all together looking for *the* truth.

One can immediately see that, according to Jaspers, truth is always something strictly personal: it has to do not so much with reason, but rather with existence. As such, reason has no content; it does nothing but clarify, bring to consciousness, and conceptually elaborate the intimate content of the person. Without existence, reason would be mere intellect, that is, impersonal and objective thought. Therefore, it is not reason that gives a content to thought, or that gives truth to a philosophy, but rather such content is given by the person, by the existence, and by that perspective on truth which all of us originally have. That is why Jaspers' encounters with the philosophers of the past—which are described in his work *The Great Philosophers*—are more an existential event than a cultural fact. “Through the doctrine I should be guided more clearly to the point where, hand in hand with the philosopher,” Jaspers says, “I enter into contact with what he has thought and thereby not only increase my knowledge, but grow in my own being.”<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, one can see that according to Jaspers truth is at the same time single and one [*singola e una*]. It is single because truth, for me, is always *my* truth; it is one because *one* is the Being that the human being searches, despite knowing such Being is unattainable.<sup>4</sup> So, the two extremes of perspectivism and dogmatism remain excluded. On the one hand, perspectivism says *not* that truth is single, but that truth is manifold. Now, talking about many truths means negating them as truths, since it means contemplating them as equivalent and interchangeable, that is, depriving them of the bond that ties each of them to the person. From this derives the indifference of skepticism, namely, the facile tolerance of respecting others' truths just because one does not commit oneself to profess one truth for one's own. On the other hand, dogmatism says *not* that truth is one, but

---

3. Karl Jaspers, *Die großen Philosophen*, Vol. I (Munich: Piper, 1957), 97. T/N: Cf. Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, Vol. I., trans. Hannah Arendt and Ralph Manheim (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), 6.

4. T/N: Here and elsewhere, I use the term “Being” and the locution “Being itself” to translate Pareyson's notion of *essere* (which he mainly uses in reference to Heidegger's notion of *Sein*), and I will use the uncapitalized “being(s)” to translate Pareyson's notion of *ente* (which he mainly uses in reference to Heidegger's notion of *Seiendes*). I think that using “being(s)” rather than “entity/entities” fits better with the way in which Pareyson interprets Jaspers and Heidegger, as well as with the way he develops his own philosophical reflection.

that truth is unique. Even this conception ends up negating truth: the presumption of possessing the unique truth is nothing but the absolutization of a particular and historical point of view, turning it into an eternal and universally valid truth. From such a mystification, fanaticism and intolerance inevitably derive.

Jaspers' position is aimed at avoiding the two extremes of skepticism and fanaticism. On the one hand I have to respect other truths not because I renounce the profession of one truth, but because in *others'* truths I recognize the same personal commitment that I put in professing *my* truth. On the other hand, *my* truth and my way of knowing *the* truth, is in fact the only way I have to access truth: in my truth, if it is really such, that which comes towards me is truth itself. All human beings, together but in different ways, look for the same thing, namely, truth, which is unreachable in time, but verifiable through the common search that we all pursue.

Truth and person are then inseparably tied to each other. This idea refers to the concept, which is crucial in Jaspers' thought, of the unity of existence and transcendence. Nothing that we reach, Jaspers claims, is the absolute, since the absolute is unreachable: everything must be relativized and limited to its field. Only through this relativization, for which every point is transcended in a wider horizon, can everything be preserved: nature, biological life, social and political life, science, religion, history, morality, reason: that is, the human world. In order to appreciate the world, we need to be open to transcendence and be aware of its unreachability. Then the human realizations manifest their *limit* together with their *value*: they manifest their limit since Being itself, which is that which truly matters, transcends them all; and they manifest their value since they are, on closer inspection, images and incarnations of Being itself.

### 3. ACCENTUATION OF MUNDANE EXPERIENCE: POLITICS AND SCIENCE

In Jaspers' thought, two conflicting and equally strong tendencies co-occur: on one hand, there is an essentially religious sense of the ulteriority [*ulteriorità*] of Being itself; on the other hand, there is a sensitivity to the realizations of the human being that is entirely worldly.<sup>5</sup> What characterizes Jaspers' thought is his ability to indissolubly unite these two tendencies, by ensuring that each tendency finds its true significance only in the other one.

---

5. T/N: In this section, I will alternatively use the terms "mundane" and "worldly" to translate the Italian *mondano*, in order to better grasp its meaning in the original Pareyson text.

In this sense, his thought is at the same time religious and worldly; on top of that, it is religious without ever being mystical or confessional, and worldly without truly being Enlightenment-like or humanist. In Jaspers, the atheist Sartre saw the promoter of a sterile pessimism and a deceitful restorer of transcendence; the theologian Barth enclosed his thought in a mere “anthropology of limit” and contested the authenticity of his transcendence.<sup>6</sup> But Jaspers escapes such accusations, because his faith in transcendence has an effective and active meaning in the world, and his appreciation of human realizations has a religious and transcendent motivation.

Of course, such a difficult unity cannot be maintained without some fluctuation, depending on whether one or the other of the tendencies is accentuated; and Jaspers has had more than one of these fluctuations. In particular, after World War II he seemed to have accentuated the mundane aspect of his thought, to the point that it has been wondered whether this was “a new Jaspers,” less metaphysical and more critical. And it has also been said that such a new Jaspers would be the true one, finally freed from the theologizing hindrances of his thought, and inspired by a political and religious liberalism, in accordance with a rational and scientific mentality. But it would be a mistake to isolate such aspects from the living core of his philosophy.

After World War II Jaspers, who had been persecuted by Nazism, made an intervention into the political debate, expressing positions inspired by his previous liberal education and by his firm cosmopolitical convictions. The political assumed such a relevance for him, that he stated that there cannot be great philosophy without the thought of the political.<sup>7</sup> But commitment to the political does not make him forget the personal relation with transcendence: even in the community, everything depends on the single human being, so that politics is subordinated to ethics; and the true inspiration of an authentic politics is still faith in transcendence. It is significant that he concluded his short book on *The Question of German Guilt* recalling Jeremiah, who does not despair even after the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Jews. “What does that mean?” he asks

---

6. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Vol. I (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 21–22; and Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, Vol. III (Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1948), 133–141. T/N: Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 15–16; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume III: The Doctrine of Creation, Part 2*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 113–120.

7. Jaspers, *Autobiografia filosofica*, 122. T/N: Cf. Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie*, 84.

himself. “That God is, is enough. When all things fade away, God is—that is the only fixed point.”<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, Jaspers, who came to philosophy from medicine, started sharpening his interest in science further and further. He pushed himself to the point of claiming that the philosopher, to truly be a philosopher, must derive the meaning of research from science and have a scientific spirit. Actually, according to him, the solution of the current crisis and the reconstruction of a brand-new world must necessarily pass through science and technology, which are the predominant features of today’s world. But it must not be forgotten that for Jaspers the truth that really matters is not the scientific, impersonal, and objective one, but the philosophical, personal, and committed one. Additionally, he disapproves of that superstition of science which characterizes the contemporary world, and, although he does not underestimate the virtues of technology, he also lucidly predicts its dangers. Technology is a demonic power because, while it makes nature closer, it ends up distancing it; while it frees human beings, it ends up subjugating them; and it creates the illusion of being able to remedy the evils that technology itself provoked. Once again, what is essential is the single individual, that is, the truth as personally possessed.

#### 4. PHILOSOPHICAL FAITH AND DEMYTHOLOGIZATION OF CHRISTIANITY

Finally, Jaspers intervened in the current debate about the demythologization of Christianity. His intervention is inspired by a religious liberalism that appeals to reason in all its criticality and that refuses any church as confessional and any positive religion as exclusivist. Jaspers acknowledges that Christianity pervades all our civilization, but he condemns its exclusivism: there are other religions, and above all there is an autonomous philosophical truth. Reason must keep the human being open to all these possibilities.

Nevertheless, although it is very critical and anti-confessional, his religious liberalism is not rationalistic, since it acknowledges the necessity of myth and respects religion. Myth is irreplaceable in the human world: it is not a false fable, or a half-truth, that has to be *interpreted*; but rather it is an essential truth, which has to be *assimilated* as a possibility of life, and as a way to enunciate things that cannot be expressed otherwise. The disappearance of religion is a danger: without religion, the human being falls prey to

---

8. Karl Jaspers, *La colpa della Germania*, trans. R. De Rosa (Napoli: E.S.I., 1947), 146. T/N: Cf. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 116–117.

superstition, be it technology, ideology, or science. From these various types of superstition, so widespread nowadays, the human being can save herself either through a new assimilation of Christianity, or through that which Jaspers calls philosophical faith, which is independent from religion, but takes vigor and strength from it. In fact, on closer inspection, Jaspers' "philosophical faith" has the same content as Christianity: it is *simultaneously* faith in the human being and in God; it is awareness that human freedom and divine grace are inseparable.

On this point, Jaspers' position is arduous and subtle: it is not atheism, but it is not theology either; it is not unbelief, but it is not religion either; being equidistant from nihilism and from faith, he is exemplary of how philosophy and religion can be extremely close, and yet extremely far from each other, allies and opponents at one time, and they can irresistibly attract and repel each other. But, despite all the fluctuations, Jaspers' position is coherent, always hinged on the affirmation that existence and transcendence are inseparable; thus, one must believe him when, summing up his thought, he claims: "If I think back to my intellectual evolution, I think I can glimpse a constant line in it. In my convictions, there have never been mutations, ruptures, crises, or rebirths."<sup>9</sup>

## 5. HEIDEGGER'S ANTI-HUMANISM: A NEW ONTOLOGY

Heidegger too is opposed to pure humanism; for him too there is a transcendence, and for him too, in a certain sense, existence and transcendence are inseparable. But for Heidegger the question becomes more acute, since his first great work, *Sein und Zeit*, namely *Being and Time*,<sup>10</sup> written in 1927, seemed to be inspired by a straightforwardly humanist standpoint; and this is the sense in which his thought has been received and developed, for instance, by the outspoken atheism of Sartre. But in his subsequent writings—which became known to the public only after World War II, although most of them date back to 1930s—it was clear that for Heidegger the protagonist of the philosophical scene was not the human being but Being itself. Therefore, a fracture seemed to occur between his first work and the later ones, especially since Heidegger himself, in his *Letter on Humanism*

---

9. Jaspers, *Autobiografia filosofica*, 153. T/N: Cf. Jaspers, *Philosophische Autobiographie*, 122.

10. Martin Heidegger, *Essere e Tempo*, trans. P. Chiodi (Torino: UTET, 1969). T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, revised by Dennis J. Schmidt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

(1946),<sup>11</sup> explicitly referred to a “turn” of his thought: such an admission led several scholars to make a distinction between an “early Heidegger,” who is a humanist, and a “late Heidegger,” who is an ontologist.

Actually, such a “turn” should have occurred within *Being and Time* itself, which remained unfinished precisely due to the difficulty of its task. Even back then, Heidegger’s aim was to tackle the issue of Being itself. However, he understood that it is not possible to *pose the question of Being* without first calling into question *the sole being that poses the question of Being*, namely, the human being. Hence, he started with an investigation on the human being, called “existential analytics,” from which the examination of the question of Being, that is, ontology, should have arisen. And at this point the discourse was interrupted, and the existential analytics was the only published section of *Being and Time*.

Those for whom humanism seems to be the more authentic meaning of existentialism, and who talk of a late Heidegger, different from the early one, or rather in contrast with the early one, forget precisely that the existential analytic was just preparatory for the investigation of the question of Being itself. If the discourse of *Being and Time* did not continue into an explicit ontology, that was due to the fact that traditional metaphysics could provide Heidegger neither the language nor the conceptual instruments for the ontology that he intended to advance. Thus, the task of continuing the discourse was shifted, with no ruptures, to the new works, and especially to the ones that range from the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (written in 1935 but published in 1953)<sup>12</sup> to the extremely suggestive *On the Way to Language*, published in the late 1950s.<sup>13</sup> In these writings, the *foundation of a new ontology* goes hand in hand with the *critique of metaphysics* and with the examination of the *question of language*: three points in which Heidegger had the opportunity to show all the originality and depth of his thought.

---

11. Partly translated [into Italian] in Martin Heidegger, *Che cos'è la metafisica*, ed. A. Carlini (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1953). T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 213–265.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Introduzione alla metafisica*, trans. G. Masi, foreword by G. Vattimo (Milano: Mursia, 1968). T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

13. Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zum Sprache* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959). T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

Surely, the existential analytic of *Being and Time* insisted very much on the fact that the human being is in the world; and the humanist interpretations of Heidegger's thought are based precisely on this "worldliness" of the human being. But for Heidegger the human being is not defined by its being-in-the-world, if by this one means, as Sartre does, that in the human being existence precedes essence (which is only a sophisticated way to say that the human being is such as it is made by circumstances). The world is not the totality of things and circumstances, in which the human being is immersed and by which she is determined in her historicity. The world as organized totality of things and circumstances exists only because there is an organizing perspective, that is, the human being. But, in turn, this does not mean that the world is a creation of the human being, or a projection of the human being qua knowing subject: nothing could be further from Heidegger than this sort of idealistic subjectivism. The opening of the world to the human being and through the human being is not only a human fact: if the human being is in the world, this is because the human being is originally in relation with Being itself. Therefore, the being-in-the-world that characterizes the human being can be defined neither as a pure relation with the world, nor as a mere production of the knowing subject, but only as the relation of the human being with something that transcends the world and with that which transcends the human being itself, namely, with Being.

## 6. OVERCOMING OF METAPHYSICS

For Heidegger, then, everything is based on an initial relation of the human being with Being itself. But how can one talk about this originary ontological relation? How can one talk about that Being with which the human being is originally in relation? It is clear that it is not possible to talk about it on par with the objects that manifest themselves in the world. There is an unbridgeable difference between *Being*, whose light makes the opening of a world possible, and *beings*, that appear in the horizon of the world; there is an abyss between the relation of humans with beings and the relation of humans with Being itself. Nevertheless, Western thought has disregarded such a difference and such an abyss; from Plato to Nietzsche, it did nothing but talk about Being itself as if it were a being, albeit being in its highest abstraction, or supreme and absolute being. This was the mistake of metaphysics: it posed the question of Being itself, immediately confusing it with the question of beings, and by so doing ended up forgetting and concealing precisely that Being which it wanted to reach and discover.

For Heidegger, the history of Western civilization is the history of this progressive oblivion and obfuscation, up to the complete forgetfulness and obscurity of today's world. Heidegger adopts very pessimistic, and even catastrophic, tones about the forgetfulness of today's human being: if our whole civilization has led to the dominion of technology and therefore to the subjugation of the human being, and if the era of technology already eludes our control, this is due to the fact that for almost twenty-five centuries Western thought has forgotten Being itself; and it is not possible to foresee the sad and lethal effects that such state of things will still bring to humanity.

Therefore, in order to remember Being itself and to ground the new ontology, it is necessary to overcome metaphysics, which confuses Being with beings. However, insofar as Being itself cannot be confused with beings, it cannot become the object of a discourse. Being illuminates beings, but it never lets itself be seen as such: in this sense, the effort of thinking and speaking Being is always destined to fail. Should we then resign to a sort of negative ontology, which talks about Being only to say that it is not possible to talk about it? Is not silence the only possibility that follows from that? This does not seem to be the necessary outcome of Heidegger's thought. Of course, he is not unreceptive to such ideas, he even welcomes them: in his work, as in that of the greatest philosophers of his country, resounds the echo of the great German mysticism. But more than the destroyer of the word, the silence would be for him the protective custodian of Being; and in fact, he could not consider it but as the result of a severe purification of language and the origin, however mute, of every discourse.

## 7. LANGUAGE AND REMEMBERING THOUGHT

In any case, Heidegger's reflection has more positive aspects than it may seem at first sight. From the moment when he fully realized the difference between Being and beings, Heidegger, far from retreating into silence, dedicated himself to retracing the analysis of the human being and of the history of metaphysics, trying to remember what they have forgotten and obscured: Being itself. Thus, existential analytics and philosophical historiography have assumed a new and unprecedented depth, and a dimension not only critical, but decidedly ontological: they have turned themselves into a discourse, although indirect, on Being itself. Moreover, Heidegger's aspiration is clearly directed at a thought that is revelatory. Indeed, he means to replace that thought which is aimed at "explaining" things with that thought which is aimed at "unfolding" Being itself, and that language which is mere human

expression and communication with that language which is the “house of Being.” From this, it follows the tendency to attribute an interpretative character to the relation of the human being with Being, in the sense that, precisely because Being itself withdraws and hides itself in the act of concealing and revealing itself, for this very reason history is made possible, and the different historical epochs emerge, as different interpretations of Being.

Of course, compared to Jaspers, Heidegger is less “engaged” in the world: totally absorbed in meditating his own thought ever again from its beginning, he seems a living example of those “monastic and lonely philosophers” neglectful of every civil duty, who are described by Vico. But actually, he invites us to a meditation that neither renounces the world nor disregards time, but rather is aimed at preparing an authentic renewal of them. He is well aware that true innovation does not depend on a contingent upheaval, as it seems to be proposed by that eager and fanciful uneasiness which is so widespread nowadays, but it is something much more substantial and deeper, much more radical and decisive. And the philosopher can contribute to it with her meditation, aimed at preserving the authenticity of thought: a truly essential thought, which taps into its source and recalls its origin, which is not merely an intellectual exercise or a cultural operation, but involves the human being in her entirety and in view of her destiny.

This explains why Heidegger’s reader gets the impression that his thought is at the same time extremely ancient and extremely modern. This happens not only because Heidegger is able to successfully connect the primordiality of the Presocratics with the contemporaneity of philosophers of language; but mostly because he is able to indicate in thought the originary unity of the contemplative aspect, much beloved in times past, and of the active and innovative aspect, preferred by today’s world. Heidegger asserts that “thinking changes the world,”<sup>14</sup> but he also claims that “thinking does not endow us directly with the power to act.”<sup>15</sup> How can such apparently conflicting theses be reconciled? By virtue of the fact that the relation of the human being with Being itself is originary, namely, much deeper than the distinction between thought and action. Thus, thought modifies the world not because it promotes action, but because it remembers Being itself. Indeed, only by remembering Being itself, thought becomes able to create

---

14. Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), 229. T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 78.

15. Martin Heidegger, *Was heißt Denken?* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1954), 161. T/N: Cf. Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Grey (New York: Perennial Library, 2004), 159.

epochs; and every epoch is a new interpretation of Being, that is, a radical transformation of the world.

It could seem that, even in the most recent developments of their thoughts, Heidegger and Jaspers already belong to a bygone era. Nowadays, philosophy seems to prefer other ways: humanist and empiricist, or even skeptic and nihilist ways. However, Heidegger and Jaspers were able to make the voice of Being be heard, even to the more critical and demanding among the readers of today; provided, of course, that such a reader does not put herself, from the beginning, in that part of the human world which is currently abandoned by the gods.