

William James, Karl Jaspers, And The Call to Transcendence

Ronald D. Gordon

Humanities Division, The University of Hawaii' at Hilo, U.S.A.

Email: rgordon@hawaii.edu

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol12n22235>

Published March 16, 2024

Citation: Gordon R.D. (2024) William James, Karl Jaspers, and The Call to Transcendence, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.12, No.3, pp.22-35

ABSTRACT: *William James (1842-1910), one of the founders of American psychology, was also among the most important pioneers of the academic study of mysticism. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), German psychiatrist and existential philosopher, too was fascinated with transient self-transcendent experiences (STEs) in which participation with “something greater” than the baseline egoic self-structure seemingly occurs. Karl Jaspers more actively than James pursued STEs through his “self-annihilating” dialectics, his receptivity to “cyphers” in empirical existence, and what he referred to as his daily “transcending meditation.” It is suggested in this paper that when the classical Jamesian markers of “mystical” experiences are applied to Jaspers’ STEs; Jaspers convincingly fits on James’ “mystical ladder.” Reasons for Jaspers’ reluctance to self-identify as a “mystic” are identified, and parallels between James and Jaspers are noted in passing. Jaspers remains significant for his respect for an existential life productively lived in-the-world while at the same time engaging in an approach to self-transcendence in which “I as myself vanish.”*

KEYWORDS: William James; Karl Jaspers; self-transcendence; mysticism; existential philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Eminent American psychologist and pragmatic philosopher William James (1842-1910) in his chapter on “Mysticism” in his classic text *The Varieties of Religious Experience* writes that, “The overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystical achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystic tradition, hardly altered by differences of climb or creed” (James, 1902/1929, p. 410). James observes that Buddhist mystics, Hindu mystics,

Sufi mystics, Jewish mystics, Christian mystics, and those of other mystical traditions have for centuries have engaged in practices for inviting and potentially activating mystical states, and that “The deliciousness of some of these states seems to be beyond anything in ordinary consciousness” (James, 1902/1929, p. 402). Additionally, these experiences “point in definite philosophical directions” marked by hope, peace, reconciliation, unification, and vastness, and “In them the unlimited absorbs the limits and peacefully closes the account” (James, 1902/1929, p. 407).

For James (1902/1929, pp. 370-420), the four markers of mystical states are these: (1) *Ineffability*, in that mystical states of feeling elude and defy accurate and adequate verbal expression; (2) *Noetic Quality*, with mystical states serving as sources of knowledge, insight, and illumination, “into the depths of truth unplumbed by discursive intellect”; (3) *Transiency*, with mystical states rarely being sustained for longer than a few seconds, minutes, or hours at most; and (4) *Passivity*, where even if induced by specific practices soon “the mystic feels his own will is held in abeyance” and is within atmosphere of a grander expansive presence.

James viewed these four markers as “sufficient” to delineate a wide-range of states of consciousness that are within “the mystical group.” A question arises as to how the classic Jamesian markers might apply to the contemplative, philosophical, and meditative experiencing of Karl Jaspers, M.D. (1883-1969), the iconic psychiatrist (Jablensky, 2013; Schwartz, et al., 2017), and one of the three most eminent German existential philosophers of the twentieth century (Abbagnano, 1969; Barrett, 1990; Kaufman, 1989; Matson, 1987). While only a few scholars have chosen to apply the linguistic label “mystical” to Jaspers’ philosophical and contemplative pursuits (e.g., Olson, 1983; Samadian, 2021; Volker, 2017), Samadian (2021, pp. 306-318) has recently observed that overall, “There has been a lack of study in relation to Karl Jaspers and mysticism.” The vast majority of Jaspers scholars ignore the matter entirely, and do not use the word “mystical” when academically analyzing and critiquing Jaspers’ works (e.g., see Schilpp, 1957).

It is the thesis of this paper that Jaspers was not only a pioneering psychiatrist and noted existential philosopher, but also a philosophical seeker who can validly be located somewhere on the “mystical ladder” imagined by James (e.g., 1902/1929, p. 374). But first, before more closely focusing upon Jaspers and his placement on James’ “mystical ladder,” we consider parallels between William James’ and Karl Jaspers’ realizations of the limits of intellectualism and logic in perceiving and savoring the ultimate mysteriousness of life.

JAMES AND JASPERS: BEYOND DISCURSIVE THOUGHT

James, in lectures assembled as a volume titled *A Pluralistic Universe* and published in 1909, the year before James’ death in 1910, discloses that when matters of ultimate reality are being encountered or reflected upon, “For my part, I have finally found myself to *give up the logic*, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably.” James had decided that “reality” surpasses logic, it “overflows and

surrounds it” (James, 1909/2019, p. 35) with “reality” not necessarily “irrational” but at least “non-rational.” Thought itself deals with outer layers, with the “thickness” of things, concluded James, and can label but not fully fathom them: “Direct acquaintance and conceptual knowledge are thus complementary of each other; each remedies the other’s defects,” although when it comes to deeply metaphysical matters, “. . . we must turn our backs upon our winged concepts altogether, and bury ourselves in the thickness of those passing moments over the surface of which they fly . . .” (James, 1909/2019, p. 65). James consciously echoed Bergson, who argued that if we choose to know “reality” we must personally dive more penetratingly into the flux, and with receptive listening. James advised that “Philosophy should seek this kind of living understanding of the movement of reality, not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results” (James, 1909/2019, p. 68). Philosophy, said James, has been too wedded to logos, to discursive thought, rather than attempting to “fall back on raw un verbalized life as more of a revealer . . .” James urges that we become “again as foolish as little children in the eyes of reason” (James, 1909/2019, p. 71). He goes further, asking “May not you and I be confluent of a higher consciousness, and confluently active there, though we now know it not?” (James, 1909/2019, p. 76). James gives his own answer: “. . . the drift of all evidence we have seems to me to sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious” (James, 1909/2019, p. 82).

James and Jaspers shared much in common in their disregard for the excessive application of “mere intellectualism” in the philosophical domain. Jaspers (1957d, p. 851) said that “In all of my psychological and philosophical work I stand opposed to the rationalistic levelling of everything thinkable into research, objectivity, and theory.” For Jaspers (1957/1966b, p. 383), “The limits of reason can be seen by reason itself.” Jaspers knew, for example, that Kierkegaard had gotten trapped in “pure mentality,” and that “He had never lived except as mind” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 41). Jaspers learned that “I can do nothing by reason alone” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 131). Theories, deductions, and conceptual models “never succeed in grasping anything except limited realities, mere aspects of empirical existence” (Jaspers, 1936/1955, p. 71). We can use “thought” to “think about” the *Encompassing*, but need to then pass through and beyond this cognitive modality alone: “The purpose and therefore the meaning of a philosophical idea is not the cognition of an object, but rather an alteration of our consciousness of Being and of our inner attitude toward things” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 75).

Philosophizing is an “experiment” in not stopping at rationality alone, since *Being* is not directly reachable by intellect, and giving rise to an inner action that precipitates a heightened presence, “a knowing which is an inner act, illuminating, awakening, or working its transformation” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 156). Jaspers discovered that “the concepts of the understanding are empty without intuition . . .” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 67). It is a “collapse of thought” that “does the revealing”

(Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 47). From our historicity in empirical existence we human beings can, when arising from our *Existenz* dimension, “grasp the whole spaciousness of *Being* . . .” (Jaspers, 1935/1955, p. 76). The bottom-line declaration from Jaspers is that “Philosophizing is an initiation into the consciousness of *Being*.” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 65).

It must be mentioned in passing that James and Jaspers shared other commonalities as well: both received M.D. degrees, yet went on to become respected philosophers as well as psychologists; both were drawn to philosophies of life that were considered as “yea-saying” rather than “nay-saying”; James at Harvard had been the first university teacher of a psychology course in America, and author of the first psychology text in English; Jaspers had published a pioneering psychopathology text in 1913 that is read to this day, and Jaspers introduced the biographical and phenomenological methods to German psychiatry; both had to cope with persistent physical infirmities, yet performed at high levels in spite of these maladies; James expressed a grand vision of philosophy to which Jaspers, in his own terms, also subscribed: “Philosophies are intimate parts of the universe, they express something of its own thought of itself” (James, 1909/2019, p. 84). Additional overlaps remain to be teased-out by future scholars in further comparing and contrasting these two major figures.

We next briefly survey James’ and Jaspers’ experiences within one of their mutual areas of interest: self-transcendent experiences, today identified as “STEs,” as per Yaden, et al. (2017).

THE CALL TO TRANSCENDENCE

James did not consider himself a mystic. As close as he had come were his captivating and uplifting experiences in nature (Barnard, 1997), plus his experimentation with nitrous oxide under controlled conditions, which he saw as inducing an “artificial mystic state of mind” marked by the reconciliation of opposites, and merger into a sense of greater unity (James, 1902/1929, pp. 377-385). It also became vividly apparent to James that our “normal” waking state of consciousness is but a single form of consciousness, and far from the only state possible. James resounded to, and was elevated by, other writers’ reports of their own personal self-transcendent experiences. The longer he lived the more open James became to the presence and validity of such phenomena, honoring his personal over-belief that there is likely a “wider self” from which universal experiences can flow into the human being (James, 1909/2019, Lecture VIII).

To briefly summarize Karl Jaspers’ conception of the human being and their being pulled toward *Transcendence*, Jaspers viewed we humans as “empirical existence” (bodies in space and time), “consciousness-as-such” (awareness, intelligence, communication), and “spirit” (the drive to unity) (Jaspers, 1935/1955; 1957a; 1957b; 1957c; 1957d; 1947/1959; 1957/1966a; 1957/1966b; 1932/1969; 1932/1970; 1932/1971a; 1956/1971b; 1951/1973). We also have within us that which goes beyond our finite limits: Our potential *Existenz* dimension, a term Jaspers borrowed from

Kierkegaard. Our *Existenz* is the innermost ground of our readiness for touching upon immense dimensions of ultimate reality, and, when aroused, embodying the *elan vital* of the metaphysical urge to self-transcendence. Our *Existenz* seeks to “push on in communication to the One” (Jaspers, 1956/1971b, p. 75). When illuminated, it is from our potential *Existenz* that we bridge with *Transcendent Being*, for which Jaspers often uses such terms as the “*Comprehensive*,” the “*Encompassing*,” the “*Enveloping*,” or “*Being*.” The referents of these intentionally abstract terms are neither meant to be objectively defined nor are they capable of precise translation since they are not themselves objects but “pointers” to the mysterious and vast metaphysical horizon within which everything else exists, the horizonless horizon that exceeds and includes all horizons. Of this *Encompassing*, Jaspers says, “. . . I surge up and beyond myself, with the urge to yield to an ‘other,’ to reality itself” (1947/1959, p. 57). There is a surrendering, and “Transcendence manifests itself in my own attitude toward it. I grasp its being in the inner action that makes me myself; its hand is offered to me as I take it. But it cannot be forced” (Jaspers, 1932/1971a, p. 30).

In a chapter on “The Comprehensive,” Jaspers (1951/1973, Ch. III) notes that we are normally blocked from the experience of unity with *Being*, and that “We call this basic condition of our thinking the subject-object dichotomy. As long as we are awake and conscious we are always involved in it. Twist and turn as we will, we are always in this dichotomy, always oriented toward an object.” Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 30) asks, “What is the meaning of the ever-present subject-object dichotomy? It can only mean that *Being* as a whole is neither subject nor object but must be the *Comprehensive*, which is manifested in this dichotomy.”

Jaspers used three primary approaches to surmounting this subject/object dichotomy: (1) what he termed “*self-annihilating dialectics*,” for “One must continually break out of the confinements of knowledge” (Jaspers, 1932/1971a, p. 134); (2) *disciplined daily self-reflection* upon our existential choices and character, for “We cannot do without our daily moments of profound reflection” (1951/1973, p. 122); and, (3) “*transcending meditation*,” including contemplation upon nature or art, as seen and felt in its depth. Jaspers (1932/1971a, p. 155) reminds us that as we become engaged with the “infinity of present things” it is good to be open to “philosophical faith,” and ever-ready for the possibility of *Transcendence* within immanence. Our surrounding environment will remain mute if we interrogate it, yet can speak if we but silently listen. As we make ourselves open and ready to receive, there looms the possibility of *Transcendence*.

Not only our natural environment alone, according to Jaspers, but absolutely anything within immanent existence can become a cypher (a symbol, a hieroglyphic) of *Being*, and “I do not think beyond the cypher, for its glow is that of Being . . . It is an echo of that transcendent language, audible only in the immediacy of the present moment . . .” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, Ch. III). So a puddle in the street can become a cypher, as can a streetlamp, a painting, a sculpture, a person, a poem, an institution, an entire philosophy. But Jaspers cautions: “The symbol is not passed over

by being understood, but is deepened and enhanced by being meditated upon” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 53). Anything and everything can become a cypher when from our *Existenz* dimension we move into “wonder before eternal being as it reveals itself in the infinity of temporal appearances” (1956/1971b, p. 72).

The *Encompassing* normally remains dark to consciousness, ever in the background, yet ready to be encountered in some of its facets from our activated *Existenz* dimension: “In principle everything can become sacred, and nothing is exclusively sacred” (Jaspers, 1956/1971b, pp. 84-85). The hidden divinity speaks pervasively, indirectly and ambiguously, for those who have the eyes to see and ears to hear, though “every certainty about him is fraught with danger.” (Jaspers, 1957d, p. 784). To behold cyphers in-the-world, “The cypher is listened to, not cognized” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 41), and even thought itself can become a cypher (Jaspers, 1959, p. 52). A take-away for Jaspers (1947/1959, p. 77): “. . . the way to God goes through the world” (1932/1971a, p. 155).

Touching upon the *Encompassing* awakens the person, and Jaspers likens this to waking up from sleep or a trance: “Then authentic being opens up to us . . . For he who has experienced this, this becoming one is the true awakening; the awakening to consciousness in the subject-object dichotomy is more in the nature of sleep” (Jaspers, 1954, pp. 33-34). In such moments, cognition of objects is no longer the aim, “but rather an alteration of our consciousness of Being” (Jaspers, 1932/1971a, pp. 70-75).

One of the intriguing aspects of Jaspers is that while he was a well-grounded existentialist who profoundly valued the surrounding world of daily life activity and its attendant roles, Jaspers simultaneously valued *Transcendence*. Jaspers neglected neither the responsibilities and claims of the everyday relative realities of which he was a vital part, nor did he abandon the quiet fullness of a rich and ongoing contemplative life. This sets him apart from those who have retreated from the world to pursue their own self-transcendent journeys rather exclusively, those whom Jaspers saw to be the “mystics.” Jaspers found his own “middle way” that honored and participated both within their immediate world and the groundlessness of Being.

Next we return to James’ “mystical group” markers as introduced in his *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902 and how these pertain to Karl Jaspers’ own self-transcendent encounters.

JAMES’ CLASSIC MARKERS OF MYSTICAL TRANSPORT

Ineffability

James (1902, p. 396) notes that the mystical state of transport is ultimately incommunicable, and that the term recurrently used in mystical literature is “ineffable.” Jaspers (1957b, p. 73) is clear throughout his work that “the authentic idea of the *Encompassing* disappears with every attempt to establish, isolate, and absolutize it.” What Jaspers would grasp when thinking would finally fail

him, and he would transcend to again realizing “*that*” there is a larger *Encompassing* yet while never precisely knowing “*what*” it is. For Jaspers (1971a, p. 34): “I can, therefore, neither conceive this absolute being nor give up trying to conceive it. This being is transcendence, because I cannot grasp it but must transcend to it in thoughts that are completed when I cannot think them.” And in the end, “Whatever we can think, we must say: it is not this” (Jaspers, 1957d, p. 488). The *Encompassing* announces itself, but is never reducible to a thought, image, or object to be quantified or linguistically captured.

Noetic Quality

James (1902/1929, p. 379) concludes that while mystical states fail to offer a precise map, they nevertheless open a region, offering “windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world.” James (1902/1929, p. 402) cites St. Ignatius, who wrote that “In one quarter of an hour I saw and knew more than if I had been many years together in a university.” Yet self-transcendent experiences are tremendously more than this, as James (1902, p. 420) goes on to say: “The supernaturalism and optimism to which they would persuade us may . . . be after all the truest of insights into the meaning of this life.” Beyond this rests the height of mystical aim: “The overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystical achievement” (James, 1902/1929, p. 420). Jaspers himself aspired, and learned, to surmount the supposed gap between subject and divine “object,” to participate in greater union with the infinite *Comprehensive* (which, when speaking to or writing for lay audiences, he frequently referred to with the pointer-term “God”). Jaspers (1956/1971b, pp. 76-78) was well aware of the limitations of human knowledge and belief, and humbly submitted himself to higher agency in his personal contemplative practices and in his philosophizing: “Confronting reality, therefore, is always like breaking out of illusion.” Jaspers (1957b, p. 139) understood that “the spirit of philosophy emerges out of its ever-present source in the soul only to awaken the soul . . .” Jaspers’ (1956/1971b, p. 22) philosophical operations were not to acquire transmissible content knowledge, but to make more lucid a sense of *Being*, to allow his spirit, reason, and *Existenz* dimension to carry him into union with the *Encompassing*: “The mystic is immersed in the *Comprehensive*” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 34).

Transiency

James noted that the preponderance of self-transcendent mystical states do not long remain in their fullness of intensity. However, James (1902/1929, pg. 387) does grant that some in-the-world mystics (e.g., Walt Whitman) or monastic monks (e.g., St. Catherine of Sienna) might have attained “chronic mystical perception” relative to the general population. Jaspers as well knew from his own direct experience that the intensity of self-transcendent moments is usually transitory: “In our ascending journey the primal source grows clearer for us behind our empirical states, but there is

the constant danger that it will return to obscurity” (1973, p. 130) Jaspers declares that “there is no remaining on that height insofar as we live in time,” conceiving that the best we can hope for in daily life in the world is “eternity by way of the moment” (1957d, p. 828). As for lingering effects, Jaspers (1956/1971b, p. 60) says “Transcendence becomes visible in its traces, not as itself, and always ambiguously. It does not become extant in the world.” Jaspers concludes that, “in time the order always is: move on. We lose ourselves, and we win ourselves again,” and “we become more real in the repetition” (Jaspers (1957d, p. 828-829). This aligns with James’ (1902, p. 387) observation that while self-transcendent experiences do fade in intensity, they tend to leave an inner rich tone and texture that can continue developing across time. Once the fullness has passed, the mystic is then challenged to stabilize elements of its presence in their life. About the continuing effects of his own daily “transcending meditations,” Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 125) says this: “For in these moments when I return home as it were to myself I acquire an underlying harmony which persists behind the moods and movements of the day, and which sustains me, and in all my derailment, confusion, emotional upheaval does not let me sink into the abyss.”

Passivity

James understood that while mystics have often used contemplative practices and procedures, a larger force or power or presence seems to unfold and to some degree guide the process, to where (James, 1902/1929, p. 372) “the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance.” Jaspers own personal process reflected this, he says he was impelled to “surge up and beyond myself, with the urge to yield to an ‘other,’ to reality itself.” Selfless surrender was necessary, for Jaspers knew that “Essential reality reveals itself only to our naivete” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, pp. 57-58). Jaspers said of cyphers (symbols of *Being*) that “I cannot control them, but can only be conquered by them” (Jaspers, 1959, p. 60). It is a matter of projecting less, controlling less, and absorbing more, all in the spirit that “The world and everything that occurs in it is a mystery” (1947/1959, Ch. 2). Jaspers concluded even more explicitly later in his life that “Unlimited devotion to God is the authentic mode of existence” (1951/1973, p. 83).

It is the thesis of this article that if we are to apply William James classic’ conception of mystical markers to Jaspers practices and experiences, Jaspers would certainly fall within the “mystical” range and be positioned somewhere on the “mystical ladder” as conceived of by James.

We next glance at each of Jaspers’ main methods for moving toward Transcendence.

JASPERS’ SELF-TRANSCENDENT PRACTICES

Willaim James (1902/1929, pp. 407-409) has referred to Dionysius as being among the early Western sources of mysticism, and noted that Dionysius pursued “absolute truth” via negativities in terms of what truth is *not*: “Like Hegel in his logic, mystics journey toward the possible pole of

truth only by the ‘*Methode der Absoluten Negativitat.*’ This paradoxical method had repeatedly been used by Eckhart, Boehme, Silesius, and other prominent mystics across time.” Jaspers too employed what he termed a “self-annihilating dialectics” that would include such propositions as “The Now has no Before and no After,” “Nothingness is *Being*,” “I cannot think of the end of the future,” “Time and timelessness become identical as eternity,” “Nothing is infinite abundance.” If and when fortunate, thinking such thoughts would eventually lead to cognitive “foundering,” where the intellect is stymied and logical thought processes are risen above, for “This ultimate can be attained only in the transcending of all thought” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 49). Jaspers was direct about the overlap here with mysticism: “Now that, with our basic philosophical operation, we have loosened the fetters binding us to objects mistaken for being itself, we are in a position to understand the meaning of *mysticism.*” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 33, italics in original).

In addition to using thought to transcend thought, Jaspers also practiced contemplating cyphers from the perspective that “Possible symbolism pervades all existence.” Jaspers regularly made it his task to be “reading the symbols of the polyvalent language of things ...” (1951/1973, p. 126). To see into the depth dimension, whether of city lights, the sea, or entire philosophies, Jaspers speaks of “penetrating to the origin by becoming one with the temporally concrete appearance of the reality in which I stand” (Jaspers, 1932/1971a, p. 124). In true philosophizing the sensory world is not cast off, “but endowed with meaning and soul” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 44). Jaspers loved to look at art objects, or photographs of art, or mother nature, and to enter symphonic realms, sensing the reality of *Being* itself shining through these fragments within empirical existence (1932/1971a, p. 75).

Jaspers also engaged daily in what he referred to as “transcending meditation,” and unlike with public religious worship, Jaspers knew that meditation and self-reflection require solitude: “What the religions accomplish in prayer and worship has its philosophical analogy in explicit immersion, in inner communication with being itself” (1951/1973, p. 122). In this we “are in contact with what is most essential.” Jaspers says of the drive toward non-dualistic clarity: “*Being* itself, the foundation of all things, the absolute, presses upon our consciousness in object form which, because as an object it is inadequate, disintegrates, leaving behind the pure clarity of the presence of the *Comprehensive*” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, Ch. III). To the extent that Jaspers touched upon the *Comprehensive*, “meditation will provide the dominant tone that carries me through the day in countless activities . . .” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 125).

Jaspers also undertook disciplined self-reflection each day, asking himself how he had conducted himself with integrity that day, where he had fallen short, and what he further needed to focus upon to and refine and develop his character ever more in the field of daily action ((Jaspers, 1951/1973, pp. 120-122).

JASPERS' SEMANTIC RELUCTANCE

Although Jaspers' contemplative, meditative, and philosophical life seem to clearly overlap with William James' conception of the mystical tradition, Jaspers was not at all eager to identify himself personally with the title of "mystic," and shied away from such semantic alliance throughout his career. Nevertheless, a few scholars (e.g., Olson, 1983; Samadian, 2021) have argued that Jaspers is clearly within the mystical spectrum, no matter how much he avoided applying such nomenclature to himself. Why might Jaspers have demurred from embracing the "mystic" appellation?

James died three years before Jaspers' first major book publication, and therefore did not know of Jaspers' work, but what James understood as to science's general attitude toward "mystical" individuals and events applies well to Jaspers' situation. James noted that nothing outside science "has been treated with a more contemptuous scientific regard than the mass of phenomena generally called mystical . . ." (James, 1979, p. 223). Contemptuous connotations of the term "mysticism" in any of its forms abounded in the academy. Added to this, Karl Jaspers had no Ph.D. (or any degree) in philosophy, and yet held a full professorship in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg, much to the consternation of his departmental peers. And from what little they did know of Jaspers' thinking, he was labelled a "romantic" (Jaspers, 1957a, p. 30). In addition, Jaspers published nothing for the first nine and a half years of his full professorship, and this more than cast doubt upon his scholarly credibility. Jaspers was also married to a Jewish woman in Hitlerian Germany, and living within the historicity of the National Socialist era, where even philosophy itself was viewed as "a deadly spiritual enemy" (Jaspers, 1957a, p. 70). In light of these compelling facts, Jaspers would certainly be justified in refraining from applying such a term as "mystical," with its derogatory connotations within the academy, to himself and his philosophical endeavors.

Added to this was Jaspers' personal dissatisfaction with much that is associated with traditional religious mysticism, doctrine, and imagery. For religious mysticism, self-transcendent experiences typically involve sacred objects, rituals, persons, and doctrine; but as Jaspers viewed it, religion tends to "absolutize" these elements, to statically freeze them into place, and thereby engage in "idolatry" (Jaspers, 1957b, p. 108). In Jaspers' own free philosophizing, on the other hand, movement into self-transcendence can potentially manifest anywhere from within empirical existence and not only through fixed objects, locations, dogmas, or persons. The historical Christian mystics, those with whom Jaspers would have been most be familiar, were far too doctrinal in their interpretations of their self-transcendent experiences in Jaspers' view (1956/1971b, p. 72), and of this he wanted no part. In his adolescence Jaspers physically and psychologically left the Church, and though he never formally resigned the Church, he chose unrestrictive free philosophizing as his path. Yet as Jaspers himself put it, "But to the extent that

religion entails mystical relation to the immediacy of God, there religion and philosophy meet” (Jaspers, 1957d, pp. 777-780).

Another relevant factor is that Jaspers as an existentialist placed inestimable value upon the human’s daily empirical existence within their actual historicity, for our worldly presence brings ultimate “boundary situations” that only life lived in-the-world can bring and providing prime opportunities for personal growth. Jaspers’ conception of the word “mystic” itself, with the severe withdrawal from the world that the term connoted in Jaspers’ personal interpretation of that term, was incompatible with his existential in-the-world philosophy of life. Within the hustle and bustle of the everyday world are ever-present gateways for encountering cyphers of *Being*, and these are best not abandoned.

Academics, of course, frequently have varying referents for the same symbol, such that what is considered “mystical” to one might not be to another with a different frame of reference. D.T. Suzuki (1964, p. 35) for example, considered Zen philosophy and practice to be “mystical,” such that if a person were sitting silently and simply becoming aware of their breathing, then this to Suzuki would constitute a “mystical” practice since its aim is to become settled, calm, quiet, and “looking into eternity.” And among the pioneering Western scholars of mysticism, Underhill (1909/2020, pp. 73-74) saw the “mystic” as a person who moved into nonduality, subject and object becoming one, a prime stated aim of Jaspers himself, though he chose not to self-identify with that label. Today the word “mystical” in any of its forms as related to self-transcendent experiences would be held by many academics in higher regard than in Jaspers’ era, location, and situation. Added to this are Jaspers’ conservative semantic tendencies in general along with his semantic inconsistencies (Gordon, 2021), and his reluctance to explicitly ally with the semantics of “mysticism” becomes readily understandable. In any event, a totality of factors no doubt inhibited Jaspers from crossing a linguistic barrier that had been set for him in the academy, and that he had set for himself. Jaspers (e.g., 1957a, p. 39) frequently acknowledged that his philosophical contributions were in the spirit of the *philosophia perennis*, and as Huxley (1945, p. 65) makes clear, unlike the intellectualist metaphysicians “the Perennial Philosophers are primarily concerned with liberation and enlightenment . . . so that they and others may actually become the unmoving One.”

From a broad retrospective view, Jaspers functioned as what Huxley (1945) would likely call an “applied mystic” or what Underhill (1909/2020, p. 458) would call a “mystical philosopher” or a “practical mystic.” Here we will settle for the term “philosophical practical mystic,” a term with which James himself might well concur if were to have the opportunity to read Jaspers’ works.

CONCLUSION

Because Jaspers was existentially-oriented, he saw our roles and responsibilities within the confines of our everyday empirical existence as of great importance and meaning. Our “historicity” in time and space is where and how we find and discover ourselves in more of our comprehensiveness (though we can never finally and totally grasp what and who we are). Jaspers bridged empirical in-the-world existence and its endless possibilities for further human development, with, at the same time, the *Transcendent*. Karl Jaspers made it his aim to abide within both orders of reality; and, intellectually, so did William James. Two great historical figures with us to this day in their visions of inspiration and hope for human *Being*.

It is the thesis of this brief paper that, using the traditional Jamesian markers, egoic self-transcendence is what Jaspers sought and markedly achieved. Jaspers can justifiably be viewed as a philosophical practical mystic, one who neither gave up the world nor gave up on the world, and who instead robustly participated in two realms simultaneously: (1) empirical existence, and (2) *Transcendence*.

The lives of William James and Karl Jaspers contain provocative parallels. James was initially an M.D. psychologist by profession, and then later also well-regarded as a pragmatic philosopher. Jaspers too was a trained M.D. psychopathologist who later became a noted philosopher. Both men while valuing intellectual analysis clearly saw the ultimate limitations of logic and discursive thought. James had few direct first-person experiences with marked STEs, yet he remained fascinated with the STEs until his death. Jaspers philosophized about the importance of egoic self-transcendence for a life of wholeness, and more actively than James pursued such experiences through his self-annihilating dialectics, his receptivity to cyphers in empirical existence, and his “transcending meditations.”

A mapping of other interesting overlaps between James and Jaspers is left for others to explore. For present purposes, and using the markers of James to apply to Jaspers’ STEs, it has been suggested that Jaspers can be located somewhere on James’ “mystical ladder.” Yet more than this, Jaspers’ contributions are noteworthy in that he held deep respect for an existential life lived fully and productively within the everyday world while at the same time engaging in an approach to *Transcendence* in which “I as myself vanish” (Jaspers, 1957/1966a, p. 81). Jaspers appears to have found his own middle-way.

REFERENCES

- Abbagnano, N. (1969). *Critical existentialism* (N. Langiulli, Trans.). NY: Anchor.
- Barnard, G.W. (1997). *Exploring unseen worlds: William James and the philosophy of mysticism*. State University of New York Press.
- Barrett, W. (1990). *Irrational man: A study in existential philosophy*. NY: Anchor.

- Blackham, H. (1963). *Reality, man and existence: Essential works of existentialism*. NY: Bantam.
- Gordon, R. (2000). Karl Jaspers: Philosopher of dialogical communication. *Southern Communication Journal*, 65(1-2), 105-118. Retrieved in December 2023 from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10417940009373161>
- Gordon, R. (2021). Karl Jaspers on listening to the sacred within empirical existence. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 44(4), 22-44. Retrieved in January 2024 from <http://www.relcomm.org/journal-of-communication-and-religion.html>
- Grabau, R. (1971). Preface to Karl Jaspers' *Philosophy of Existence* (R. Grabau, Trans.). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1956.)
- Huxley, A. (1945). *The perennial philosophy*. Harper & Row.
- Jablensky, A. (2013). Karl Jaspers: Psychiatrist, philosopher, humanist. *Schizophrenia Bulletin*, 39(2), 239-241. Retrieved November 2023 from <https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbs189>
- James, W. (1929). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. Random House. (Originally published in 1902.)
- James, W. (2007). The will to believe. In *William James: Essays and Lectures*, 173-216. (R. Kamber, Ed). Pearson.
- James, W. (2019). *A pluralistic universe*. Anodos Books. (Originally published in 1909).
- Jaspers, K. (1955). *Reason and existenz* (W. Earle, Trans) . NY: Noonday Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1935.)
- Jaspers, K. (1957a). *Man in the modern age* (E. & C. Paul, Trans.). NY: Anchor. (Originally published in Germany, 1931.)
- Jaspers, K. (1957b). *Reason and existenz: Five lectures* (W. Earle, Trans.). NY: Noonday. (Originally published in Germany, 1935.)
- Jaspers, K. (1957c). Philosophical autobiography. In P. Schilpp (Ed.). *The philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (4-94). ILL: Open Court.
- Jaspers, K. (1957d). Reply to my critics. In P. Schilpp (Ed.). *The philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (748-869). ILL: Open Court.
- Jaspers, K. (1959). *Truth and symbol* (J. Wilde, W. Kluback, & W. Kimmel, Trans.). New Haven, CT: College and University Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1947.)
- Jaspers, K. (1962). *The great philosophers: Vol. I* (R. Manheim, Trans.). NY: Harcourt, Brace & World. (Originally published in Germany, 1956.)
- Jaspers, K. (1966a). *The great philosophers: Vol II* (R. Manheim, Trans.). NY: Harcourt, Brace & World. (Originally published in Germany, 1957.)
- Jaspers, K. (1966b). *The great philosophers: Vol III* (R. Manheim, Trans.). NY: Harcourt, Brace & World. (Originally published in Germany, 1957.)
- Jaspers, K. (1969). *Philosophy: Vol. I* (E. Ashton, Trans.). ILL: University of Chicago Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1932.)
- Jaspers, K. (1970). *Philosophy: Vol. II* (E. Ashton, Trans.). ILL: University of Chicago Press.

- (Originally published in Germany, 1932).
- Jaspers, K. (1971a). *Philosophy: Vol. III* (E. Ashton, Trans.). ILL: University of Chicago Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1932.)
- Jaspers, K. (1971b). *Philosophy of existence* (R. F. Grabau, Trans.). PA: University of Pennsylvania Press. (Originally published in Germany, 1956.)
- Jaspers, K. (1973). *Way to wisdom: An introduction to philosophy* (R. Manheim, Trans.). CT: Yale University Press. (Originally published in England, 1951.)
- Kaufman, W. (1989). *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. NY: Meridian.
- Kirkbright, S. (2004). *Karl Jaspers: A biography*. CN: Yale University Press.
- Matson, W. (1987). *A new history of philosophy: Vol. II*. NY: Harcourt Brace.
- Mendlewicz, M.S. (2014). Existential dialectics, ciphered language and mysticism in Karl Jaspers. *Yearbook of the Austrian Society*.
https://www.academia.edu/9691972/Existential_dialectics_ciphered_language_and_mysticism_in_Karl_Jaspers_Jahrbuch_der_%C3%96sterreichischen_Karl_Jaspers_Gesellschaft_2014
- Miron, R. (2012). *From selfhood to Being*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Rodopi.
- Olson, A. (1983). Jaspers' critique of mysticism. Retrieved from *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 51(2), 251-256. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/LI.2.251>
- Pattison, G., & Kirkpatrick, K. (2018). *Mystical sources of existential thought*. London: Routledge.
- Peach, F. (2008). *Death, 'deathlessness' and Existenz in Karl Jaspers' philosophy*. Scotland: Edinburgh University Press.
- Samadian, D. (2021). *The apophatic philosophy of Karl Jaspers*. Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the humanities at the University of Manchester.
<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/the-apophatic-philosophy-of-karl-jaspers>
- Schilpp, P. (Ed.). (1957). *The philosophy of Karl Jaspers*. La Salle, ILL: Open Court.
- Schwartz, M., Moskalewicz, M., & Wiggins, O. (2017). Karl Jaspers: The icon of modern psychiatry. *Israel Journal of Psychiatry*, 54(2), 3-8.
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/d13df73e5bf5a363c9570592d4489249/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=47717>
- Suzuki, D.T. (1964). *An introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Evergreen.
- Underhill, E. (1911/2020). *Mysticism: A study in nature and development of spiritual consciousness*. Digireads.com .
- Volker, F. (2017). Methodology and mysticism: For an integral study of religion. *Religion*, 12(2), 161. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020161>
- Yaden, D., Haidt, J., Hood, R., Vago, D., & Newberg, A. (2017). The varieties of self-transcendent experience. *Review of General Psychology*, 21(2), 143-160.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000102>