

# Karl Jaspers and the Philosophy of Technology

Panagiota Xirogianni<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece, email:  
pxirogianni@gmail.com

**Abstract.** Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) is one of the leading existentialist philosophers of the 20th century. In his view, the concept of existence is not adequately grasped through scientific research; its goal is to liberate itself from the objective world. In law, existence comes upon extreme situations (death, pain, failure, passion, struggle, guilt), it is tested by them, and by experiencing them it is asked to constitute the person through self-knowledge and as being-with-the-other. Humans acknowledge their responsibility for materializing their potential, and use their technique in order to produce beneficial objects and acts. Technique is morally neutral since it is an instrument in the service of humans, who use it for better or for worse. Technique has promoted justice and freedom. Existence though has lost its joy and has abandoned itself to technique, viewing the technical world as its nucleus. Technique gives humans the right to a total destruction of the world, but humans assume freely through rationalism to become equal to the occasion. Technique cannot create a perfect world. Jaspers refers to the future of humanity and brings to light a situation where nuclear energy will found human existence in an order of world peace. At the same time, a mutual disarmament of great world powers is in order. Existence is led to co-existence through a combination of reason, love and will, and with personal responsibility within the world.

**Keywords:** *existentialism; nuclear energy; technique; freedom; self-knowledge; science; culture; transcendence.*

## 1. Introduction

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) is one of the leading existentialist philosophers of the 20th century. In his view, the concept of existence is not adequately grasped through scientific research; its goal is to liberate

itself from the objective world. Existence as free retains its individuality and seeks communication with others.

However, within the world, existence comes upon extreme situations (death, pain, failure, passion, struggle, guilt), it is tested by them, and by experiencing them it is asked to constitute the person through self-knowledge and as being-with-the-other.

Yet humans as persons are threatened by technological progress. At the same time, totalitarianism and the nuclear threat endanger their existential freedom. Faced with (borderline) extreme situations, humans are asked to transcend them, to live them through and to distance themselves from empirical existence. Therefore, humans are led to authentic existence when, through their existential anxiety, they try to conquer their existence.

When tested or suffering, humans are asked through existential struggle and anxiety to overcome adversity through failure, to bring forth their authentic purpose. Existence inevitably comes upon extreme situations, and every experience in life becomes an occasion of self-recollection and struggle, insulation, and revelation of truth (Wahl 1988, pp. 224-226; Xirogianni 2019, pp. 34-39; Nissiotis 1956 [1985], p. 100) in the very wreckage of existence.

Humans acknowledge their responsibility for materializing their potential, and faced with the obstacles of life, with wreckage, they are asked to reach the essence of their Ego despite their desolation in the world.

Humans apply technique in the world as part of spiritual culture, in order to produce useful objects and acts (Koumakis 2016, p. 33):

“Technique aims at liberating man from his animal confinement in nature, which threatens him and chains him, because man is in need of nature” (Koumakis 2016, p. 42).

Technique is put in human service: “the principle of technique is purposeful action with matter and forces put in the service of man” (Koumakis 2016, p. 42).

At the same time, love of knowledge, unselfish devotion to a goal, is also an important element in the development of science and scientific technique: “Culture was created by love of wisdom and love of technique” (Koumakis 2016, p. 89).

Yet technique is morally neutral since it is an instrument in the service of humans, who use it for better or for worse. In fact, technique has combatted human misery, and has promoted justice and freedom.

Technique is not a mere form of culture; it belongs to humans, who, as rational beings, and through their work, transform the natural world into human world (Koumakis 2016, p. 99). Through technique, culture obtains the dimension of width.

However, all products of technical culture are produced in a mass scale; individual quality is not a goal, what matters is to acquire more and more material goods. Thus, there is a loss of the deeper meaning of virtue, hope, pain, patience, although there are some people who remain imbued with humanism and abstain from selfishness.

Existence has lost its joy and seeks vivid emotions, doubting about everything – e.g., if the profession we have come to master will even be available in the next few years. Through technique, humans transcend every earthly anxiety and distance themselves from earth, transporting themselves into space (Koumakis 2016, p. 144) and widening their horizons without retaining at the same time their particularity: “collapse of historical memory, lack of a dominant knowledge, puzzlement before an unknown future” (Koumakis 2016, p. 147).

Therefore, humans, according to Jaspers, are abandoned to technique as prisoners and forget their Ego. The philosopher makes it his task to analyze the possibility of a new humanism: “Under the term humanism, we mean, first, an educational ideal as appropriation of the classical tradition; second, the rehabilitation of contemporary man as a principle; and third, the acknowledgment of human dignity in every individual” (Koumakis 2016, p. 148; Jaspers 2010, p. 87).

## **2. Philosophy of Technology**

Jaspers seeks a coming humanism for present-day humans, pondering upon a possible end of the now dominant technique. The result, he acknowledges, would be a disaster – massive deaths and the destruction of the communicative unity of the planet.

The philosopher believes that appropriation of technique and control over it are necessary conditions for a future humanism. Jaspers also thinks that it is important to associate ourselves with nature (Koumakis 2016, pp. 150-151) and to improve living conditions on earth (Koumakis 2016, p. 152): “Unbelievable amounts of money are spent for military purposes, which would be capable to eliminate hunger and malnutrition from our entire planet” (Koumakis 2016, p. 153). For this, a necessary

condition would be world peace, which has not been achieved to this date, although it is longed for by everyone.

Humans can use technique in the right way, to their benefit, responsibly, while not making the technical world the sole core of their existence (Koumakis 2016, p. 154).

Jaspers thinks that it is better to deny the further evolution of technique, since it is not possible to reverse technical evolution. However, to deny technique means to deny the very existence of humanity. Technique though does not lead by itself to total destruction: “Technique does not carry in itself the seed of total destruction; it gives man the right to choose among two possible outcomes” (Koumakis 2016, p. 170).

Yet humans must become equal to the occasion (*ibid.*) and not lead themselves to self-destruction; through danger, they must find the way to their salvation, having in mind that technique and rationalism are means in their life, not ends in themselves. Human freedom is what gives meaning to all that (Koumakis 2016, p. 171):

“With technique, man has opened a new way, a way that he must continue. The frustration of this course would make human existence ever more difficult” (*ibid.*).

The idea of a golden future of technique has always been a human preoccupation. “Men could almost achieve heavenly conditions” (Koumakis 2016, p. 172), but at the same time there have always been those who resist to the conception of technical progress as a spiritual liberation from the past. Besides, technique does not create a perfect world, but “causes new problems and new obligations” (*ibid.*); no actual progress has been made in the fields of reason and morality, which means that “technical achievements are not always a blessing” (Koumakis 2016, p. 174).

Two cases in point are the morally unacceptable crimes of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Hitler’s crematories. In his book *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, Jaspers describes a situation in which nuclear energy will found future human existence in an order of world peace. Yet Jaspers is fully aware that predictions about future are not certain, and that grave dangers for human health stem from nuclear energy. Besides, although nuclear energy as such is morally neutral, it is to be doubted if its total human control is even possible. All nuclear weapons in the world might indeed be extinguished and nuclear energy might be put in human service, but we do not actually know to what extent this is possible.

It is very unlikely that the free time produced by an eventual waning of labor would be devoted to human spiritual development

(Koumakis 2016, p. 183; cf. also Jaspers 1966). It is also to be expected that violence and the military ideals will not disappear with the abolishment of war; humans may well remain in a constant state of struggle and tension.

However, “Jaspers does believe that the powers that possess nuclear energy and are able to abolish war are also able to solve whatever problems might occur in the warless nuclear century” (Koumakis 2016, p. 187; cf. also Jaspers 1966). The danger lies in the tests of nuclear weapons, which is why mutual disarmament is, according to Jaspers, necessary.

Jaspers believes that this supra-political reality will be produced by morality, by a “logic in which the element of violence has vanished. Morality, law and the spirit of sacrifice constitute a logic that is made real. Logic constitutes the freedom of man” (Koumakis 2016, p. 190).

Thus, only through logic and in conditions of democracy is the unification of humanity possible. The transformation of human nature and the cultivation of human responsibility are also possible then, since the whole of humanity will have a responsibility not to destroy the world. However, human nature has constantly belied this expectation. This is why humans must continue their intense efforts to establish world peace.

### 3. Conclusion

Jaspers saw well the evils brought upon humanity by technique: “manipulation of the mind by the mass media, violation of values, mechanization of man, construction of weapons of mass destruction. Today, there are in orbit around the earth about two thousand bodies, most of which are remainders of rockets and satellites launched in the past. An eventual fall of such bodies might put into danger whole cities” (Koumakis 2016, p. 228).

Moreover, accidents that occur in the technical world cause more casualties than wars within the riven world. Thus, humans follow the path of their own destruction. Only through transcendence is man able to stop being an empirical existence, yet:

“As long as man has not gained the experience of shock and has not found the ‘passage’ to transcendence, he is not yet himself. He is a merely empirical existence, with life and rational thought, and completely tied to it. Yet, contrary to this humiliating image, man has been called the being that thinks of God. Only in relation to

transcendence can man obtain the consciousness of a free being” (Jaspers 2010, p. 86; cf. also Dufrenne & Ricoeur 1947).

It is only then that existence will find its way to genuine co-existence, with a combination of reason, love and will, and with a sense of personal responsibility, and only then will be possible an authentic existence in the world: “Communication is always and at the same time a struggle, a struggle of love, or a struggling love. Every individual must remain what they are, and everyone must grow along with the other” (Wahl 1988, p. 57; cf. also Dufrenne & Ricoeur 1947).

Existence is in its essence potentiality (Wahl 1988, p. 73) and a return to the source (ibid.). The area of substance (Wahl 1988, p. 90) is the area of lived potentiality, a potentiality actively longed for (ibid.).

The world is sanctified through our resignation from it (Wahl 1988, p. 131). It is a world in which humans are born without having the choice of place, time, or environment (Wahl 1988, p. 215). Existence is asked to abandon the passion of knowledge and to lead itself to the passion of unknowledge:

“As in Socratic unknowledge, where the philosophy of day is replaced by the philosophy of night. It is the ‘sign’, the only possible reason of transcendence towards substance, a discovery without words” (Wahl 1988, p. 225).

## References

- Dufrenne, Mikel & Ricoeur, Paul (1947). *Karl Jaspers et la philosophie de l’existence*. Paris: Seuil.
- Jaspers, Karl (1966). *The Atom Bomb and the Future of Man*, 2 vols. Athens: Hellenic Army General Staff.
- Jaspers, Karl (2010). *Lessons in Philosophy*. Athens: Armos Publications.
- Koumakis, Georgios (2016). *Karl Jaspers’ Philosophy of Technology*. Thessaloniki: Romi Publications.
- Nissiotis, Nikolaos (PhD Thesis 1956 [published 1985]). *Existentialism and Christian Faith in Kierkegaard and Contemporary Existentialist Philosophers* (Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre). Athens: Menyma Publications.

Wahl, Jean (1988). Introduction to the Philosophies of Existentialism. Athens & Ioannina: Dodoni Publications.

Xirogianni, Panagiota (2019). Paul Ricoeur’s Moral Philosophy. Athens: Ennoia Publications