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## Karl Jaspers as Philosophical Practical Mystic

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### ABSTRACT

While Karl Jaspers, M.D. (1883-1969) is well-known as a pioneering psychopathologist and prominent existential philosopher, he is rarely recognized as a philosophical mystic, nor did he claim such a title. It is the thesis of this paper that more than a half-century after his passing, it is finally time to also recognize Jaspers' role explicitly as what Underhill termed the "practical mystic," though in Jaspers' case it would seem more fitting to propose the title of "philosophical practical mystic." An attempt is made to support this claim, and to suggest why Jaspers might have been reluctant to embrace such designation during his academic career, especially in light of his lack of a Ph.D. in philosophy; his attempt to survive with his Jewish wife under the Nazi regime in Germany; and his core values of existential in-the-worldness, ongoing active human dialogue, and personal freedom from ecclesiastical religious doctrines, artifacts, and institutions.

**Keywords:** Karl Jaspers, existential philosophy, practical mysticism, Evelyn Underhill.

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### 1. Introduction to the Problem

In this essay we consider the philosophy and practice of Karl Jaspers and suggest that Jaspers was more of a philosophical "mystic" than has been commonly acknowledged. Rather than using limiting and anachronistic definitions of "mystics" and "mysticism" that include a leaving of the world and retreating reclusively into a cave, desert, mountain, temple, or monastery, we will argue that according to the classic definition established by noted scholar of mysticism Evelyn Underhill (1911, 1915), Karl Jaspers can validly be referred to as an in-the-world "practical mystic." This is in addition to being named among the twentieth century's three-to-five most prominent existential philosophers (Abbagnano, 1965; Barrett, 1990; Blackham, 1963; Kaufman, 1989; Matson, 1987) as well as an "iconic" figure within the field of psychiatry (Schwartz, Moskalewicz, & Wiggins, 2017; Jablensky, 2013).

While Jaspers (1913/1964; 1931/1957a; 1932/1970; 1932/1971a; 1932/1969; 1932/1970; 1935/1955; 1946/1965; 1947/1952; 1947/1959; 1951/1973; 1956/1971b; 1957b; 1957c; 1956/1962; 1957/1966a; 1957/1966b; 1957/1974; 1957d;) has been actively celebrated as a pioneering psychopathologist and existential philosopher, his endeavors as a "practical mystic," or perhaps more properly as a "philosophical

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practical mystic,” have been less noted. For example, in the nearly thousand-page landmark volume *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* edited by Paul Schilpp (1957), containing two-dozen critical essays on Jaspers’ philosophical work, the terms “mystic” or “mysticism” or “mystical” appear in its index merely eight times and referencing a total of less than twenty sentences across only five of the volume’s twenty-four separate essays. One of these (Knauss, 1957, p. 150) clearly declared that Jaspers is no mystic, and another (Thyssen, 1957, p. 353) concluded that while Jaspers had experientially arrived at the state where mystics arrive, he retains the non-dissolution of his self-structure to a greater extent than mystics are believed to, so “As far as I can see, Jaspers has not accomplished the change-over to mysticism.” Lowenstein (1957, p. 652) too declared that Jaspers is no mystic, for Jaspers remained in the world and sensed divinity within it, whereas most mystics, as Lowenstein conceives of that term, “blot out” temporal consciousness and flee from the world. Holm (1957, p. 680) placed Jaspers in an intermediate position between mystical “quietism” and pure “positivism.” Ricoeur (1957, p. 613) concluded (as did Lowenstein) that mysticism involves negation of the material world, a ‘suicide’ of sorts, and that in this sense of the term Jaspers was clearly not a mystic for he in no way suppressed the worldly pole of existence.

While most Jaspers scholars ignore the matter entirely, then, some scholars are convinced that Jaspers is certainly not a mystic (Grabau, 1971; Peach, 2008), while others (Gordon, 2024, Mendlewicz, 2014; Miron, 2012) are more open to placing his “on-the-way” self-transcendent philosophy and practice within the mystical range. Olson (1983, p. 251) concluded that Jaspers kinship with mysticism is “both fascinating and frustrating” since Jaspers refuses to self-identify as a mystic while “the general tenor of his work is mystical throughout” (Olson, 1983, p. 260). Samadian (2021, pp. 152-155) sees Jaspers as contributing to the tradition of German mysticism writ large, and especially in the apophatic manner of two of his major German philosophical and mystical predecessors, Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) and Nicholas de Cusa in the fifteenth century (and Jacob Boehme, 1575-1624, might well be added): “We can therefore see in Jaspers the mystical urge to realize identity with reality” (Samadian, 2021, Ch. 1). Yet Samadian (2021, p. 316) recognizes that “Jaspers’ philosophy is muddled in its approach to mysticism.”

Through his writing and teaching Jaspers invited others closer to Transcendence in what he referred to as the *Encompassing*, and the intriguing question still today remains: Did Jaspers himself actually touch upon the *Encompassing* to a greater extent than the larger group to whom Jaspers (1956/1971b, p. 94) referred to disparagingly as mere “academic philosophers” who “fritter away” at dull doctrines, irrelevant details, and repeatedly “miss-the-mark”? Is Jaspers not solely deserving of recognition for being an iconic M.D. psychiatrist and prominent existential and metaphysical philosopher, but also worthy, a half-century later, of being seen through the lens of “philosophical practical mystic”?

## 2. Underhill’s conception of practical mysticism

We draw upon the classical work of Evelyn Underhill, recognized as a luminary within the scholarly treatment of mysticism, and explore how Jaspers’ pursuits and practices seem to fit with Underhill’s conception of what it means to be a “practical mystic.” Underhill writes of major traditional European mystics from across the centuries (e.g., Plotinus, St. Augustine, Dionysius, St. Hildegard, St. Aquinas, Hafiz, Meister Eckhart, St. Catherine of Bologna), many but not all of whom were of the Christian Church, in her landmark work *Mysticism* (1911/2020). Four years later in her smaller volume titled *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* (Underhill, 1915/2023) and published in England at the inception of World War I, Underhill (Section 1) argued that all people are born with mystical potential, and that without nurturing and cultivating this potential we remain less than fully conscious human beings. She chose to honor, nurture, and fortify the human spirit in England as WW I began, helping her readers to understand that the “sterner duties of the national life” demanded vitality of spiritual consciousness, and that from this upliftment flows practical energies useful for survival, hope, and further human development.

Underhill (1915/2023, Ch. I & II) observed that humans live ensconced within a self-construction of the mind built from materials such as verbal labels, images, judgments, and other relatively static elements conditioned by the machinery of the brain, and that these structures impose reductive patterns that close us off from larger realizations: “The doors of perception are hung with the cobwebs

of thought” (Underhill, 1915/2023, p. 16). Underhill opines that the fetters of the mind and the tyranny of incessant thought tend to obscure deeper intuitive vision, citing the classic line of William Blake, “A fool does not see the same tree that a wise person sees.” The average human mind mostly seizes upon mundane labels and concepts, transitory physical objects and other dominant aspects of the material plane and utilizes these for rudimentary tasks and pursuits. Underhill suggests, however, that the “practical mystic” advances to another and higher level of Transcendent consciousness, though perhaps not with the same frequency or intensity as a monastic “ecstatic mystic” in continuous retreat. Yet this ‘practical mystic’ remains fully engaged with the world, unlike the mystic who retreats to the mountain cave, temple, or monastery. The “practical mystic” can be an “ordinary” person who yearns to connect with a larger self-transcendent dimension, while at the same time energetically and skillfully participating in the affairs and demands of daily life in the world. The “practical mystic” need not be theologically or philosophically trained, but does engage in contemplative practices.

Underhill speaks of “mysticism” as entailing movement toward a wider experiential landscape, an uplifted plane of reality, a broadened state of consciousness bringing new levels of understanding, meaning, and purpose. The specific conception of “mysticism” and “mystic” that Underhill aligns with is as follows: “*Here is the definition: Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The Mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment*” (Underhill, 1915/2023, Section I, p. 7, italics added). Alternate synonyms for the term “Reality” could include “Pure Being,” the “Ultimate,” the “Unknowable,” the “All,” “Timeless Being,” the “Source,” the “Absolute,” the “Divine,” “God,” the “One,” the “Infinite,” and other such pointers (Underhill, 1911/2020).

The second element within Underhill’s definition is prone to being assessed as excessively lax with its criteria of “believes in” and “aims at” as constituting sufficiency for earning the title of “mystic,” or even “practical mystic.” Many are those who “believe” and “aim at,” and by these non-stringent prerequisites would therefore be called “mystics.” Underhill’s opening sentence pertaining to the attainment of “union” within a wider landscape of “Reality” (or its abstract semantic equivalents) in “greater or less degree” is more suitably exacting, and sets the bar higher for earning the specific designation of “practical mystic.” For Underhill there is an “interpenetration” of the “practical mystic” with an enlarging presence, unitive connection with a grander dimension, while yet remaining solidly grounded in the world. As to any question about the precise nature of this larger reality, Underhill (1915/2023, p. 7) suggests that “Only a mystic can answer it: and he, in terms which other mystics alone will understand.”

The thesis of the present paper is that while Jaspers himself was not likely an “ecstatic” or “rapturous” mystic to the extent of Plotinus, nor Jaspers’ Germanic mystic predecessor Meister Eckhart, he was nevertheless a “practical mystic” in Underhill’s sense, as one who seeks and experiences transcendent union with a universal greater Whole, and without abandoning the world. Jaspers heavily pursued the Way of Ideas, but it will be argued in this essay that he in addition ventured into at least the lower regions of the Way of the Mystic through his “cypher-reading” in everyday life, his daily “transcending meditation,” and his ongoing “self-annihilating” dialectics, while continuing to actively serve within his social, academic, and societal worlds.

### 3. Jaspers and practical mysticism

As for Jaspers’ working model of the person and their relation to the ultimate *Encompassing*, also known as the *Comprehensive* (and occasionally as the *Enveloping*), Jaspers (1932/1971a) knew well that it was as if he had merely depicted “rooms” within a vaster expanse with levels, contours, angles, and shapes t

hat he could never fully know. His model was suitably humble: Most basically, there is “empirical existence,” “consciousness-as-such,” “spirit,” and “Existenz.” As forms of empirical existence we have bodies and occupy space and time. As consciousness-as-such we think, we have awareness and communication, we develop society, science, and technology. As spirit we are driven by reason, which reaches toward wholeness and unity: “We do not merely exist; rather, our existence is entrusted to us as the arena and body for the realization of our origin” (Jaspers, 1956/1971b, p. 4). We are designed to transcend the surface self, and our awakened Existenz dimension renders us ripe for

leaping from immanence to Transcendence: “It is the leap from everything that can be expressed in time . . . to real and eternal being in itself . . .” (Jaspers, 1956/1971b, p. 24). The referents of the intentionally abstract terms *Encompassing* or *Comprehensive* are neither meant to be objectively defined nor are they capable of precise translation, since they are not themselves objects. Rather these terms are pointers to a mysterious and vast metaphysical horizon within which everything else exists, the horizonless horizon that includes and exceeds all horizons. As Jaspers (1935/1955, p. 75) strongly asserted (in the only three adjacent exclamatory sentences in Jaspers’ works of which this writer is aware): “The philosopher therefore says to himself: preserve the open space of the *Encompassing*! Do not lose yourself in what is merely known! Do not let yourself become separated from the Transcendence!”

One of the first philosophers whose works Jaspers studied when he was still a practicing psychiatrist (Jaspers, 1957c, p. 86) was Plotinus, the third century Egyptian-born mystical philosopher of Rome, whom Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 141) saw to be “inherently mystical” and a metaphysical fountainhead of “the first order.” Plotinus was compelled to reach mystical insight and knowledge “by the mystic urge to realize identity with reality,” to reach union with the One. Jaspers (1957/1966b, p. 91) felt that “Plotinus’ influence down to present times has been extraordinary,” and that Plotinus was “the greatest mystical philosopher of the West” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 34). Jaspers (1957/1966b, p. 50) went so far as to say, “No philosopher has lived more in the One than Plotinus.” Jaspers’ early exposure to and high regard for Plotinus had a life-long impact on Jaspers, and the aim of Plotinus was also that of Jaspers’ (1957c, p. 791): “Peace will descend when I as myself vanish; I gain insight into union with the One, when subject and object vanish” (Jaspers, 1957/1966b, p. 87). Discovering Transcendence, and in Jaspers’ case Transcendence within Immanence as well, is the quest both of Underhill’s practical mystic and of Karl Jaspers himself. For Jaspers pursued a wholistic approach that entailed “soaring above” empirical existence through specific practices, while also penetrating into the depths of empirical existence through the realization that the world is not only what it appears to be, and discovering Transcendence that often goes unwitnessed

Jaspers, however, was critical of traditional mysticism, observing that it for too easily can lead to a rejection of the world (Olsen, 1983). Jaspers himself was highly committed to his roles within empirical existence, and was not about to leave them behind, especially when daily life in the world itself offers portals to Transcendence. Jaspers did not primarily view the world as replete with sins and evils but more as an historic and existential site for ultimate union with the Godhead. To this, Jaspers’ own philosophical dialectical thinking, transcending meditation, and cypher-reading (Jaspers, 1951/1973, Chapter XI) were primarily directed, even though he demurred at invoking the term “mystical” in referring to his own strivings. But Jaspers made it apparent that he sought throughout his work to awaken himself and others to awareness of our participation in the *Encompassing*: “It is the philosophical thought-operation *par excellence*, therefore, to lift us out of the subject-object division . . .” Simultaneously, Jaspers remained vitally active in and committed to empirical existence, and particularly to meaningful dialogical communication with other human beings.

We next consider procedures traditionally used by both monastic mystics and practical mystics to prepare themselves to transcend layers of the ego-based personality and eventually reach a unitive state of consciousness, and how these methods overlap with the practices and experiences of Karl Jaspers.

#### 4. Practices of practical mystics & Jaspers

There are methods for attending to and developing mystical capacities. These traditional practices can be used both by those who aspire to become monastic mystics and withdraw from this world in retreat, and those practical mystics who long for Transcendence yet choose to continue to energetically perform their regular societal roles within empirical existence. As Underhill (1915/2023, pp. 1-13) saw it, if we in the world have not at all pursued our mystical potentials we are incomplete human beings, and have not yet taken possession of our range of powers. One need not seek to become a cloistered mystic to awaken these capacities; the practical mystic can learn to actively serve on the everyday material plane while simultaneously having their other foot in another and even more uplifting dimension, “this dual power of knowing by communion both the temporal and eternal, immanent and transcendent aspects of reality . . .” (Underhill, 1911/2020, p. 40). Jaspers actively served

within the academy at the universities of Heidelberg and Basel, produced scholarship, and prodigiously philosophized, for “To philosophize is to transcend” (1951/1973, p. 161). He also pursued and practiced methods of traditional mystics, to be called upon in his active service to the world.

In Underhill’s depiction, aspirants to practical mysticism need to continually pursue increased self-knowledge, recollecting all that they have been, are, and can yet become. This demanding endeavor requires the trinity of feeling, thought, and will (Underhill, 1911/2020, p. 69). The aspirant would be challenged to simplify the everyday egoistic surface self, to lighten the attachment system of “I, Me, and Mine,” to cast away layers of desire, to purge emotional baggage, to undergo at least partial mortification of the surface egoistic personality (Underhill, 1911/2020, pp. 289-346). There would be a gathering-up of “all the powers of the self into a state of determined attention” (Underhill, 1915/2023, p. 57), and an increasing dedication to the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. One’s character would undergo gradual refinement, a personal cleansing and purification.

There would appear to be significant overlap between these preliminary actions required of the practical mystic, as per Underhill, and Jaspers’ own daily method of self-reflection. Jaspers (1951/1973, Chapter XI) indicates that it was from the Pythagoreans, Stoics, Christian mystics, and Kierkegaard and Nietzsche that had learned to engage in daily self-reflection. In his evening self-reflection, for example, Jaspers would recollect and reflect upon what he had felt, thought, said, and done, during that day; what mistakes he had made; if and when he had deceived himself by being inauthentic; how he might in any way have been irresponsible in his choices; what virtues he had embodied; how mindful he had been; and what guiding phrases he might affirm to himself moving forward (e.g., “God Is,” “think of the other,” “be patient,” “observe moderation”). In sum, Jaspers would contemplate his attitudes and behaviors as they were enacted in empirical existence, reflecting on what could be better done by him in the world on the day ahead, or on the morrow. It was his intention to become an ever more evolved human being in a life of responsibilities and relationships in this world. This daily practice of Jaspers is consistent with the general “purging” process of the practical mystic (Underhill, 1911/1920, pp. 171-225).

In Underhill’s treatment the practical mystic also begins to look more deeply into living beings, non-living forms, natural events, and other elements within everyday life: “Look with the eye of contemplation on the most dissipated tabby of the streets . . .” (Underhill, 1915/2023, p. 59). Whether contemplating sunshine, flower, bird, cloud, sea, stars, time, space, or anything else, the aspiring practical mystic with purer gaze begins to enter into a fresh plane of perception (Underhill, 1911/2020, pp. 290-296). The practical mystic experiences an “intensified existence” within all things, glimpsing their inner secrets: “Seen thus, a thistle has celestial qualities, a speckled hen a touch of the sublime” (p. 293).” Attention to depth of contemplation is central to the development of the practical mystic, and this too was well within Jaspers’ realm.

When Jaspers as a child looked upon the sea for the first time he was captivated, he thought it the most magnificent phenomenon in the world. Jaspers later came to further see elements of “infinity” within the endless movement of the waves, nothing fixed, splendidly ordered, and where firmness and solidity end, an eerie singularity: “The real sea to us is the cypher of something unfathomable . . .” (Jaspers, 1932/1971a, p. 116).

What is a “cypher”? Jaspers (1947/1959, Chapter 2), held that the cypher can be looked upon either as “the metaphor which is Being, or the Being which is metaphor.” The cypher speaks out from immanent empirical existence. Whether we call them cyphers, symbols, or hieroglyphics of Being, “. . . in the symbol we become open to Being and at the same time filled with Being” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 38). Jaspers understood that any object or event in the world can become a cypher if we but have the eyes to see it so. Jaspers’ cypher-reading is congruent with Underhill’s vision of the practical mystic as one who becomes penetratingly aware of that which lay beneath the surface of things, and refines themselves and their processes to eventually receive messages from another plane. Jaspers, in his reading of cyphers of being across his life, felt he was doing exactly that, receiving messages from a deeper dimension within the *Encompassing*. In his daily practice of what he what he referred to as his “transcending meditation,” Jaspers (1951/1973, pp. 122-126) would at times absorb cyphers found present in poetry or literature or art or memory and contemplate creation, and heighten his awareness of that which is eternal, the *Comprehensive*: “The symbol is not passed over by being understood, but is deepened and enhanced by being meditated upon” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 53). Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 31)

reported that as meanings of objects in empirical existence undergo transformation in our “upswing” into our *Existenz* dimension, cyphers become perceptible, and can lead to authentic selfhood. Our *Existenz* dimension is the innermost ground of our readiness for touching upon vaster dimensions of reality, embodying the *elan vital* of the metaphysical urge to transcendence. When illuminated, it is from our potential *Existenz* that we are bridged through the cypher with *Transcendent Being*. Underhill (1911/2020, p. 290) put it plainly: “*Contemplation is the mystic’s medium*” (italics in original).

The sea was the first cypher for Jaspers, and after that the flat landscape surrounding his home, and also the mountains. So it was nature, the earth itself, that first spoke to Jaspers in his initial experiences of going beyond everyday consciousness-as-such. Jaspers (1932/1971a, p. 17) observed years later that, “A curious yearning awakens if as *Existenz*, living in the sensory present, I do not simultaneously live in it as a transcendence.” To Jaspers all things in the world have cypher potential, including soil, dawn, sunset, puddle, worm, person, love, fire, everything: “If I dwell in it, everything becomes a cypher, illuminated by the ray of light out of the ground of Being, and every content becomes pale when this ray is extinguished” (Jaspers, 1947/1959, p. 60). Jaspers (1947/1959, Chapter 2) said that the *Existenz* domain of our being is accessed from the “poetic viewpoint,” and ideally in the presence of the spirit of love: “Being in the form of cypher reveals itself to love . . .” Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 62) understood clearly that contemplation is an act not of intellect, but of love: “I cannot perceive what authentically is without loving it.” Underhill too suggested that the practical mystic gazes most profoundly when there is an atmosphere of love in the heart, since “contemplation is an act of love, the wooing, not the critical study, of Divine Reality” (Underhill, 1911/2020, pp. 49-50).

Underhill (1915/2023, Ch. II) points out that the evolving practical mystic becomes increasingly attentive not only to the depth of the dynamic processes and phenomena that constitute daily temporal existence, but also experiences an enhanced unity with life’s fluctuations. The practical mystic simultaneously comes into an increasing sense of unity with the Whole within which the parts exist, and parts and Whole fit in more harmonious relation. The poem, so to speak, is savored not only in its lines and stanzas, but in its Wholeness (Underhill, 1915/2023, p. 68). For the aspirant who continues yet further, there is ultimately (if all goes well) a complete surrender, a further relaxing of the layers of surface self, a total trusting and letting go, and a melting into the Ocean of Being. The soul engages in interfusion with Nameless Being, of which nought can be uttered. Thus comes being born anew, “the union of the soul with its God,” and a feeling of “dwelling with the Eternal” in everyday life (Underhill, 1915/2023, pp. 75-89). The mystic “passes over into that boundless life where Subject and Object, desirous and desired, are one” (Underhill, 2011/2020, pp. 73-74, italics in original).

Underhill’s paradigmatic mystical experience is not unlike that of Jaspers, who spoke of times of expanded vision where thought “dissolves into radiance” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, p. 49) and there arises the “paradoxical union of time and eternity” (Jaspers, 1957/1966b, p. 81). Jaspers held that reason seeks unity within the *Encompassing* (1932/1971a, p. 75), and this unity necessitates transcendence of the subject-object split in consciousness: “What is neither object nor act of thinking (subject), but contains both within itself, I have called the *Encompassing*. The latter does not speak for itself either through the object or through the subject but through both in one . . .” (Jaspers, 1957, p. 73). In transcendence through surrendered immersion, subject and object become united, and the practical mystic concurrently straddles both planes of existence: the world of time, and the presence of the Infinite and Eternal. As Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 33) knew:

“For thousands of years philosophers in China, India, and the West have given utterance to a thought which is everywhere and at all times the same, though diverse in its expression: man (sic) can transcend the subject-object dichotomy and achieve a total union of subject and object, in which all objectness vanishes and the I is extinguished. Then authentic being opens us to us . . .”

Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 34) refers to this moment of nondual subject-object dissolution as movement from our consensus trance, our walking sleep, to “the true awakening.” He goes on to say, “The mystic is immersed in the *Comprehensive*” (Jaspers, 1966c). Of his daily “transcending meditations” Jaspers (1951/1973, pp. 122-127) said, “I seek as it were to partake of creation,” and he speaks of “the presence of the primal source,” “an imponderable presence,” “revelation of being,” “peace of mind,” “trust in the foundation of things,” “unswerving resolve,” “immersion and inner communion with being itself,” “I return home,” “I gain awareness of authentic being, of the godhead,”

“I acquire an underlying harmony,” “illumination and growth into being.” Jaspers observed that these daily meditations would support him throughout his roles and responsibilities in the outer world, sustaining him amid the vicissitudes of life in empirical existence. Jaspers believed that we humans need and benefit from such periods of profound reflection and meditation: “In them we recapture our self-awareness, and the presence of the primal source. Unlike religious contemplation, philosophical contemplation has no holy object, no sacred place, no fixed form” (Jaspers, 1951/1973, Chapter XI).

As has been indicated, for Jaspers the reading of cyphers within daily life, and his “transcending meditation” and contemplation, were prominent among his personal practices, yet there was a third philosophical method that also occupied much of his attention: “self-annihilating” dialectics. Jaspers came to see philosophizing as a way of going *beyond* thought, but only by first going *through* thought, and then out the other side of thought and into the *Encompassing*. “The goal, an ineffable ultimate experience . . . it is called union with the One.” Jaspers was strongly drawn to the philosophical method of dialectical opposition, as had been Plotinus and Eckhart. The “last fulfilling act of thought,” held Jaspers, is to stop itself from thinking, and operating within categories of dialectical-speculative thought can lead to a cogitative “foundering.” Jaspers (1932/1971a, pp. 50-51) generated thoughts such as these to foster this illumination process: “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.” Thinking these thoughts is subject to intellectual impasse, “But the intellect’s failure becomes the awakening of *Existenz*.” Jaspers (1932/1971a, p. 118) said of this method of concerted speculative thinking, “It lets other thinking evaporate in its own thought movements, in which no object remains solid . . . It is mysticism to the intellect that wants cognition, but is lucidity to a self-being that transcends it.” Jaspers (1932/1971a, p. 35) gives another example from among his “conjuring” tools, as he referred to them: “The ultimate transcending step of thought can only be to void itself. I come to think: *Is it conceivable that there are things which are not conceivable?*” (italics in original). As Jaspers put it, “Thinking sets itself a limit it cannot cross—and yet, by thinking it, it appeals for a crossing of the limit.”

Did this “self-annihilating” dialectics work for Jaspers? Jaspers (1951/1973, pp. 42-49) found that when the limits of thought are exhausted, “the consciousness of God suddenly becomes a natural presence,” “thought must dissolve into radiance,” “the stillness of being,” “Comprehensive consciousness of God,” “this presence of God at the end of philosophical endeavor,” “God is.” The term “God,” interchanged with the Comprehensive, was especially used in Jaspers’ work during his Basel period in his seventh decade and when lecturing to a lay audience.

Underhill (1915/2023, pp. 368-400) speaks of the noted “dark night of the soul” which even practical mystics can at times encounter, and either recoil from or learn to pass through: “The road to a Yea lies through a Nay.” Jaspers was well aware of “foundering in the face of Transcendence,” and the opportunity it provides for the leap to Transcendence (Thyssen, 1957). Jaspers (1956/1971b, p. 28) himself had traveled this road: “Both alternatives are possible. In losing the substance of myself I sense Nothingness. In being given to myself I sense the fullness of the *Encompassing*.” Jaspers viewed both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as having faltered as they faced the abyss, and they succumbed, versus the “turning” that is to be made from darkness to light by means of philosophical faith, and to which Jaspers was fully committed.

For Jaspers, to philosophize was not about formulating fixed doctrines and dogmas but participating in “on-the-wayness” actively from our *Existenz* dimension, toward connecting with the *Encompassing*, becoming One with primal source: “. . . Illumination of *Existenz* is meant to serve its enlightenment” (Jaspers, 1957, p. 799). Transcendence is inaudible to the person imprisoned within their constricted everyday conceptual mindset, for “its voice is audible only to *Existenz*,” and this is in turn is related to the depth, power, and extent of our philosophical faith in *Existenz*. When these are sufficient, and we enter the dimension of *Existenz* with our entire being, then our more mundane “consciousness-as-such” becomes at least momentarily shattered, and we can rise to the One to which we belong (Jaspers, 1956/1971b, pp. 75-79).

Underhill (1915/2023, p. 11) declared that “The philosopher is a mystic when he passes beyond thought to the pure apprehension of truth.” It seems legitimate to this writer to claim that Jaspers had precisely such experiences, and can be reasonably considered a philosophical practical mystic. Jaspers

(1957d, p. 850) understood that logical thought alone was insufficient for Transcendence: “But the real task is to get at it, so to speak, face to face, not to subsume it under a genus or type” Living within both temporal and eternal dimensions at the same time, the practical mystic learns to better harmonize worldly tempos with rhythms of grander existence.

It is unlikely that Jaspers proceeded to the “ecstatic” intensity of a Plotinus or other mystics known for their “rapturous” episodes. Monastic mystics and yogis can amass as many as 30,000 to 50,000 or more hours of meditation in a lifetime, and contemplative neuroscience now shows that disciplined prolonged meditative activity can affect the neuroplasticity of the brain to a measurably marked degree, tamper distractibility and self-defining brain circuitry, and dramatically affect brainwave activity, including gamma-wave production (Goleman & Davidson, 2017; Brewer, et al., 2011; Lutz, et al., 2004). Jaspers presumably logged far less hours of contemplation than traditional reclusive mystics (though we lack the data from which to draw firm conclusion). Still, in his decades of philosophical, contemplative, and meditative practice, Jaspers likely touched into the *Comprehensive* “to greater or less degree” (Underhill’s criterion), and his writings give adequate reason for surmising this.

Supposing that this is the case, why did Jaspers avoid stepping into the title of “practical mystic,” and go no further than his public self-designation as “philosopher”?

### 5. The reluctant practical mystic

Even though mysticism has been seen to be “the crux” of Jaspers’ philosophizing (Pattison & Kirkpatrick, 2018), Jaspers “prevents himself” (Olson, 1983, p. 252-255) from applying this term to his own approach due to his “mystical sobriety.” Yet Jaspers at the same time explicitly recognized (Jaspers, 1957d, p. 779) that “the mystical relationship of immediacy to God . . . is possible in philosophizing itself.” Since Jaspers would seem to have an affinity for the mystical in actual practice, why might he have so consistently demurred (Jaspers, 1957d, p. 839) from explicitly linking himself with any form of that semantic?

Jaspers’ (1957c, pp. 30-38) first love in his life had been “the indispensability of science,” and he prodigiously read scientific treatises in a range of fields both prior to and after his training as an M.D. psychiatrist, and held science in high esteem ever after. Early in his academic career before he moved into philosophy, Jaspers taught empirically-oriented university courses in psychology at the University of Heidelberg, including classes on sense perception, memory, psychosis, character types, and other such topics. Hoffman (1957, p. 111) characterized Jaspers as a “cool and impartial diagnostician of reality.” Jaspers’ mentor and dear friend, social scientist Max Weber (1968), viewed traditional German mystical philosophers as having lived their lives hidden away, shielded from reality, excessively quietist, and marked by “a soft pathetic attitude.” Weber also believed that there are no “mysterious forces” to be called upon in life, that things can be “mastered” only by calculation (Weber, 1968, p. 298). As an ardent scientific thinker, Weber demystified life as he conceived of it, and the views of his mentor no doubt had influence upon Jaspers prior to his entrance into his second career, as philosopher. Another of Jaspers’ lifelong influences was Kant, who had declared mysticism “the opposite of all philosophy,” and associated it with alchemy (Ehrlich, 1975 Ch. 2).

Another explanatory factor could be that Jaspers’ full professorship position in philosophy at Heidelberg was granted without him having a Ph.D. in philosophy (or even an undergraduate philosophy degree), and this resulted in non-acceptance by most of his departmental peers in the first decade or so of his academic career (Jaspers, 1957c). Even to claim that he was a “philosopher” strained credulity among his colleagues, and any semantic-reach in the “mystical” direction would have further delegitimized Jaspers and been strategically unwise. Added to this, for his first nine years (1922-31) as full professor Jaspers published nothing; he was writing three volumes, but these did not emerge in print until 1932 (Jaspers, 1957c, pp. 34-37). This lengthy lack of observable productivity earned him the disapprobation of his colleagues, and he said that his reputation “sank to the point that I was considered ‘done for’.” Added to this, compliant student followers of certain of his philosophy colleagues apparently publicly pronounced his lectures to be “frivolous” (Jaspers, 1957c, p. 35). Also there is the fact of the negative connotations of the word “mysticism” in general in the academic context of 1930s Germany, and anything identified with “mysticism” was to be vilified under the academy’s norm of “rigor.” The term “mysticism” was associated with certain of its historical connotations including alchemy, astrology, magic, “miracle” performance, and superstitions of various



sorts, and Jaspers knew this and wanted no part. There is more than sufficient reason here for non-alliance with the semantic designator of “mystic.”

Added to this is the connotation of the word “mystic” that to some suggests a “withdrawal” from the tempo and activities of normal life routines, a cloistered retreat into relative seclusion, and Jaspers himself seemed to hold onto this association for the term “mystic.” Jaspers (1966b, pp. 69-89) critiqued Plotinus for being largely unconcerned with the surrounding world of empirical existence, a stance which was alien to Jaspers. He was not about to separate from others and retreat into a monastery or cave, for Jaspers has been called “the philosopher of dialogue” and high quality human communication was vital to both his life and philosophy (Gordon, 2000).

In any of the above restricted senses of the word “mystic,” Jaspers was unquestionably not a mystic, and he would especially not want to be associated with abandoning involvement with the world of humankind and its institutions, demands, and communication challenges. As Jaspers (1951/1973, p. 122). saw it, “There are two paths of philosophical life: the path of solitary meditation in all its ramifications, and the path of communication with men . . .” Especially living in Nazi Germany, Jaspers saw that the “ultimate situations” we face in life must be taken seriously and existentially addressed. Jaspers believed that our historical existence in time and space is replete with possibilities for transcendent action within our world of social, political, societal affairs. To avoid and evade one’s outward social roles and callings would be to miss metaphysical opportunities.

Relatedly, dialogical philosopher Martin Buber had walked away from ever again seeking mystical transport after one of his own self-transcendent experiences (Hodes, 1975, pp. 17-20). Buber was decompressing one afternoon after being in an expanded state, still in transition back to baseline consciousness. Without prior notice, a young student with life challenges came to Buber’s residence and visited with him. Buber welcomed him, but was distracted by his own re-entry process. A short passage of time after this meeting, Buber learned that this young fellow had proceeded to end his life. Buber felt remorse and guilt, believing that his mystical experience earlier that day had rendered him unfit to acutely listen to this young man in need. After that event, Buber turned away from cultivating mind-altering mystical moments, resolving instead to give his full attention to his external duties and responsibilities. The definitive turn-away from mysticism had been made, and Buber embraced ever more heavily human encounter and dialogue. In like fashion, Jaspers had an active professional life filled with tasks, commitments, and dialogue with his fellow humans, and seeking prolonged exalted mystical adventures was likely subordinated to his public life of service to, and engagement with, other human beings. Jaspers saw mystics as running the risk of being excessively immersed in infinite Transcendence (Ehrlich, 1975, Ch. 2). Jaspers clearly wanted to visit Transcendence, yet not by denying the world around him. Jaspers appeared to see himself as having the mobility to move rather freely both in and out of empirical existence and the *Encompassing*, and dearly valued this agility and freedom. Freedom, and high quality human dialogue, were among Jaspers’ core philosophical values.

And there is again the fact that 1930s and 40s Germany was in a period of great travail and darkness, and Jaspers own life had its share: Jaspers’ brother had committed suicide, his wife Gertrud 's only sister was in a mental institution, a dear poet friend of Gertrud’s had recently committed suicide, and Gertrud was Jewish and living in Nazi Germany with Jaspers as they suffered through continual restrictions and threats (Kirkbright, 2004, pp. 140-148). Jaspers and Gertrud had made a pact to jointly take their lives should the Nazis come to take them, and they kept poison on hand for this purpose (Schwartz, et al., 2017, p. 6). For twelve years Jaspers and his wife were “heedful of the Gestapo and the Nazi authorities, determined to commit no act and utter no word which we could not justify. Fortune was with us. I did not tempt it by imprudence” (1957c, p. 62). They were within two weeks of being taken to a concentration camp in 1945, when they were fortunately rescued by American forces. The times were severe, and playing it as safely as possible was a necessary and wise survival strategy.

Added to all of the above good reasons for not personally identifying with the term “mystic” was Jaspers’ conservative language usage in general, observable in the case of his unwillingness to fully “own” his robust application of the word “communication” to his cypher-reading (Gordon, 2021). Even though Jaspers would regularly and repeatedly use the word “communication” when speaking and writing of our potential relation with cyphers, he would hold that such usage was merely metaphorical. Jaspers stood strong against using the word “communication” in any other context than that involving

“man with man” (sic), even though he did. Jaspers placed extremely high value on persons actively communicating with one another in human dialogue, and argued that applying this term in any other context whatsoever would turn energy away from those “loving struggles” in existential interpersonal communication that need to occur. But within the contemporary discipline of communication studies (e.g., Littlejohn, 2017) the term “communication” today has evolved to include far more than Jaspers would have linguistically accepted. It can be argued that, likewise, the avoidance of the word “mysticism” in any of its forms as applied to Jaspers or his philosophical approach is also unnecessarily conservative, and perhaps anachronistic, at this stage in the twenty-first century.

At the same time, it is entirely understandable that for Jaspers to have allied his philosophy or himself with the word “mystical” or “mystic” would not have been without hazard. It would have violated the linguistic conventions of his academic and political communities and been unnecessary and dangerous baggage to bear.

## 6. Conclusion

Karl Jaspers exhibited an intensive mystical bent in spite of his longstanding and heavy attachment to cognitive conceptualizing. Yet even that attachment itself, to the path of the Way of Ideas, is a viable and oft-chosen path to mystical encounter. Jaspers philosophizing, combined with his contemplation of cyphers and his transcending meditation practice, took him places. It is the position here that Jaspers was speaking from his phenomenological experience when he wrote, “. . . I gain insight in union with the One, when subject and object vanish” (Jaspers, 1957c/1966, p. 81). Jaspers would seem to have gone beyond the shadows on the wall, and had what today are termed “self-transcendent experiences” (STEs) by the neuroscientists studying them (Yaden, et al., 2017). Kaufman (2020, pp. 202-206) posits a continuum of “increasing degrees of perceived unity” for STEs, ranging from standard subject-object dualism at one end to states such as “flow,” “gratitude,” “love,” “awe,” and “peak” and “mystical union” experiences at the other. It is likely that Jaspers was within the mystical zone of such a spectrum, though not at its extreme pole, for again, as a “practical mystic” he kept one foot in Transcendence and the other in his everyday world. Jaspers maintained a dialectical tension and balance between the Immanent and Transcendent.

Using Underhill’s conception, we would consider Jaspers not the fervent religious mystic or yogic mystic who seeks to annihilate all sense of a personal “I,” but rather the citizen-of-the-world practical philosophical mystic. Jaspers was content to remain “earth-bound” (Lowenstein, 1957, p. 652) while simultaneously bathed in the light of Transcendence. This achievement with which he was most satisfied is also at the core of Underhill’s conception of “practical mysticism,” and what Huxley (1945, Ch. 28) termed “applied mysticism.” Underhill (1911/2020, p. 458) also at times used the term “philosophic mystic,” which also fits, or perhaps in reversed form: “mystical philosopher.” For now we have here gone with “philosophical practical mystic,” though further reflection is in order. Jaspers often acknowledged (e.g., Jaspers, 1973, p. 16; 1947/1959, p. 77-79) that his philosophizing was in the spirit of the traditional *philosophia perennis* that “makes one ripe for the experience of the utmost.”

It is the contention here, after having read Jaspers’ works across three decades, that Jaspers seems to have met this core component of Underhill’s definition, “union in greater or less degree” with “Reality” (synonymous with Jaspers’ *Encompassing* or *Comprehensive*). At moments this would have occurred by means of Jaspers’ contemplation of “cypher” language in his daily environment, at other times through what he referred to as his “transcending meditation,” and additionally as a result of his philosophical practice of what he termed “self-annihilating” dialectics. Surrounding these practices, Jaspers did not retreat from the everyday world he inhabited, rather he stayed animatedly involved within it.

In looking back from over a half-century since Jaspers’ passing, it would seem fitting to finally broaden the range of Jaspers’ earned titles to include not only those of iconic “psychiatrist” and “philosopher,” but also as one who operated across multiple dimensions and states of awareness. Karl Jaspers was an exemplary philosophical practical mystic, not in the restricted sense of the term “mystic” but in his simultaneous commitment to both the world and the *Comprehensive*, and their interpenetration. The practical mystic, in Underhill’s conception, remains in the material world actively serving within its structures: “. . . capable of living the real life of Eternity in the midst of the world of

time.” The practical mystic is “a meeting place of two orders,” and serves others from this both-and positioning (Underhill, 1915/2023, pp. 92-93). This is precisely what Karl Jaspers did.

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