Human Being, World, and Philosophy in Karl Jaspers

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ABSTRACT

According to which ideas does the human being manage her/his relationship with the world in which s/he lives? Is this relationship shaped by psychic invariable structures influencing the interaction between the subject and the objective reality? What is the existential role of knowledge and what is the connection of the philosophy with the individual’s life? These are only some of the questions characterizing the philosophical thought of Karl Jaspers. Focusing on ideas like Weltbild and Weltanschauung the paper highlights both the way Jaspers answered those questions and the originality of his philosophical approach in the twentieth-century panorama.

Jaspers between Psychology and Philosophy

For a long time Karl Jaspers was considered by philosophy professors and university colleagues only as a self-taught philosopher. Actually he studied law at first, later medicine and psychiatry, and he read the classics of the philosophical thought by himself. His first studies were about personality disorders, nostalgia and crime, jealousy and dementia, schizophrenia. Through his voluminous book Allgemeine Psychopathologie (1913; cf. Jaspers, 1965bd) he gained the public acknowledgment as innovative researcher in the field of clinical psychiatry. As psychologist at Philosophy Departments Jaspers was an outsider in the German academic panorama, and the collection of his lectures, revised and published in 1919 with the title Psychologie der Weltanschauungen, was a sign of that hybrid position. Thanks to the publication of this essay Jaspers got the chair of philosophy at the University of Heidelberg: against the opposition

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of the established academic professors, first of all the famous neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert.

Jaspers’ important contributions as «researcher of the human nature» (Saner, 1970, p. 31) can probably not be explained and properly understood without consideration of his medical background and of his unconventional development. In particular there are three ideas directing his way of thinking first as psychologist and then as philosopher:

• The centrality of the individual. This is thought on one hand as a whole and on the other in connection with an objective background. Constitutive for the subject-object-relationship is the fact that each existence is an historical existence.

• The idea that each logical, conceptual or rational issue depends on an extra-logical, unconditioned factor, so that each form of knowledge is necessarily always partial and incomplete.

• A dynamic view of life marked by paradoxes. If, on the one hand, the human knowledge is the result of conceptual tools, categories and methods which as such are out of the flow of life, on the other hand life is so much rich of possibilities and contradictions that it is quite necessary to regulate and control its variety, sometimes even to enforce an artificial order on it, in order to foster and further it, and finally to be able to experience it fully.

These approaches influence the way Jaspers builds his philosophical point of view. They are evident also in his conception of the Weltbilder and in the relation of these with the Weltanschauungen.

Weltbild and the Psychologie der Weltanschauungen

Answer the questions “what is a Weltbild?” or “what is a Weltanschauung?” means to inquire the psychological and existential need which corresponds to the building of these concepts.

According to Jaspers, life is reacting to a condition of be-thrown-away and to the feeling of weakness and seclusion connected to it: human beings¹ in fact are surrounded by a world made of things and persons that they perceive as

¹ The expression “human being” is used with reference to the individual as such without consideration of the individual gender.
deeply distinct from themselves. However, this feeling of separateness is closely related to the will of adaptation and the desire for relation. The reaction of the individual goes through the knowledge and through the idea of a world totality. By speaking of the human condition Jaspers observes: «I appear to the others, in this world, only as another “I” and as such I am, for me and for them, only a particle. But even though I am almost a nothingness dissolving in a point of the space and time immensity, I am a particle able to turn towards the totality [...] as if I could embrace it» (Jaspers, 1932a, p. 78). This as if is an idea, the reflected image of a world connection, in which everything fills its own place and order. The actual totality of being remains uncatchable but this idea is exactly the way making possible that each “I” does not reduce himself to be-only-a-particle.

In Jaspers’ *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* the leading idea of the analysis is the scission of subject and object. This idea plays a fundamental role not only in philosophy, but also in the psychological research. Here the «totality of mental facts» has to be inquired, as it is experienced by a subject living in a world of objects and being itself a possible object. Without conceptual order no comprehension can be reached. This order is possible only through a series of forms and intellectual schemes, shaping the variety of possible or real relations existing between subject and object. According to Jaspers, in fact, the way between the one and the other is not «a straight line»: it goes «through networks of different kind, which are, as such, out of space and time, neither subject nor object» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 23).

These forms condition and define everything that is objective; they can be found every time a subject meets an object. Through his need of unity and his search for synthesis the human being opposes to the feeling of tear — arising from the perception of being only a part of an impenetrable whole — and to the situation of duality, whose clearest evidence is the cleavage between subject and object. These constructed synthesis give answers to the fundamental questions of the human-beings, offer a system of meanings, and so make the human life in the world possible. By writing a *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* Karl Jaspers intends to describe the different ways the relations between subject and object can be, and has historically been, managed. Let us consider that the different types of life explanation correspond to «the various frames in which the

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2 Unless otherwise stated, all the translations are made by the author of this article.
mental life of the individual takes place» (Lefebre, 1981², p. 489). Consequently, by illustrating in a systematic way the positions the human mind can hold by facing the world, Jaspers makes the internal structures of the psychic life psychologically clear; more generally, he outlines the various possibilities of human nature.

The different combinations of subject-object-relationship can be observed from different points of view. If they are considered from the side of the subject, then we have a series of attitudes corresponding to the manners through which people experience the world. According to the goals the human being sets himself, the choices s/he makes, the way s/he perceives her/himself, reality and time, the functions s/he assigns to the reason or to the senses, it is possible to characterize an active or a contemplative, an aesthetic or a rational, a mystic or a reflective, an hedonistic or an ascetic attitude. These are the themes dealt in the first chapter of Jaspers’ essay.

Complementary to such a view is the consideration of the forms shaping the human way-of-being from the side of the object. This is the field in which the world pictures [Weltbilder] are formed. «From attitudes to world pictures there is the same “jump” to make by proceeding from the subject to the object, from subjective behavior to objective expression, [...] from the pure and simple possibility to the real expansion in an objective space» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 38). Weltbilder are neither «existential spheres» nor logical forms, they bring neither impulses nor spiritual forces to the consciousness: they are rather schemes enabling the comprehension of the way the objective world appears to the individual. «In themselves they are nothing mental, but are conditions as well as consequences of mental experience» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 122).

However, also in this case the reference point of Jaspers’ analysis is the subject. World pictures are not interesting for themselves, says Jaspers, nor wants he to establish what is true or false, right or wrong, worth or not in each of them. They become important for the psychological analysis only because they are «an object for a subject» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 25) and, consequently, they offer a new, alternative perspective for understanding the subject (Jaspers, 1919, p. 38). Weltbilder are like forms of intellectual representation for the real world, indissolubly corresponding to a way of being of the human soul. So, according to the different ways the space and the life environment are figured, there will be world pictures explaining the universe as finished or infinite, other considering the nature as a machinery, or representing the reality as a living spiritual organism: the highest form of human wisdom is here not the
scientific and technological knowledge, but the mythological comprehension of the connections existing among phenomena, between natural and spiritual world. From a cultural point of view the world can be imagined as uniform or not homogeneous, as mostly determined by cultures or single personalities, as a perfectly made cosmos or like an endless completion process – what heavily affects the self-perception of the human being and the representation of her/his possibilities in the world. The highest confidence degree in the world totality (that is to say, the confidence in the world as a totality) is yet to be found in the metaphysical world picture where, according to the different views, the validity or the being of the reality is made dependent on the relationship that it has with the absolute. In this psychic context it is natural to think that «each single part is a whole and at the same time it is in the whole» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 164).

Considering the close correlation existing between the subject and the corresponding world picture it is no cause of surprise that Jaspers indicates two sources for the formation of a world picture: on the one hand, there is what is given to the individual from the outside, from his world and life experience, and on the other there is what is due to the natural character of the individual, to the inner disposition of her/his soul (Jaspers, 1919, p. 125). Unlike philosophy, which investigates the connection of the one with the other from the point of view of the systematic validity and with the aim to realize an all-embracing world view, it is typical for the psychological attitude to take into account what is as it is. Psychology is not interested in answering the question about the reality of a universal, or universally accepted, world picture, nor in demonstrating the absolute value of such a picture. In its enquire the psychology proceeds as if this picture exists, analyzing the whole of its possibilities and of its contents. This is an application of the (Kantian) regulative idea of the als ob and it has a double implication. Firstly, hierarchy and value judgments about the different world pictures are removed. The scientific value of a Weltbild lies exclusively in the fact that it is a way the objective world manifests itself to the subject, «even if it is a mythical world picture, the illusion of a lunatic, the utopia of a dreamer» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 21). Secondly, the consideration of «what was mentally true and still possible» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 4) as if it would be still true and constantly possible implies the necessity to build comprehension patterns which open the door to the classification of different phenomena and events of the psychic life: here not the present, existing reality is taken into account, but the possible, potential reality of the human mind. In so far the
human intellect can enter the flow of the psychological experience, crucial points, by which the psychic life crystallize, are taken to the consciousness. The task of Jaspers’ psychological inquire is to measure not only the horizon, but also the limits of the human psychic experience (Jaspers, 1919, pp. 125—126).

Jaspers writes: «By speaking of the world pictures we intend to typify, to point out what in our opinion has the marks of essentiality» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 38). In order to highlight what is essential, the scientific observer has to classify the various facts of the experience and to bring them into types, which as such do not correspond exactly to the real experience: compared to this one, those types are only ideal schemes bringing the experience to its extreme expressions. This is the way – Jaspers adopted this methodological approach by Max Weber – the human intellect can manage with the tangled mass of psychic facts and bring the flowing life to the level of consciousness.

But knowledge is as dynamic as life is. There is no pre-made truth: there are only processes, achieving as much truth as possible for the individual. So, also the building of a world picture is a process. In fact, there are different consciousness degrees in the perception of a world picture. This is due to the fact that a world picture is not an artificial scheme extraneous to the nature of the individual: on the contrary, it arises with the human being and grows up through her/his actual life experience. The world picture which has not yet been penetrated by the intellect is the most efficacious: it is all the same with the immediate being and acting of man. At the opposite side of the degree scale there is the world picture not experimented in the psychic life: since it is only a matter of intellectual knowledge, it can be explained, understood and transmitted without being something alive. Finally, there is a third different case, when the world becomes the object of a cognitive act and exactly this process gets the building of a further interior world going (Jaspers, 1919, p. 126).

This graduation of awareness represents a form of classification used by the observer to distinguish the different relationships the subject can have with a world picture. Getting consciousness of a life situation means tearing the immediate life process the subject lives into. But that is also the necessary condition to make the individual more able to act in the world.

Weltbilder are subjective, since they are forces and creations carried out by the subject, but they are objective too, since through each of these creations the human being enters the world of the universal being, which is ruled by its own
laws. The human being in fact gets soon dominated by what he has created by himself. (Jaspers, 1919, p. 124)

A world picture is to understand as an intellectual medium the individual has to provide himself in order to survive in a world presenting insoluble contradictions and value-conflicts. By means of a scheme of interpretation offering a comprehensive system of meaning, the individual can figure out his role in the world, his priorities, his frame of thoughts, and the way to manage collective issues together with other human beings.

The transformation of the subject-world-relationship into an object of reflection has however a “dark side”: it is not only an opportunity of world adaptation, it implies also a tendency towards a general, indistinct objectification. The result of this process is double: every subject considers himself legitimated to regard his own world picture not only like the only right and valid, but even like the only possible one. Furthermore, there is always the risk that a personal scheme of world interpretation gets absolute, placing itself above the real life and usurping it. When a series of theoretical principles take the place of the real experience, the knowledge — whatever its origin may be: religious, philosophical, aesthetic, scientific, or ethical — becomes sterile and loses its touch with the concrete life of the human being. Here a self given belief changes into a stiff dogma, a catechism of rules, notions and prejudices becomes a “cage” where the changeability of real life is stifled and restrained, in the worst case even hidden and repressed. Jaspers is very clear about this point: «A Weltbild is like a shell [Gehäuse], in which on the one hand the mental life is jailed, on the other it is what the mental life is able to generate by itself and to bring outwards» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 122). A “shell” is an inanimate structure in which each expression of life is reduced into a mere object of theoretical speculation.

Jaspers calls the attention also to other processes: the dispersion or the lack of authenticity, easily changing into inauthenticity; the formalization abstracting from the experience; the differentiation; finally, the absolutization that isolates the part from the whole. By pinpointing these phenomena, that cause degenerated world representations, Jaspers reveals a constant attitude which stays at the basis of his thought: the fear for each form of extremism. It may be either in the political or in the scientific or philosophical field, regarding the clarification of the historical world, the explanation of a political doctrine, or the comprehension of a religious feeling: at any occasion Jaspers launches his philosophical appeal for avoiding the radicalization of principles and ideas, for preventing concepts from devouring the humanity of the human being. He em-
phasizes the necessity for the individual of keeping himself open to the possibilities of the existence and to the uncontainable richness of it: open to the life as a whole [Ganzes].

Jaspers’ philosophy is a philosophy of the *aurae mediocritas* calling for practicing the ancient virtue of *sophrosyne* and for balancing the opposites. He constantly stresses that «without schemes neither knowledge is possible, nor an order in the conceptual world, but without the capability of throwing these schemes away and, after having known and used them, of surpassing them, no culture can be possible» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 41). The idea of the whole as a regulative programmatic idea and not as a substance, the aspiration to the synthesis of divergent attitudes and feelings, the quest for conciliating analytic issues with the comprehension of life connections, the building of intellectual schemes to match with the intuition of the unrestrainable mobility of life: these are the issues orientating the philosophical way of thinking of Karl Jaspers. Evidences of them can be found also in his theory of the world pictures.

Each world picture is in fact the result of a psychic-gnoseological process aiming at providing the subject with an intellectual apparatus for the orientation in the world. But a world picture is something more than a sign of the human desire for knowledge: it is the evidence of the human quest for totality and the expression of the impossibility for the human being to be satisfied with the only mechanical addition of facts and experiences. The human being needs an interpretative framework giving him a symbolical representation of all the possible connections s/he has with her/his world. The *Weltbild* represents an answer to this unconscious demand in so far that it puts together the knowledge of the world as fact and as series of facts with the interpretation of it as a source of meaning. In so far that a world picture expresses «the whole of the objective contents of a person» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 122), it is to consider like the outcome of the effort the human existence makes in order to achieve a personal point of view upon his way of being-in-the-world. This is a personal truth that is neither absolute nor generalizable. But as shared intellectual *habitus* the world picture can help the people living it (and not only in it) to find a common horizon suitable for acting and for entering in touch with each other. The search for a unitary idea of the world entails something going further the intellectual arrangement of the reality into a system: it already represents a genuine manifestation of the human being’s natural inclination to keep himself open to
infinity, to the otherness, to the overcoming of each partial truth; or, to use a Jaspers’ world: open to transcendence.\(^3\)

**From Weltbilder to Weltanschauungen**

Between Karl Jaspers’ psychopathological studies and his philosophical works one can recognize an invariable lodestar orienting his intellectual activity: the attempt to think of the human being over the split existing between subject and object, and then over the division between what is scientific and what it is not. To consider the human being from the point of view of the existential totality he is (a totality that is beyond each possible or eventual objectification) means to rethink upon completely new grounding the ways of dealing with the being of the individual. Jaspers was not only interested to explore what the human being knows: he starts from the assumption that also «how the human being knows» becomes constitutive for the meaning of the knowledge. But this “how” is not a neutral or an accidental factor: it is closely related with the «existential a priori» which is different by each person. What Jaspers most of all intended to realize with his works was not to grade the types of human knowledge according to their internal validity, but rather to understand the significance each intellectual topic, each experience has for the human being in the specificity of her/his life situation. The interest without prejudice for «man how he is» represents the fundamental issue of a psychology, but also of a philosophical program, aiming at understanding [verstehen] sooner than explaining [erklären], at clarifying rather than classifying.

Starting from these premises Jaspers’ *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* looked like to be an innovative book which, as regards the way of considering the manifestations of the abnormal or morbid psychic life, remains by many aspects still «unsurpassed» (Van der Berg, 1955; Galimberti, 2000\(^7\)). The *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* turned those intuitions into a method: here Jaspers intends to examine both the forms in which the reality presents itself to the human being and the existential forms by which the human being plans the

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3 Here it is to recall the influence exerted on Jaspers by Kants’ doctrine of the transcendental ideas. Among these ideas Kant indicates also that of the world, defining it as the «absolute unity of phenomena’ conditions», or, in another passage of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, «as the totality of all the phenomena», cf. Kant, 1998, pp. 432, 437, 442. In the Introduction of his *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* Jaspers mentions Kant’s doctrine of ideas as a fundamental source of his work.
building of his world and at the same time of himself too. The comprehensive analysis of the ways the human being relates himself to the surrounding world, making it *his own* world, is in fact all the same with the comprehension of the meanings the world assumes *for* the human being. In this interpretative context there is no distinction between what is healthy or unhealthy, right or wrong. There are only as many different ways of looking at the world and of taking spiritually or mentally possession of it as there are many human beings. Each single case is a personal, intentional, individually defined relationship. In the *Psychopathologic* Jaspers observed that each form of understanding is like a «light thrown on the human nature» (Jaspers, 1965\(^4\), p. 260). The same spirit inspires Jaspers to consider that «wherever a subject is confronted with an object — it may be in the hallucination of a raving man or in the illusion [...] of an insane person — there are [interpretative] forms to find» (1919, p. 23). The *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* intends to point out exactly these forms. It is however much more than a mere catalogue of schemes. As Martin Heidegger — reader, correspondent, friend and finally silent observer of Karl Jaspers’ personal history — noticed in many occasions, the unquestionable merit of that study is to attract attention for the problem of «what the human being is» and «what he can be according to his life possibilities»: in a word, this is the problem of the human existence.\(^4\)

This is the interpretative and methodological framework to consider also by discussing about *Weltbilder*, *Weltanschauungen* and their mutual relationship. Then, what is a *Weltanschauung*? This is the question opening Jaspers’ essay of 1919. And this is the answer he gives: «It is something total and universal at the same time. [...] The worlds views are forces and ideas, anyway they are the highest and total manifestations of human being» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 1). Since they represent the whole possibilities of human existence, they are the proper topic of philosophy.

Essential, however, for the comprehension of this topic is the distinction Jaspers underlines again and again between the intellectual and the axiological level, between the apperception of knowledge — it may be scientific or sense-grounded, rational or empirical — and the determination of a life orientation: or, using Max Weber’s terminology, between the identification of *facts* and the

constitutions of values. «A world view», Jaspers remarks, «is not a mere form of knowledge, but it shows itself through evaluation, through the hierarchical order of values which one chooses» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 1). What characterizes a world view, distinguishing it from a theoretical world system or from a pragmatic ideology, is its connection with life: that is, more specifically, with the sources of individual’s life taking a specific Weltanschauung, developing specific beliefs and thoughts, showing a peculiar, interior way of being and a personal way of re-interpreting the experience. By speaking of «forces of life» Jaspers means the principles and the spiritual energies making of a human being the person s/he actually is.

Exactly the consideration of such forces makes the change from the world picture to the world view level possible. If the first one corresponds to a pattern of world interpretation considered from the point of view of the object, the second one implies the frame of thought which has been inspired, built and carried out directly by the subject, through his life experience. Consequently, Weltbilder are «dead reflected pictures» as long as they are not filled up by the «alive forces bringing about, in the movement of experience, the choice and the direction of life» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 190). Between world picture and world view there is the same difference existing between a well known system of knowledge and a practiced doctrine of life.

Jaspers is careful both to keep the two dimensions apart from each other and to integrate them into a suitable comprehension form for the world life of the human being. Each Weltanschauung is in fact like a network of connections and criss-crossing levels. Nevertheless its dual conformation remains unequivocal: beyond the intellectual, systematic order there is an a-logical, untheoretical nucleus relying on the ontological, and consequently mental, structures of the singular human existence. «Weltanschauungen are not produced by thought [...]. The knowledge of reality is an important moment by their development, of course, but it is only a moment. Weltanschauungen issue from individual’s attitude in life, from life experience, from the structure of our psychic totality. [...] Each genuine Weltanschauung is a form of intuition arising from the being-situated-in-the-life-itself» (Dilthey, 1931, pp. 86, 99). This words have been written in 1911 by Wilhelm Dilthey in his famous essay Die Typen der Weltanschauung und ihre Ausbildung in den metaphysischen Systemen, which represents one of the most important sources not only for Jaspers’ work, but also for the whole debate about world views taking place in Germany and Europe between the 19th and the 20th century. The same words
could however have been written by Jaspers too. For both authors the form of association between faculty of representation, individual’s feeling and volition results from the peculiar position each single man has to the general problem of life: this position impacts on the way a form of rational knowledge turns into an all-embracing life project. The authenticity of the world view is just given by the inner, immediate commitment of the individual by taking part in it (see Cantillo, 2001, pp. 35–42).

However, a world view has not to be only authentic and genuine: it ought to be also real, that is to say, life-orientating. In so far that it has been formed and taken by a subject it becomes a part of his world and, consequently, of the world. Jaspers notes: «Each existence has a concrete content, in the same way all the corresponding Weltanschauungen are concrete, and have a content» (Jaspers, 1919, pp. 25). This “content” gets evident through those objective manifestations by which an historical subject expresses in the world his personal way of being, of viewing, of believing. That is the way by which theoretical systems, political, religious and ethical doctrines, past interpretations, teachings and theories originate. All these are the necessary outcome of a process of objectivation – that is almost a rejection process – by which the inner life of the human being comes outside, in the world and, therefore, into reality. Without exterior, objective and communicable manifestations, it is as if that life and that being do not exist. But just in the moment in which a spiritual force gives the evidence of being present and actual, it needs a whole series of thoughts, ideas, values, and arguments in order to support its own points of view and to make them taken into account. The acknowledgment is made particularly necessary by the fact that each human being is closely connected with other subjects, other individuals, therefore with other spiritual forces. This is the reason why Jaspers considers the world views in a double perspectives: both as «the actual existence of a mind considered in its whole» and also as the whole of «rational doctrines, imperatives and objective images which the subject shows, applies, and uses in order to justify himself» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 33), his way of being and acting. Considered from this perspective the role of the world view, and of each inwardly participated doctrine, becomes clear: it is an essential, communication-grounded framework for the existence of the subject and for his historical survival and adaptation in the world.

As for the subjective attitudes and the objective world pictures, also for the world views Jaspers identifies many types of systems. They differ in the values admitted for interpreting and orientating the life processes; they vary from
each other in the role attributed each time to the absolute towards the finite, and vice versa. According to the «hierarchy of values» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 194) chosen by each individual it is possible to distinguish nihilism and skepticism, authoritarianism, liberalism and absolutism of values, rationalism and vitalism, organicism, mysticism, realism, romanticism, and so on. A particular prominence is given by Jaspers to the philosophical systems, representing the highest form of objectification, and therefore of rational clarification, of the existential forces (Jaspers, 1919, pp. 275–278). Common to all the world views, although in different degrees, is their character of being a totality, that is a combination of psychic connections, values and spiritual ideas embracing the whole being of the human being, shaping his experience and orientating his action in the world. Through the different «spiritual types», \(^5\) which each Weltanschauung corresponds to, the man comes in touch, maybe only in an unconscious way, with an unconditioned origin, with the spring of life staying always beyond each objective manifestation of it, always at the end of each possible knowledge, unsuitable for any rational understanding or clarification. Jaspers will make this point clear in the first book of his Philosophy by writing: «Faith \([Glaube]\) is the nucleus of each world view» (Jaspers, 1932a, p. 246).

By introducing the concept of faith, that Jaspers already mentioned in some significant passages in the essay of 1919 (pp. 298–303), all the elements useful to explain the relationship between world picture and world view acquire a new light: the passage from the first to the second one is not only a change from the rational to the existential level, from a theoretical world orientation to an experienced life praxis, but also a transformation of a learned doctrine into a belief — what by Jaspers corresponds to see knowledge turning into an all-embracing way of thinking: more properly, into philosophy. In so far it can be both a practice of life and a science of existence, philosophy is the highest form of knowledge; in so far it is life-taken-to-clearness and at the same time consciousness of life’s individuality, philosophy is expected to indicate an overall meaning for life, a framework of principles, a scale of values: to give, in a word, a world view.\(^6\)

\(^5\) This is the topic of the third chapter of Jaspers’ Psychologie.

From the level of the Weltbilder to the level of the Weltanschauungen there is a quality step: this is a change of perspective and of consciousness, not only an extension of knowledge. This change is due to the fact that a Weltanschauung is not only a more complex Weltbild, an intellectual more sophisticated picture of a world connection and totality. Rather, a Weltanschauung is an all-embracing belief motivated by existential forces, whose activation depends on the choices made by the individual, on his life orientation, and on the values selected and taken over by him. Compared with world pictures, i.e. the intellectual ways of giving a systematic and unitary order to the manifold experiences connected with space and time, world views have a stronger practical and therefore ethical connotation and efficacy; they «have been chosen through the life existence, through experience and action, but not as theories. […] All what is theoretical is not other than the objectification of something which was already actual, otherwise it is something merely intellectual and therefore without essence. Life is all» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 277). After all, as Dilthey noted, Weltanschauungen represent nothing else than «attempts to solve the mystery of life» (Dilthey, 1931, p. 82).

Weltanschauungen, and not Weltbilder, can be taken into account by political issues. Not because there are world views purely or typically political, but because of the capability of each belief to turn easily itself into a — at least potentially — political tool. What is in fact a world view if not a form of world comprehension motivated by faith and therefore able to influence the way of acting of an individual which lives side by side in the world with other human beings? And what is, on the other side, politics if not the activity which takes charge of making different subjects, having different perspectives, believes and interests, live together in the world in the most possible pacific, orderly, and just way? This is even why in the political sphere the facts take the importance of applied or practiced values, and the values are — whatever they may be: the peace or the war, the force or the justice, the power or the solidarity, the liberty or the equality — the essential matter of politics.

The relationship between politics and Weltanschauung is determined not by the type of value assumed as overriding either in the political action or in a philosophical belief, but by the intensity this value is believed, pursued and concretely promoted. The gradation of faith can originate a scale of political behaviors: or, by using Jaspers’ word, of politische Stimmungen.
This is in fact the title of a lecture Jaspers gave in 1917 in a “club” established in Heidelberg during the First World War and made up of professors from different departments of the university (cf. Jaspers, 1977, p. 70). In this lecture the young scholar examines the relationship between Politik and Weltanschauung, namely between politics as an independent and self-governing sphere of human life and a world view supported by faith. What he finds out is a sequence of types, where each of them corresponds to a peculiar way to combine together sense of reality and willpower, life and idea.7

Beyond of the single aspects of this lecture, representing Jaspers’ first political text, there are two things to be noted, which make this text relevant in our perspective. The first one is the centrality of the idea of Weltanschauung in a conference about political behaviors. Considering that in 1917 Jaspers were probably writing the essay published in 1919, and considering also the political moment of that war time, it is plausible to think that Jaspers would like to put his psychological knowledge and observations about world views in connection with the actual problems and problematic, political issues of his time. Secondly, a thematic uniformity is to be observed between, on the one hand, Jaspers’ consideration of the forms of world interpretation, and his description of the ways the experience of the political world can be possible on the other. In both cases, Jaspers remarks the danger that the balance between different issues and opposing values gets lost – a loss which results from misunderstanding the relationship has to exist between the particular and the whole, the form and the real life. The manifestation of such a phenomenon may be different: the inauthenticity and the indifference for the original forces of life; the consideration of an intellectual framework as universal scheme; the lack of consciousness about the variety of life; the degradation of faith to mere utilitarian means of power or to a programmatic doctrine for the mobilization of masses; but also the transformation of a personal or group world view into an absolute truth, an

7 Jaspers illustrates, also with reference to historical examples, the different ways the relationship between Politik and Weltanschauung can be thought: so politics can be considered as a means for the organization of the common life or as a belief, as a field without values but the power, or as a field led by principles coming from an external (religious, moral, philosophical, aesthetic) world view. Sometimes a strictly political view can change into an absolute faith: this means that politics itself becomes a world view influencing the way of being of the man, the way of believing of the people and, finally, the action of a whole State. This is what happened, according to Jaspers, in Russia with the Socialism (exactly in 1917).
unconditioned belief. In all cases Jaspers sees the same danger coming into being: the losing sight of the real highest value, the human existence.

As observer of the human psychic life he is aware of the practical function of individual feelings and convictions. Jaspers recognizes that also the political activity is driven by vital forces, therefore values and faiths are an essential component also of the political sphere. Furthermore, he knows how much useful for the human life the transformation of personal attitudes into objective views and collective behaviours can be: this is the way elaborated by the human being since the beginning of his cultural development in order to find – or even better, to build – in the world a suitable order for her/his existential need, for her/his call for orientation, for her/his quest for engagement and unity. At the same time Jaspers is very careful with fixing limits, whatever they may be: the limits of a theory, because «everything going exterior gets soon relative» (Jaspers 1919, p. 25); the limits of philosophy, since it «goes round a pole without managing to put a foot on it» (Jaspers, 1932a, p. IX); the limits of each conceptual or scientific system, which «becomes wrong whenever it wants to be definitive» (Jaspers, 1919, p. 16); finally, the limits of politics, whose task is to take care of the external conditions for the social and civil life of the human beings. On the contrary, the personal existence of each individual – her/his possibilities and her/his search for absolute values, her/his peculiar, irreplaceable way of being the person s/he actually is – is out of political competence. And it ought to (sollen) remain out of it. The field or the topic Jaspers is speaking about may be different: unchanged it is his focus on the individual as individual, as moral being living in a world together with other subjects and facing many different life possibilities.

Without success we can read Jaspers’ writings looking for an answer to the question: “How is it to live?”. His philosophy focus on questioning and wondering, on setting limits and “calling for” getting continually over each self-imposed limit. But Jaspers’ lecture dating back to 1917 is prophetic. Exactly the 20th century has showed, often in a dramatic way, how much dangerous and anti-human the political faiths can become, how inhuman the transformation of a political doctrine into a totalitarian system can be. At the same time Jaspers warns his readers against the illusion that liberty is the same as the absence of great visions, as if the new freedom of the modern age would rely on the incapability of the individual at having a distinctive perspective on life or a personal world view. Exactly this illusion can turn into an absolute doctrine, which can become as fanatic and mortifying for the humanity as the strictest
dogmatism: in both cases an intellectual scheme, a doctrine of life change into a “shell”, into a cage without life.

On the contrary, «the world view [...] comes in communication with the others through struggle, understanding and discussion; by disclosing itself, in time, as incomplete, the world view puts itself in movement and, by meeting the others, it searches for itself from its own depths» (Jaspers, 1932a, p. 242). Through the connection with the philosophical thought on the topic of «possible existence» (mögliche Existenz), on the open possibilities of it, and the ways it can become authentically itself (the communication, the love struggle, the limit-situations, the ciphers ...), the doctrine of the world view achieves its proper meaning. Weltbilder and, most of all, Weltanschauungen are to consider as conceptual tools and comprehensive supports human beings resort to in order to pursue their existential struggle for life, for authenticity, for the clarification of the world and of themselves. They are essential moments of the way human beings can, and have to, go for reaching the deep sources of their being, and therefore the transcendent being.

In the present time, in which — as Jaspers already noticed in 1917 — all the modern world views have collapsed (Jaspers, 1999, p. 248); in which each doctrine or science is in danger of being self-referential and each knowledge risks of losing its connection with the life by becoming an over-specialized technique; in a time in which the human being can be dealt everywhere like an object, like “one of the many”, or, at best, like a customer, Jaspers’ works reminds us that each individual is a self-related and a world-related subject. It is the totality of both mental connections and world relations that changes a subject into a whole: into an existence. Jaspers’ words keep their validity intact: «Each new existence ought to attain freedom by his own source, keeping in view other existences and getting in touch [in Kommunikation] with them. The freedom exists only if it is attained by oneself» (Jaspers, 1932b, p. 392). This is the message of Jaspers’ most famous work, dating back to the time of his biographical and intellectual maturity. But after all, in the preamble of the Psychologie der Weltanschauungen he had already made the point clear:

Who wishes to find a direct answer to the question “how have I to live?” would look for it in this book without success. Here the essential is closed and impenetrable: it lies in the concrete decisions of the personal history. (Jaspers, 1919, Vorwort)
REFERENCES


