

# TRUTH and SYMBOL

from

VON DER WAHRHEIT

by

KARL JASPERS

Translated with an Introduction

by

Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback and William Kimmel



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An example of this is the Trinity. God becomes the Trinity with metaphors drawn from the world of experience, but the Trinity is also thought of as the basis of these phenomena in the world. The metaphor of the Trinity of God is the dialectical three steps which are to be found in all Being, especially in our inner life and intellectual development. These phenomena are, however, rather to be interpreted in reverse as the mirror and the likeness of the Trinity so that Augustine's *de trinitate dei* is perhaps just as much a knowledge of God as a knowledge of the soul. But this circle does not dissolve this whole as a delusion but is itself the cypher of Being which is just as lost in an objectivization into a presumed knowledge of God as in a reduction into empirically experienced triplicities. Other circles also arise between empirical reality and the language of Being, between the world image and knowledge, between the ideal and the reality of being-man.

## 4

*The Ascent to the Reading of  
the Cypher-Script*

Philosophizing is an initiation into the consciousness of Being. This initiation is accomplished first in the totality of philosophizing, not through a single thought. It takes place through the inner action which is accomplished by thinking, not by thinking as such.

The initiation achieves its fulfillment in the symbols which have become effective. To hear their language requires more than the methods of thinking. The impressiveness, depth, and force of the symbols is made manifest to that inner action achieved in the totality. In them philosophizing achieves the clarity and breadth from which it started as from a barely conscious seed. This hearing of the symbols is the first precedent and incomprehensible experience out of which philosophical thinking arises and towards which it strives.

This initiation takes place in leaps of clarification. That which becomes clear to me seems then to be that which I have actually always known. I remember the eternal in the form of an apparently new insight. The fulfillment of philosophy can at moments seem to participate in the knowledge of the creation.

We can speak of stages of initiation in philosophizing. The highest stage would be the penetration of objectivity in such a way that everything is a metaphor (cypher), nothing is without language, nothing is left to mere existence as the remains, as it were, of a non-being abandoned by God.

A. *The ascent to gliding<sup>8</sup> awareness.* The pure cypher speaks for a consciousness of Being for which everything objective and subjective is relative as a phenomenon in the movement, and sensual tangibility is overcome as the last stage of Being. This state of the consciousness of Being, in being one with all stages and modes of objectivity and subjectivity, would at the same time be gliding with respect to each one of its definite forms. I am aware of Being by not having become bound or grounded anywhere.

In this state the knowledge of reflection is unrestricted. I know that every stage or mode of Being, that the sensual present, and that deception and appearance are requisites for life; but I am able to recognize them as such, as that which they are. Knowledge does not overcome life but it has transformed it. Herein lies the decisive factor: whether I am able to achieve unconditional realization in time, knowing that all tangibility is a cypher; and whether, in such penetration of reality which attains a gliding state, I yet accomplish this with

8. Jaspers uses the word "*schweben*" both for the characteristic of thought which touches all forms of Being as it glides from one to another without adhering absolutely to any of them and also for that which, therefore, hovers suspended within and beyond the forms themselves.

the same force as one who is inwardly shackled to it [tangibility]. If I am not able to do this, then I lose both empirical reality and cypher, for if I permit the transcending to turn into impotent scepticism, then the tangible with its becoming-a-cypher transforms itself for me in aesthetic observation into an ineffective symbol. Through such a slipping of philosophizing I no longer arrive at a genuine foundering<sup>9</sup> but only at the loss or disappearance of life. I have lost the right to philosophize.

The building up of the philosophical awareness of Being is achieved in a sequence of stages, each of which, with its relativity, is at the same time preserved in the gliding. It is, to be sure, dissolved and transformed in reflection but not destroyed. In doing this, reflection can, however, also derange instead of preserving. It can lead to desperation in the loss of the consciousness of Being so that, instead of ascent, a precipitate descent takes place. Consciousness became the nemesis of simple immediacy.

This building up of the awareness of Being may be clarified by a comparison. I can observe my physical functions, such as the action of the heart or of respiration, can recognize them, can consciously follow them as my own, can understand them in their animal-physiological function, and can, as it were, adopt them as my own. The knowledge of physiological corporeality leaves their function untouched. Life on the higher stage knows about that which comes earlier without being able to disturb it, indeed, rather enhances and secures it by holding it within standards appropriate to it.

But this is not the only possibility. Observation can

9. Cf. Introduction.

be disturbing. Knowledge leads to painful apperception of what happens to alterations of the function, for instance, to hypochondriac developments in fear and anxiety, to tormenting emotions and ailments. Yet the function always remains a necessary requisite for life and must remain so. If it should fail, then every higher function of life which depends on it would disappear with it.

It is a fundamental feature of human physical life, in contrast to that of the animal, that man knows more or less about his body and influences it. He can become the physician of his body or its destroyer, whereas the animal, who must surrender completely to the biological course, must live for his body without being able to see beyond it or into it. The influence of man on his body occurs in manifold ways in a manifold sense. One way is that of the conscious appropriation and exercise of physical life in the service of the soul. With my knowledge I will take my body in hand, will improve its functions, put them in the service of higher goals, from the relaxation exercises of modern psycho-therapy to the mystical breathing techniques which are a special feature of Asiatic philosophical practice.

The question is, how far can a body be ruined by unreasonable knowledge on the part of the soul; and secondly, how far is the management of physical life able to enhance the soul; and finally, how far can even a failing body be yet sustained by a reasonable soul.

This comparison of the attitude of reflection towards all stages of the consciousness of Being, up to gliding awareness, with the attitude of knowledge towards life,

ASCENT TO READING OF THE CYPHER-SCRIPT

shows, in both, the twofold possibility in the course of the process of awareness: either knowledge and disturbance, or knowledge and, with it, a raising of the lower states from the position of the higher ones. The knowledge which can disturb can also enhance and can protect against disturbances and remove disturbances which have occurred. Furthermore, it is common to both that the earlier stages must be preserved and elevated in the process of penetration in order to carry and make possible the later ones. Only when we remain with clarity in all stages of the knowledge of objectivity and unfold them, can we attain the meaning of the higher stages which would sink into nothingness without the others.

In philosophizing, the stages in the gliding of the knowledge of Being lead up to the point where the resting-place of Being sets a goal for the gliding. Every mode of the knowledge of Being is, as it were, a standpoint which is surpassed. In philosophizing we achieve and practice these modes of surpassing. Finally, however, genuine consciousness of Being is not a point of view. For there is no longer a standpoint outside of it or above it from which the consciousness of Being could be viewed. On the contrary, here is that point from which all other standpoints are seen as standpoints or as stages for getting here.

For this gliding there are two presuppositions: all objectivity is to be grasped in its relativity—and the support in the distant One must not be lost.

B. *The ascent through the grasping of all objectivity.*  
Because all the stages of objectivity are presupposed in

## TRUTH AND SYMBOL

order to swing up to the last one, and because, furthermore, the breadth of the realization of each step is requisite for the depth of the last, therefore, he who philosophizes has at every step an irrevocable will to the object. Every mode of being-an-object must constantly surround him, as air and nourishment surround the body. Not to omit any mode, to be present again and again in every mode, and to seize methodically in every presence what is essentially real, is a fundamental trait of philosophizing itself.

Philosophizing began with astonishment. Astonishment turns into questioning.

An answer is given by research, by illumination, by reflection, or by affirmation. Each time a world of objectivity arises.

(a) *Research*: In the sciences the methods of experiencing the empirically real are developed, and definite knowledge of objects is found. The sciences help me in training my ability to see and to observe. With scientific organs I go through the world. I try to be present in all activities, in sociological functions, in intercourse with people, in technical skills, and I try to raise whatever I experience into consciousness, to transform it into knowledge, and to experience it as something new and better.

(b) *Illumination*: What we are and can be as Existenz and what is present to us as a mode of the Encompassing, is illuminated by thoughts which, since the beginning of philosophizing, are not actually knowledge but are that which addresses itself to us in the form of wisdom and maxims, thoughts which do not put a world

ASCENT TO READING OF THE CYPHER-SCRIPT

of objectivity at our disposal but which call to us [as potentialities]. As the illumination of Existenz and the philosophy of the Encompassing this way comes into full consciousness.

(c) *Reflection*: I seek fundamental knowledge in the totality of the sciences, in the illuminations and affirmations, and in the categories and methods of which thinking in all these directions makes use. Thereby, in the breadth of its forms, in the origins, in the all-sidedness of its possibilities as at present achieved, my fundamental knowledge becomes clear. This I achieve in philosophical logic as the order of my knowing consciousness.

(d) *Affirmation*: Authentic being becomes realized in the cypher. All the modes of objectivity, every form of thinking, of research, of illumination, of reflection are in the service of the deepening of the perceptible cypher-script.

Research may, indeed, at first destroy the cypher-script of the myths insofar as its corporeality contained a moment of untruth and superstition. It is, however, the intention of research to lead the way towards a true cypher-script. Cypher-script without research is deceiving. Universal research must lead to the boundary where the highest astonishment and the most penetrating cypher-script become possible.

The cypher-script of Being must be read with the help of the cypher-script brought forth by men. What myth and revelation have said I want to understand and know about even though it be in a philosophical transformation. Whatever part of it has become ob-

jective in poetry, art, and religion, becomes the organon of philosophizing. In philosophizing itself the will to objectivity forces itself into the clarity of the cypher-script of thought which has become objective.

C. *The ascent to a Divinity.* The decisive factor for all consciousness, for inner action, for the ethos, for freedom, for existence and reason, is whether and how the reality of God is the measure of all things.

But the one God is distant; the completely "other" is entirely hidden. It is, therefore, not only easy but almost compelling for reason and sensual experience to deny Him. He cannot be deduced from any single phenomenon, cannot be perceived as Himself in anything specific. If everything is related to Him and everything comes from Him, it is not in any comprehensible way.

His distance makes the ascent to Him almost always falter again and again. We flutter our wings of philosophizing and rise above the ground only for a few moments and only slightly. In another metaphor, we remain stranded on the way to Him, or by plunging in vain directly into the reality of God, we miss the way.

(a) *We are stranded on the way:* We learn by observation of the "souls" of the elements, of Nature, of the living, of the landscape, of the cosmos; we experience the "forces"; we obey manifold demands of the good, beautiful, true, practical, and vital. From time to time we believe that we are face to face with an ultimate, must serve it and ought not deny it. This ultimate cannot be reduced to a denominator. There are the many gods which are in competition and in conflict with one another. There are the demons which rule the world. In

countless variations of historical form we remain stranded in a mode of demonology and have lost sight of the one God because there is no experience of Him either external or internal. He is that from which experience first obtains meaning and guidance, in the face of which the false ultimate becomes foreground, question, movement, and task. In philosophical thought this fixation takes place when we think of all-inclusive reality in absolutized categories as a basic law of Being, as necessity, as growth, as the will to power, as an order of monads, etc. These latter ideas, like the former demonological view, have their value and their truth as a language en route; they become false when they are assumed to grasp reality in its totality as the content of faith. Theories of a metaphysical character, by analogy with theories of natural science or with world images, are a monstrous delusion if, instead of cyphers along the way in gliding and foundering they permit the one God to be forgotten. Then they force man into a corner, rob him of his freedom and of his nobility.

(b) *We miss the way by wanting to rush directly into the reality of God:* The fascination of the thought of the One fatally devaluates the world, the fullness of its phenomena and our own life. However, we manage to get to the One only through the world, only with its phenomena and the historicity of our life. If we grasp it directly it becomes empty. Abstract monotheism becomes a negative concept and a negating action in the attitude towards faith. Everything is nothing. However, this insight, fundamentally true, permits the one God Himself to become nothing if, instead of pushing ahead

restlessly along the way, it considers itself already to be the fulfillment.

Our possible fulfillment lies in *mediation*. The ascent to the one God passes through the world of phenomena. The transformation of the world into a mediation between us and the one God is its transformation into *being-a-cypher*. That essential reality is itself the one God we learn only indirectly in the empirical realities of the world through the language of the world. We learn it through our ascent in awareness of the cyphers, each of which permits us no rest and propels us into further flight. If there were a direct experience of the one God, it would be incommunicable and could, in the course of time, verify, recall and confirm itself again only indirectly through phenomena in the world. There is only one road to the one God along which everything that is, everything we encounter, everything we ourselves are and do becomes transparent. This becoming-transparent is the becoming-a-cypher, and this becoming-a-cypher moves into the boundless depths of developing meanings, not one of which conclusively fulfills a meaning knowably. We should always hold ourselves open for the cypher-script whose communication we cannot force by intention and plan. Everything which is, must become a cypher. It is the earnestness which operates in us out of that which can appear by the standards of everyday reality as dream and play.

Striving beyond all mediations along the road, we would like to form an *image of God Himself*. What we attain in this way is again always only cyphers of the Divinity. Yet God is not a cypher but reality itself. The

imaging of God is called theology. Theology never gets any further than an intellectual conception of the language of cyphers. It has truth under the condition that it preserves the tension toward the absolutely distant, the very "other" of Transcendence. Every imaging of God which believes it can grasp Him Himself other than in the vanishing mediation of cyphers falls short of the mark. We can only penetrate into phenomena and seek to discover the ground of the mystery. If we do so, we speak in cyphers.

If I renounce every perceptible cypher, then, in formal transcending, I open the space for speculation which breaks through the world towards Transcendence. If I try to bring the Divinity nearer to myself with cyphers, then such cyphers fail without exception. Whether I think of God as the One and its emanations; as the seed, the source, the ground of the development of all things; as the overseer or the architect of the world; as the One and its creation out of nothingness; as personality; as the Trinity—it is always the same thing: everything is at best metaphor and pointer. If I should possess all possible metaphors; if I were to think of everything in God and not omit anything—His love and His anger, His righteousness and His mercy; if I refer to Him everything which occurs in the world; if, in addition, I add in my thinking everything which might be, I will never, in this infinite play of cyphers, reach God himself.

It would be different if there were a direct and exclusive *revelation* of God. Such a revelation has been claimed. This claim is the foundation of the Indian and

#### TRUTH AND SYMBOL

Judeo-Christian-Islamic religions. But such a claim of revelation is a usurping by individual people and groups of people of the truth for their special historicity as having common validity for all men. It cannot be denied that in such a form Transcendence has spoken historically for men everywhere. But men confused cyphers with Being itself. Even externally the majority of mutually conflicting revelations speaks against all of them. It is the arrogance of men, which is disguised in submission to such revelation, to demand of all other men, under the name of humility, submission to their own truth and to themselves as its representative.

The contents of claimed revelation, when stripped of their absolutisms and their character of exclusiveness, are to be adopted philosophically in the form of cyphers. An example is the Christ myth. Jesus is, to be sure, not God in the world. No man is God. The distance between man and God is infinite. The paradoxical interpretations, which point to the reality of the God-man, cannot delude the person, who, conscious of his humanness, preserves the distance for himself and all other men. But the Christ myth is a cypher for the justification of the cypher as mediation between God and man. By the belief in Christ we are wrongly faced with the alternative of choosing between either a deification of the world in the pinnacle of the God-man or a lost, soulless, God-forsaken world which is opposed to the infinitely distant God-Creator as the completely "other." That the distant God speaks in the cyphers of the world and of man and accomplishes His mediation, indicates a never-ending conceiving and realizing of man in the world and not that

#### ASCENT TO READING OF THE CYPHER-SCRIPT

God has to become man in the flesh. Rightly, however, there is in the Christ myth the indication that everything human has in it the possibility of relatedness to God, God-nearness, and that the way to God goes through the world and through the reality of our historically to be determined human nature, and not by-passing the world. Philosophy must guard man against usurpation while recognizing at the same time a cypher truth in the claims of the usurper.

On the other hand, the ascent to the one God is to be protected against an *attitude without faith* which can be clothed in misleading thoughts. The actuality of the one God is undermined, for example, by the following consideration. The one God is an idea which brings us, like a magic potion, as it were, to our freedom. The idea does, indeed, make the highest demands upon us and opens up the widest space for us. With this idea man swings himself up out of the constraints of his existence and the narrowness of his impulses. When it has been said that the idea of God is necessary for the control of despotism, malice, and the ill-will of the average man, for the peace of society and for the reliability of intercourse and harmony, it might now be added that the idea of God is necessary so that man may come to himself, so that man may become free of all the world for himself. Even in this sense one might repeat Voltaire's statement that if there were no God, He would have to be invented.

Such thoughts are, however, as senseless as they are destructive. An invented God cannot have such an effect (even if he might perhaps through deception of the

masses temporarily bring them into submission through fear of punishments in Hell). Only an actual God is capable of this. The man who invents God and does not believe in Him does not experience the uplift. The man who, while deluding himself, believes in Him, would bring about what, according to his nature, would never be comprehensible from delusion. In such a merely seeming-to-understand, that which is Existenz and Transcendence is, in the categories of vital and psychological causality, robbed of its meaning and its essential reality.

The one God cannot be acquired in a definite manner in an exclusive way. Only in the totality, out of historical depth, in the Encompassing of everything thinkable and everything that can be experienced, is the ascent possible to the One who is not less, not emptier, not more abstract than the world, but who encompasses the world in which everything, through the fact that it is in relation to Him, can be elevated to its highest potentialities. There are no directions as to how the ascent may be accomplished. Here it is as in all essentially philosophical procedure: what is decisive each time happens only once and cannot be generally anticipated. It would be a mistake to presume that with the pointing to the foundation and mode of philosophical movement a fulfillment is already given, a program set up, or perhaps even the consciousness of Being mediated in its content. It would be a false expectation that in such indications a knowledge is acquired by which one could be guided.

Illumination by philosophizing is not a guide for behavior. Loosening of the possibilities of origin is not mediation of substance.

The origin lies in God. To each man must be given from Him what he becomes through the fact that he begins to perceive Being and how he begins to perceive it. The communication of philosophy does not give essential reality but makes it possible to become aware of it.

Philosophy awakens, makes one attentive, shows ways, leads the way for a while, makes ready, makes one ripe for the experience of the utmost.