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The Cultural History of Humanity

The Conception of Hegel (up to 1831), of Jaspers (1949) and the Contemporary Conception (2004)

Among the prominent philosophers of the twentieth century, Karl Jaspers is the one who has paid most profound attention to non-European cultures.¹ The same can be said of Hegel in the nineteenth century, considering the extent and the detail of his lectures with even more respect.² Both worked in the context of philosophical reflections on the cultural history of humanity from the beginnings, through the most prominent phases of development up to what they thought they could state about the end of history as a whole.

It is Jaspers's merit that he did not make do with a negative criticism of Hegel's philosophy of history. He does more than just replace the subordination of China and India (in this untenable order) under "the Occident" as systematically instructive predecessors to what developed "in the West" with a free floating coexistence of "cultural circles". In contrast to the radical relativists of the first half of the twentieth century, Jaspers does not view diverse cultures as entities which are mutually incomprehensible and incomparable – "incommensurable" and "incompatible". In presenting a clearly structured and modelled view of history, Jaspers was oriented on the topics which were decisive for his own philosophy and was mindful of the dangers of systematising. Despite all need for revision both of fundamental assump-

tions and, inevitably, of many details, he has presented a model of history which as such can hold its own with the Hegelian model. Although it is unmistakably a typical product of its times, as a “typological” orientation pattern it is of lasting value beyond the time of its emergence.

Looking back at Hegel’s and Jaspers’s conceptions of history from the current state of research, three problem areas become apparent: (1) the relation between unilinear and polycylindrical development of culture, (2) the degradation of urban and literate cultures of the pre-Axial Period, and of non-European cultures of the post-Axial Period, and (3) the conception of the origins of humanity. If the comparison is restricted to Hegel and Jaspers, it seems that Jaspers goes far beyond Hegel. If the present state of research is also taken into consideration as the third entity to be compared, Jaspers appears surprisingly close to Hegel’s positions. The survey concludes with an homage to Jaspers, to his “universalistic” belief in (4) humanity as a global community of understanding.

1. Unilinear and Polycylindric Development of Culture

It is archaeology that provides pithy models of the cultural history of humanity. Modern accounts of prehistory are in this respect no different from ancient myths, though inasmuch as they are modern they are naturally hypothetical in nature. Like many myths, they recount at once what occurred at the beginning of the history of humanity and what again and again occurs or seems to occur. There is a simple explanation for this double interpretation. What happens is that experiences made in the present are projected back into the beginnings.

There are two current models for how humanity spread throughout the entire earth in prehistorical times: (1) the pluri-regional candelabrum model and (2) the unilinear Out-of-Africa model. According to the model of a several-armed candleholder, *Homo erectus* evolved into anatomically modern man at various places in the “Old World” (in Africa, in Southwest Asia, in Southeast Asia and in China) independently of each other.

Impelled by the discovery of the molecular-biological kinship of all human beings, a correction to the first model has been made in the past decades. Instead of speaking of a pure candelabrum model, as was typical for the first half of the 20th century, one can now speak, typically for the present, of a “networked” candelabrum model. Contact and thus exchange of “genetic information” has always taken place between the individual arms of the candelabrum, that is, between the regional lines of evolution of the human race. The pure candelabrum model, by contrary,

would have it that a global “genetic exchange” could only be detected in the modern era.

The Out-of-Africa model assumes that *Homo erectus* only evolved into *Homo sapiens* in one region, in Africa, and then spread over the entire earth, completely superseding indigenous developments in other parts of the earth. Unless the other evolutionary lines were displaced into inhospitable regions or exterminated by the African *Homo sapiens*, this model has it that they were absorbed by it almost to the point of being unrecognisable (with practically no other identifying features than external characteristics such as skin colour and body proportions). With certain modifications, the unilinear development model matches the idea that Hegel had of the path of the world spirit (*Weltgeist*). The most conspicuous difference is only an external one which at best must be interpreted symbolically: “Not in innocence, and not in Asia, was mankind born.”³

Instead of from Africa – considered “dark” by reason of European ignorance – humanity stems according to Hegel from Asia, idealised as “luminous”. Instead of “out of Africa”, his motto is *ex oriente lux*. What is more remarkable is that Hegel abstains from any speculation on the actual course of the “prehistoric” (i.e. preliterate) epochs of humanity. To the extent history can be traced back, it is always split up into various cultures (H 12.82; J 314 = 255). The development, which adheres to the same steps everywhere, reaches its maximum progression in the Christian-Germanic “centre and end of the Old World” (H 12.130). Europe is thus entitled to utilize the other parts of the earth and to set itself up as their guardian and emperor.⁴ All of this is known quite well enough, and has been subject to criticism. What has not, however, been realised enough is what Hegel in his day could not have known about “prehistory” and non-European history. A systematic archaeological investigation of “prehistoric” times was beyond Hegel’s horizon. In the following discussion, we shall return to precisely this aspect.

Except for a very few secondary and marginal deviations, Jaspers’s idea of history corresponds to the pure candelabrum model that was so typical of the first half of the 20th century with its scepticism of universals. According to Jaspers, after a long initial monophyletic phase, historical development followed a polycentric, or more precisely, a polycylindrical pattern in separate “cultural circles”. The most important breakthrough in the intellectual history of humanity, the “Axial Period” about the middle of the last pre-Christian millennium, occurred simultaneously, equivalently and completely independently in the western part of the Old World (“Orient-Occident”), in South Asia (“India”) and East Asia (“China”). Speaking in the intense language characteristic of him, Jaspers writes of the “mystery of the lack of contact” of these Axial Cultures (J 38 = 17). Later, “occasional” contacts were not

considered worth discussing or even merely outlining. Significantly, Jaspers's table of the history of humanity (J 48 = 27) displays only divergent and no converging lines before the modern era.

After the Axial Period, the western part of the Old World split into the "Occident", Byzantium and Islam. The fact that ancient culture was handed down to the modern era in the "Occident", that is, West Europe, and transmitted to Europe's "Age of Science and Technology" through many channels, and that two significant channels led through Byzantium and Islam is not mentioned in Jaspers's presentation. There is no adequate reflection of the fact that more than just "civilising achievements of a craft character have slowly made their way across the earth, or at least the entire Eurasian continent" (J 34 = 13) by way of the pre-Islamic Iranian empires, from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids, and then by way of Islam, from the East (India and China) to the West and in the reverse direction. The spread of better astronomic instruments went hand in hand with the dissemination of higher mathematics (trigonometry, algebra). The propagation of Indian healing methods (in intraurban hospitals involved in teaching and research) in the West and of Hellenic ("Ionian") medicine to South Asia was always linked to a holistic conception of the human being.⁵

The cultures in the East strike Jaspers as being more homogeneous, marked by a "relative freedom of tension" (J 91 f. = 65). In South Asia, however, the "division" into Hindu-, Jaina- and Buddhadharma is at least as significant as the Western division into "Occident", Byzantium and Islam. Buddhadharma/Fo Jia transformed Chinese culture about as radically as Christianity did Hellenic-Roman culture. At the same time, Buddhadharma/Fo Jia in East Asia was Sinicised much as biblical Christianity was Hellenised in the West.⁶

Jaspers's idea of history has a European bias, indicating that development in the non-European areas after the Axial Period followed monotonous, sparse lines. It flattens.⁷ The idea of history immediately shifts and takes on a more polycentric manifestation when it is noticed that in the three outstanding cultural regions, in the "West", in South Asia and in East Asia, development no longer follows parallel lines after the Axial Period, except for particular phenomena. If the heydays of the various regions are not synchronous, then it is clear that there will also be asymmetrical influences between the regions with a marked preponderance of the culture dominant at any given time.

South Asia ("India") enjoyed its "Golden Age" during the Gupta empire in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., with corresponding preliminaries from the 2nd century, and followed by a prime about the year 700 in the area of modern Tamil Nadu under the Pallava. In the West, this was the era of the decline of the Roman

empire, and in China the era of the division into a constantly changing number of splinter empires. If we disregard the few exceptions which must be expected, such as Augustine and Wang Bi, it is correct to speak of a “dark age” in both these parts of the earth as regards philosophy, literature and science. In South Asia it is completely different. The most prominent non-legendary poets and thinkers of South Asia all date from this period: beginning in the 2nd century with the ontologist (or “teacher of emptiness”) Nagarjuna, to whom the “second turn of the wheel of wisdom” is attributed (after the first, by the Buddha himself); continuing then with Vasubandhu, who provided the “third turn” and who is particularly important from the point of view of contemporary philosophy of mind; then the most important teacher of the “doctrine of the elders”, Buddhaghosa, in Sri Lanka; the philosopher of language Bhartrihari; the epistemological logicians Dignaga and Dharmakirti; up to the Vedanta teacher Shankara in the 8th century, who is now generally regarded as the most important “Indian philosopher”. In conspicuous contrast to the most famous poet of this period, Kalidasa, the philosophers listed were unknown to Hegel (who probably did not even know their names). It was not until after his death, in most cases not until the 20th century that their works were critically edited and translated into western languages. Thus, for Hegel Buddhadharma was not a philosophy, but rather a folk religion. He was acquainted with it primarily by means of travel accounts from China, Tibet, Mongolia, Burma and Sri Lanka.⁸

At the present state of knowledge, there is need to explain why in addition to much of the folk religion China adopted the scholastic philosophy of the Buddhist philosophers mentioned, whereas they did not reach the West. What reached Europe up to the 18th century from South Asia was exclusively folk philosophy contained in edifying literature, in the *Pancatantra* fables and in the hagiography of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, which was based on Buddha legends.⁹

A marked divergence can also be made out in the adoption of the scholarly work of South Asia. Whereas medicine (“drugs”) and the mathematics associated with astronomy disseminated in both directions, the most significant scholarly product of South Asia, its linguistics (based on Panini’s grammar from the 4th pre-Christian century, was discovered in the West – in contrast to China – only in the 19th century.

Jaspers thought that a visitor from outer space travelling on the earth around the year 700 would have found the “most eminent site of intellectual life on earth” in Chang’an, the capital of China at the time (J 102 = 74). It is more likely that at that time (and certainly for the previous three centuries) he would have ascribed this distinction to South Asia. During this era, “India” was the country with the most progressive astronomy and mathematics (indeed, the only mathematics with a

complete decimal system of numerals including zero, a system showing promise of further success); the country with the only science of language worthy of being called such; a country with medicine which was also advanced in institutional terms; with the most “modern” philosophy (in the fields of ontology, psychology and epistemology); with poets (Kalidasa) and a popular literature (including the fables already mentioned, which were a sort of “Machiavellian” treatise on statecraft). An expert could have predicted that this country would attain transcultural influence. From the 4th to the 8th century, South Asia was the part of the earth with the most formidable and geographically extensive cultural reach: in the north via Central Asia to China; starting in the 7th century over the Himalayas to Tibet; in the east to Southeast Asia, and from there also on to China; in the west to Iran and Mesopotamia, and subsequently from there, thanks to the propagation of Islam, to Europe.¹⁰

It can be said in general that cross-cultural contacts can be identified to a greater extent and with more accuracy in the fields of the sciences and literature than in the field of philosophy as such. The sciences which open the path for the cross-cultural “flow of ideas” are medicine, together with its auxiliary sciences botany and pharmacology (the science of drugs),¹¹ as well as mathematics, which in the past was promoted by astrological-astronomical and commercial (accounting) interests.¹²

Whoever is interested in a more structured picture of cross-cultural relations with clearer outlines will pay attention to what segments of culture and what disciplines are adopted by neighbouring cultures easily and unhindered, and which of them encounter obstacles and hindrances which must first be overcome. In linguistics it has been found that there are structures which exert a veritable attraction on neighbouring languages, whereas others are only espoused after structures which apparently are more elementary have been adopted. In terms of time, there is an undulation in accordance with the asynchronous succession of the phases of formation, ascendancy and decline in neighbouring cultures. Flourishing cultures are an invitation to borrow and imitate. Regarded from within, it seems that in classical phases development can be explained indigenously. But time and again it strikes historians more than it does the people concerned that this development involves a response to outside influences which had been adopted earlier (in the formative phases),¹³ or that it involves a response to stimuli and forces which are attributable to the heterogeneous roots of the culture which later seems so homogeneous.¹⁴ After the formative phase, a greater frequency of cross-cultural contacts can be made out in the periods of decline. It is important here to try to distinguish between cause and effect. Increasing cross-cultural contacts can just as well be the effect as

the cause of a process of dissolution. When a culture is exhausted or paralysed, it seems inviting to look elsewhere for sources of inspiration and renewal.¹⁵

2. Jaspers's Axial Period and the Degradation of Urban and Literate Cultures of the Pre-Axial Period and of non-European Cultures of the Post-Axial Period

The heart of Jaspers's idea of history is his proclamation of an Axial Period around the middle of the last millennium before the European calendar. At that time a breakthrough occurred in terms of intellectual history, or at least in terms of what was preserved and passed on. Texts were produced of an extent and of an argumentative density which cannot be documented for any earlier time; and this occurred at the same time in China (Kongzi and Laozi), in India (*Upanishadas*, Buddha) and in the region between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean (Zarathustra, Jewish prophets, Hellenic philosophers and tragedians). That is the time when conceptions of the human being and the world were formulated which could be regarded as philosophical in the stricter sense, and on which thought has been oriented ever since, continuously or in repeated Renaissances. The most important philosophical doctrines can all be traced back to this period of emergence: rationalism and empiricism, realism and idealism, physicalism, relativism, agnosticism and nihilism. This is when universalistic ethics and monotheistic religions emerged which, in contrast to earlier approaches, have continuously been able to assert themselves since then.¹⁶ From now on, natural causes – in the cosmos physical causes, in history psychological causes – were sought for all events, not only for those with a causality which could be checked in everyday terms and understood intuitively without any great theoretical constructions. In religion, ethos and intention came to be more important than following rites (“disenchantment” of nature and the supernatural as well as of the conceivable relation between them).

Jaspers's sketch of the Axial Period can be upheld in its essential points, particularly if the Axial Period is regarded primarily in terms of the history of actually transmitted traditions; and if it is regarded in terms of a history of ideas only in relation to the form of the tradition, but not as a psychogenetic threshold. It is only proper to speak of an upswing in the “history of spirit” if this notion is understood the way a historian dealing with the past thousand years might use it, but not the way it would be understood in cognitive psychology, which deals with the history of the evolution of human mental abilities.

From that period on, writing, or, as in India, the formalised memorisation of an extensive body of philosophical text made it possible for a spatial and temporal extension of the intersubjective reflection and argumentation on specified passages to take place, something that has not been demonstrated with respect to earlier periods. However, it is not possible to uphold the assumption that it is only on the basis of these forms of passing on traditions that there is reflection (thinking that thinks about thinking), argumentation (logical deduction instead of merely mythical narration), abstraction (thinking in concepts rather than only in images) and systematic generalisation (rather than merely situational problem solutions); or that the mental abilities necessary for these things were only acquired in the cultures of the Axial Period.¹⁷

What requires revision in the picture that Jaspers paints of the Axial Period is the claim that the breakthrough occurred in the various cultures of the Axial Period “without contact” with each other, and (symptomatically) his dating of Zarathustra (J 20 = 2). The breakthrough in the Axial Period both in the case of the Hellenic philosophers and of the biblical prophets occurred on the basis of extensive contacts with the urban and literate cultures in the “Fertile Crescent” from the Persian Gulf through Mesopotamia and Syria to the Nile. Furthermore both, the Hellenic philosophers as well as the Jewish prophets, were probably acquainted with Iranian thought associated with the name Zarathustra.¹⁸

If no additions to the present text corpus can be found, the assumption that such dependencies existed will always remain controversial, even if they are quite probable because of other contacts between neighbouring cultures which are better documented. Plato and Aristotle do not quote Egyptian, Phoenician and Mesopotamian authors and texts as they quote pre-Socratic Ionian thinkers by name, albeit only in fragments. This difference in the transmission of traditions must yet be explained. It is also not the case that the Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform script which have been excavated and deciphered since the middle of the 19th century have revealed literal text parallels between Hellenic writings and writings of the ancient Orient to the same extent as has been established between biblical and Egyptian texts.

For a few decades there has been discussion that Zarathustra might be dated to 800 to 1000 B.C.E., thus before Jaspers’s Axial Period. This early date has not gained general acceptance. But the evidence is such that the majority does not completely reject it either. Together with current archaeological research on culture of the pre-Axial Period, the evidence is sufficient to be able to recognise that the transition from the ancient advanced civilizations in northeast Africa and in Asia to

the cultures of the Axial Period was less abrupt or revolutionary than Jaspers held it to be.

Jaspers does not see a gentle mountain ridge which gradually rises to the heights of the cultures of the Axial Period, not even single ramps and paths which would make the climb understandable. He begins his book with an uplifting description of the breakthrough of the Axial Period. The Axial Period seems to “throw a light on the entire history of the world” (J 25 = 6). It is then almost inevitable that the period preceding it is presented pejoratively. The advanced cultures immediately previous to the Axial Period seem to sink in the radiant light of the period.

When he looks “into the chasm of prehistory” (J 73 = 49) and regards peoples far removed from the cultures of the Axial Period, Jaspers’s choice of words becomes conspicuously reminiscent of Hegel’s. Before the Axial Period and outside of its range, Jaspers encounters an “unawakenedness devoid of authentic reflection” (J 73 = 48), and he takes recourse to a Hegelian concept otherwise foreign to him, namely “unreflected substance” (J 82 = 57). Of course, Jaspers uses a more restrained language. Hegel spoke of a *Dumpfheit* (“dullness”) and *Stumpfheit* (“flatness”) of consciousness (H 12.81, 261, 264), whereas Jaspers only speaks of *Dumpfheit* (“apathy”, also “dullness”), but does so twice (J 33 = 12, 71 = 46). He detects in ancient Egypt “a serene joy in the intimate aspects of life”, and then uses an unexamined cliché to qualify the remark: “coupled with a veiling of life by the levelling compulsion of labour” (J 74 = 49). Jaspers does not take notice of the fact that in the “ancient historical civilizations” of Mesopotamia and Egypt women and (at least native) slaves were treated more humanely, had a better status in civil law (though not politically) and had more individual autonomy than in Hellas during the Axial Period, and that they were most certainly better off than in Plato’s “Republic”.¹⁹

In Jaspers’s book on history, there are also discussions of “prehistory” – or, as we could say with less ambiguity, on the prehistoriographical period – which are reminiscent of Hegel’s words; and it is possible to agree with both of them. The spreading of the great language families and many early acquisitions of civilization took place “in silent movements”, “without the knowledge of men” (J 99 = 72). Hegel spoke of “a silent, energyless propagation, that is, without action”, which “crept along” (H 12.85, 178). According to Hegel, it can therefore be forgotten, in contrast to what was retained in memory thanks to written history. What Max Müller²⁰ later wrote about the discovery of the kinship of the Indian and the European languages was better: We now know that we are different from what we thought we were. There are common typological traits across the continents, and they go back to a time long before the Axial Period, to the time in which it was pre-

viously thought that nothing more than an unfathomable diversity of languages and cultures could be detected. Hegel and Jaspers had no way of knowing that the dissemination of the major language families went hand in hand with the spreading of the domestication of plants and animals.

It does credit to Hegel that despite his conception of a step-by-step structure of world history, which has a philosophical foundation, he does not overlook seeds which come to his attention in the lower levels of his world structure and give a foretaste of what can be expected in the higher stories. He detects a certain self-consciousness (or self-awareness) in all religions, even in “primitive religions”. According to his own admission, “primitive religions” cause him the “embarrassment” that, so to speak, he “detects the mind unfolded” in them prematurely (H 16. 304). Later, he admits that in China, where there is a dominant “general state religion” and where in his terminology external substance is the measure, there is “already a class of people who concentrate on what is *inward*” (H 16.327).²¹ Again, Jaspers expresses himself similarly: “Within prehistory the processes of culture already existed. At some points they can be observed in typical forms that seem to anticipate the historical cultures” (J 99 f. = 72). But to him, too, they seem to be only exceptions and anticipations. There is no reflection on the fact that this appearance can be kept in check (a) by undertaking a structural analysis of the “processes of culture”, (b) when it is assumed that language and not art or religion is the oldest cultural product of humanity (of all human beings) on the basis of which it is possible to draw conclusions about the level of development of the (prehistoriographic) human mind, (c) if it is accordingly not assumed from the start that cultural processes are linear and (d) if, finally, the explanation for differences is first sought in external circumstances. Jaspers regarded the transition to the Axial Period in quite Hegelian terms, as did the majority of German philosophers of his time, namely as a transition from *mythos* to *logos* (J 21 = 3); he did not see it as the ancients (Cicero) had seen it, as a transition from *wisdom* to (scientific) *philosophy*. In the time before the Axial Period, there was just as much proverbial wisdom as there was mythology.²²

For Hegel, the history of non-European culture is a history of stagnation, and for long stretches also a history of decline²³ or of dissolution, which he does not always present as regrettable. Thus, if one wishes to reconstruct the history that one has gone through oneself, one does not need to delve into the depths of one’s own culture level for level. It is easier to take a look at other peoples. They are, so to speak, a monumental open-air museum in which individual peoples are found standing on the steps that Europeans successively climbed up to reach the heights of the 19th century.²⁴

Given the state of historiography at the time, Hegel probably could not have conceived, at least he could not have adequately conceived what “Renaissances” occurred outside of Europe between the “Axial Period” and the 15th century (and even later) with more historical impact than in the West.²⁵ Jaspers, by contrast, seems to have learned from Max Weber that around 1400 “overall life in Europe, India and China was on a similar level of civilization”, and that from a global perspective it was only in the 15th century that a “singular” new beginning occurred in the West; and that it is by virtue of this that in cultural terms the West has since been able to eclipse all other parts of the earth, or at least to drive them into the defensive. It is, however, not at all correct to speak of a history of stagnation²⁶ in non-European cultures without making clear qualifications; at best there was a history of stagnation in the European reception of non-European cultures, most conspicuously in philosophy.

There is at least one great country outside of Europe of which it certainly cannot be said that its history was a history of stagnation (although it too went through a hundred years’ war); on the contrary, there was a continuous upward development: the country is Japan.²⁷ This east Asian island nation established contact with the nearest culture of the Axial Period only a little earlier than did many regions in northern Europe (since the middle of the first millennium of the European calendar). Its most significant philosophers are not the Zen Buddhists of the 12th and 13th century, who are held in such high esteem in the West, but rather the scholars who grappled with the Confucian tradition in historical-critical terms in the 17th and 18th centuries.²⁸

Jaspers thought we could expect that in the future there will be something like “one humanity” with one “world culture”, one “world literature” and one “world ethos”, as others have foretold, and that it would be promoted by a “second Axial Period, [leading] to the final process of becoming-human” (J 46 = 25). If this is indeed the case, then the contribution to be made by non-European cultures will involve thinkers who lived after the Axial Period, particularly the thinkers of these cultures’ last outstanding epochs; and they will be just as important in their pioneering work as those whom Jaspers selected as the “decisive persons” of the first Axial Period.²⁹ Elias Canetti would have pointed out that “we do not live from roots alone.”

3. The History of the Beginnings of Humanity

As far as the history of the beginnings of humanity is concerned, Hegel played the agnostic (for many a surprisingly straightforward agnostic) (H 12.74 ff., 419). In this regard he was no different from the 18th-century philosophers of the Enlightenment before him and the 19th-century positivist scientists after him. In 1765, Voltaire³⁰ extolled the Chinese for the fact that they do not begin their history the way many other peoples do (who appeal to revealed knowledge), namely with the creation of the world and the (illiterate) *temps sauvages* of humanity. No historian was present at the creation of the world and then at the creation of man. The Chinese begin their history with Emperors, of whom they claim to have information which has been continuously passed down, whether they claim this rightly (corroborated by archaeology) or wrongly (not corroborated by archaeology). In 1886, the Parisian *Société de linguistique* announced that it will not accept bulletins on the origin of language. There were no empirical data for such articles at the time.

As far as the history of the beginnings of humanity was concerned, Jaspers played the part of the philosophical existentialist mystic. In this regard, he did not follow the lead of Hegel or of the 19th-century positivists (who have now been scientifically superseded), but Bachofen. For Jaspers, “the moment of becoming completely human is the deepest enigma of all”, no less than the times in which it occurred (J 56 = 34). These are a “chasm” and “unfathomable” (J 53 = 31, 73 = 49). Whoever assumes that what is specific about the human being, its language and its mind, is more than what can be explained by natural science will also assume that its genesis is closed to the sciences. Nature and genesis of man cannot be separated if man autogenetically makes himself what he is (J 63 = 40). As far as the history of the beginnings of humanity is concerned, myth remains a heuristic device. This much can be learned from Bachofen. His approach to the early history of humanity provides “primal insights into the main features of humanity ... through creative visions” (J 54 = 32). We can also learn from Bachofen why Jaspers does not make do with the periods which are the objects of archaeology and historiography, but also wishes to take the origin and aim of history into consideration (in a non-historical manner): “Knowledge is only elevated to the level of understanding when it is able to comprehend origin, progress and end.”³¹ But the beginning of all development is in the myth. ... The origins are the conditions of later progress and determine once and for all the direction of the line that this progress is to follow. Without acquaintance with the origins, historical knowledge can never come to an inner conclusion.”³² Thus, according to Jaspers, “we cannot plunge deep enough into the enigma of prehistory” (J 65 = 41).

However, Jaspers does not expect much in the way of explanation from empirical archaeology. The findings “have been considerable in number, but very mea-

gre as to the information they can give us". "It is therefore a wise principle for historians ... not to have too much to do with the [archaeologically detected] beginnings" (J 53 f. = 31 f.). From an epistemological point of view this is an anachronistic suggestion. There is no empirical research without theory. Data cannot be sifted and sorted without an explicit or implicit theory. And the other way round, the discussion of first principles, of which it was too long assumed that it could be conducted *a priori*, feeds just as consciously or unconsciously on experience, and indeed it frequently relies on the newest experiences to a disproportionate extent.

Jaspers writes on the origin of humanity the way one could write on the origins of the universe, that is, on the question, "Why is there anything at all and not nothing?" Only theoretical speculation is possible about that. There are no empirical data that could be taken as a basis and used to test and modify hypothetical answers. In the case of the question of the origin of man, of his consciousness and his conception of himself, however, we have data which a philosophical discussion must take account of even if they are not sufficient for a complete or definitive explanation. They are extensive enough to give a clear outline for partial hypothetical explanations of particular mental abilities. It is far too obvious that the genesis of the human mind was dependent on readily classifiable data, on the sort of palaeobiological data with which we are acquainted through the phylogenesis of the mind, and on neurophysiological data, such as what we learn from the ontogenesis of the mind. Today, a "phenomenology of mind" will have to be judged as to the extent to which it takes account of archaeological and neurological data and how much light it sheds on them to contribute to understanding. The difference from Bachofen's and Jaspers's speculations, which were oriented on visions drawn from "man's spiritual make-up" (J 54 = 32), consists in the fact that the hypothetical speculations of the sciences refer back to "measurable" data. They are the constraints within which theories must contain themselves.

Since there are no scientific data without theoretical presuppositions, and in the case of the human sciences, no data (a) without tentative psychological explanations and (b) without questions as to their genesis, the refusal of the Parisian *Société de linguistique* mentioned above could not hold for even a hundred years. Today, as many treatises and academic conferences on the origin of language can be found as in the field of biology on the origin of life and in physics on the first seconds of the (present) universe. In clear contrast to the situation in 1886, there is now a quantity and density of palaeobiological and archaeological data such that hypothetical theories about the origin of the ability to speak can be subjected to tests measuring up to the advanced state of research of linguistics, and can be modified in stimulating ways. Archaeology has long since ceased to be a merely inductive science which only

gathers and measures data and then sorts them. Among its subdisciplines there is not only a “theoretical”, but also a “cognitive archaeology”.³³ The classification of jewellery or burial places, for example, requires reflection on the question as to whether they express only an aesthetic consciousness, or also self-consciousness (self-awareness), knowledge of social status. Together with behavioural studies of modern primates and human beings, archaeological findings suggest that the heights which human intelligence has reached may well be due to the fact that in the beginning it was more a matter of “social intelligence” (among other things the ability to imagine what others intend to do and how they interpret our own behaviour) than “technical intelligence” (use and production of tools).³⁴ Many findings suggest cooperative behaviour and complex social structures with corresponding mental abilities.

The explosive growth of knowledge about the “prehistory” of humanity and the concomitant revolutions in the interpretation of this knowledge since Hegel’s death (in 1831) certainly bear comparison with the explosive growth of knowledge and the theoretical revolutions in the natural sciences. One of these, Darwin’s theory of evolution, is equally significant for the life sciences and the human sciences.

Hegel still believed that humanity was about 7000 years old. He was certainly not much worried about a few “centuries or millennia” more or less (H 12.84, 148).³⁵ The fact that with regard to *homo sapiens* there is now talk of hundreds of thousand of years and with regard to the species *homo* even millions of years was, however, completely beyond his idea of the time span of the history of humanity. There was no way for Hegel to know of ice ages and stone ages, nor could he have known of the disciplines dealing with these times, archaeology and palaeontology. The first discoveries of “antediluvian” fossils, as relicts of the stone age were initially called, occurred after his death, as did the discovery of cave paintings, burial places and other artefacts of instructive value for the history of the human mind, artefacts dating back tens or hundreds of thousands of years before the date which Hegel, who was still oriented on the Bible, assumed for anthropogenesis.

Since Jaspers wrote about the origin of history (in 1949), much has been added, and much must be seen in a different light, too. Some of this is of purely historical interest, for example the fact that not only *Homo erectus*, but also the early *Homo sapiens*, of which Jaspers was only aware from European findings, most probably did not stem from Asia, as it then seemed (J 96 = 70), but from Africa. There are points that make different, possibly better explanations possible: for example the discovery of fossils of an anatomically modern human being which are not just 20,000 years old (J 56 = 34), but about 100,000 years older. Finally, there are some findings that have unforeseen effects on the degree of certainty of our as-

sumptions about the history of the beginnings of humanity. According to Jaspers, “everything” points to a monophyletic origin of human beings. In particular, he mentions the ability to procreate through interbreeding, the distance separating “man from the animal”, which is immeasurably greater than the distance from “men of the most alien races”, and the mutual intelligibility of human beings among each other. But this is not sufficient as an empirical proof of monophyletic origin. In 1949, Jaspers thought that such a proof was “impossible” (J 66 = 42). In 1953, the genetic code was deciphered. Since then, molecular biologists have been offering the “hardest” sort of empirical evidence for the genetic unity of the “human race”.

4. Humanity as a Communicative Community

This fundamental criticism of Jaspers’s “history of men”, presented with the support of numerous historical remarks, additions and corrections, shall now be concluded with a “hommage to Jaspers”, with a quite astounding piece of evidence for one of his central convictions. Although many segments of the historical relationship between the human inhabitants of the earth are unclear, and although many will probably remain unclear forever, it is obvious that all human beings together form one global communicative community (J 66 = 40, 325 = 263). Though individual cultures may well be far apart from each other in terms of history and geography, communication between them is still possible. Members of quite diverse cultures are able to understand each other. Accordingly, their curiosity, the will to explore what has not yet been understood, will not let them rest.

An almost novel-like example of this dates from 1952, three years after Jaspers published his book on the common origin of all cultures and their tendency to converge. During his lifetime, Jaspers hardly had a chance to learn about this example. At issue is the deciphering of the Mayan writing system. Jaspers had counted the Maya among the illiterate “primitive peoples” (J 48 = 27). It was a 30-year-old ethnologist in Leningrad, Yury Knorosov, who made the breakthrough. And he first had to strive for recognition in the small circle of Maya scholars. In particular, Knorosov’s feat had to assert itself against the prejudice that cultural phenomena develop step by step, against the assumption that the same succession of the same steps, which are qualitatively clearly in contrast to each other, is to be encountered everywhere, and that individual parts of the earth have remained stuck at different steps of development.

In the second half of the 19th century, the pseudoscientific claim that Mayan culture, with its imposing pyramids and hieroglyphs, had been transported by Phoenician seafarers from Egypt to Mexico was advocated with some success among the public of the time. This was the heyday of pan-diffusionism in cultural anthropology, according to which all “superior” cultural achievements disseminated over the whole earth from one place – from Egypt, from Babylon or from a sunken Atlantis.

The first remarkable point is that it became possible to decipher Mayan writing thanks to the heuristic assumption that, despite their lack of genetic kinship, Mayan writing, Egyptian writing and Chinese writing were structurally comparable with each other. All three writing systems are mixed systems, consisting of semantic and phonetic, of concrete and abstract signs and sign components. Writing can be defined as a visual system of signs with which everything which can be expressed in oral language can also be reproduced graphically. To this end, symbols for sounds, whether syllabic or alphabetical, are indispensable. There is no language for which there is a system of pictographs which is at once both pure and complete, nor is there a pure and complete logographic system. All writing systems emerged from hybrid systems. Either they have remained such, and can be easily recognised as such, or they have a tendency, which cannot be recognised as easily, to return to this state. European writing systems are no exception.³⁶ The development of writing systems did not follow categorically distinct steps from a concrete pictorial writing (bound to *mythos*) via a syllabic system of writing to an abstract writing system which represents individual sounds (and presupposes *logos* and reason). The Egyptian, the Chinese and the Mayan writing systems did not remain fixed at a “primitive” level of pictographs or logographs. From the very beginning, all three were hybrid systems consisting of concrete and abstract signs.

The second remarkable thing is another heuristic assumption which helped make it possible to decipher Mayan writing, namely the assumption that there was a genealogical connection between the language of the “advanced civilization” of the ancient Maya and the language of the purportedly “primitive culture” of the present-day aboriginal inhabitants of the jungles of Yucatan and Guatemala. Accordingly, it was possible to assume that a kinship in sound structure, in grammar and in vocabulary had been preserved. To this end a prejudice had to be overcome, namely that these inhabitants of a rural area, who so obviously were living at a low economic level, had nothing to do with the ancient, lost culture of their own country which was judged to be so advanced. It was no longer possible to adhere to the easy assumption that the remaining indigenous inhabitants of Central America, the only ones to have survived, only served the “cultural geniuses” of a past era as peas-

ants, servants, load bearers and domestic help – just as they only are of interest to foreign archaeologists in precisely these functions without having a language and culture in common with them (any more than with the ancient “cultural geniuses”).

The methodological consequence that Knorosov drew from these two working hypotheses – the hypothesis of the structural similarity of writing systems in different parts of the earth and the hypothesis of the probable genetic continuity of language in one and the same area – deserves mention as the third remarkable point. There is a set of heuristic rules that can be followed in all cultures in which one is confronted with comparable problems of interpretation. Although in contrast to what was maintained in the 19th century there is no genetic connection between the writing system of the ancient Egyptians and that of the ancient Maya, for orientation Knorosov could still look to the procedure, hypotheses and devices which Jean-François Champollion used in 1822 to make the breakthrough in deciphering the Egyptian writing system. In accordance with Champollion’s example, Knorosov relied on his knowledge of the double logosyllabic structure of Chinese writing, beyond that on the even more far-reaching mixture of logographs and syllabic signs in Japan. Just as Champollion had assumed that an instructive relationship between the language of the ancient Egyptians and that of the contemporary rural Coptic population had been preserved, Knorosov assumed, as pointed out, that there was such a relationship between the language of the historical Maya and that of the surviving Maya of today.

Finally, Knorosov was able to rely on a counterpart of the “Rosetta stone”³⁷: a Spanish missionary bishop had attempted to collate what he took to be an alphabet of the Mayan writing system around 1560 in Yucatan, and his work was rediscovered in a Madrid library in 1862.

It is hard to imagine more impressive evidence of Jaspers’s philosophical faith in humanity as a single, great community of understanding and communication through all times, continents and obvious divergences in development than the success story of the deciphering of the Maya writing system and the working hypotheses on which Yuri Knorosov based his efforts.³⁸

Notes

- 1 Particularly in: *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Zürich: Artemis, 1949; republished: Munich: Piper, 1983. English translation: *The Origin and Goal of History*, translated by Michael Bullock. New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1953. The book is cited according to the German republication (Piper edition) and the English translation as follows: J German page number = English page number.
- 2 Hegel is quoted according to his collected works: *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971 as follows: H volume number. Page number. For a historiographical assessment of Hegel's studies on world history cf. Ernst Schulin, *Die weltgeschichtliche Erfassung des Orients bei Hegel und Ranke*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958.
- 3 Robert Ardrey, *African Genesis*, London: Collins, 1961: 7.
- 4 "It is the necessary fate of the Asian empires to be subject to the Europeans" (H 12.179). Hegel believed that the culture of pre-Columbian America was a "natural" culture which had to "decline as the Spirit [of Europe] approached it" (H 12.108). In Georg Lasson's edition of Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (Hamburg: Meiner 1923/68: 763), he also says: "The world has been circumnavigated, and Europeans know it to be round. Whatever is not yet dominated by them is either not worth the trouble or it is yet to be subjected."
- 5 "The best physician is also a philosopher," says Galenos, the most important Hellenic authority for Islamic medicine.
- 6 The only convergence that Jaspers mentions before the modern era is the "integration" of "scriptless peoples in the orbit of the civilizations" into "the world of the Axial Period" (J 48 = 27). This absorption brings them to their "end". Apparently, they make no contribution to the further development of the cultures after the Axial Period, neither in art nor in music nor in literature nor in ethics, neither alternative medications (natural medications) nor alternative styles of life (for example a natural religious tolerance).
- 7 In Jaspers's table of world history (J 49 = 27), the left, representing Europe, is the most differentiated side. "Scriptless peoples" and "primitive peoples (Negroes, etc.)" are not located, as their geographical distribution might suggest, to the left and right of and between the cultures of the Axial Period, but rather systematically gathered (in a manner which is too reminiscent of Hegel) to the right of China. The farther to the left (the west) the course of history is, the higher and more differentiated it is – and the more independent personalities it can rely on (J 92 = 65).
- 8 Still, Hegel tended to seek a comprehensive understanding, and it did not escape his notice that this popular religion was capable of thinking God as "nothing", that is, as not determinable with human categories (H 16.377). – The Buddha and "Buddhism" were not mentioned in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, except, perhaps, for one passage (H 18.163) in which the Buddha may be equated with another figure of the same name (Gotama), the legendary founder of the Nyaya philosophy, one of the six orthodox streams of Indian philosophy. It is Jaspers's merit that he introduced the name of a second Indian philosopher (in addition to the Buddha) to the average German philosopher, namely Nagarjuna, whom he included as a fourth Asian (after the three "founders" Buddha, Confucius and Laozi) in his gallery of (fifteen) Great Philosophers (*Große Philosophen*, Munich: Piper, 1957).
- 9 These fables, which today are more commonly known by their Arabic title *Kalila wa Dimna*, were translated into Latin in the 13th century under the title *Directorium vit(a)e human(a)e*, and into English in the 16th century under the even more remarkable title *The Moral Philosophy of Doni*, which was adopted from Italian. It is no exaggeration to say that about 1500 the "fabulous" Brahman "philosopher Bidpai" was the most frequently translated and most read philosopher in the world, and that he was in Europe, if not the first to be published, at least the most frequently published philosopher; the animal tales were attributed to him as teachings for rulers. A newer edition presents the fables as "having no illusions about man, sceptical with regard to established religion, but full of confidence that it is nonetheless worthwhile to dedicate oneself to the Good" (*Kalila und Dimna*, edited and with a postscript by J. Christoph Bürgel, Zürich: Manesse, 1995: p.

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- 306). In terms of “universal history”, it would be interesting to know whether Machiavelli and Hobbes had read or heard these fables. Both, of course, had enough experience of their own and knowledge of human nature to reach similar convictions.
- 10 In 700, Jaspers’s visitor from space would probably have preferred Kanchipuram, the capital of the Pallava Empire in south India, to the Tang capital, Chang’an (today Xi’an), which was then just regaining prosperity – at least if he was a philosopher. The legend has it that the founder of Chinese “Chan Buddhism”, Bodhidharma (fl. 500), who died in Central China, came from Kanchipuram. In the other direction, there is good historical evidence that Kanchipuram was visited in 640 by Xuanzang, the most important Chinese pilgrim and research traveller. The city was the southernmost stop on his trip to India. Kanchipuram is also mentioned in connection with the buddhistic epistemologist Dignaga (about 480-540) and his disciple Dharmapala as well as with the Theravada philosopher Buddhaghosa (5th century). Shankara, who today is revered in India as the most important postclassical philosopher, was probably active in Kanchipuram around 700 as the founder of a monastery school, and according to local legend also died there (his legendary dates, too brief and too late: 788-820).
 - 11 That is a matter of course: everybody wants to become healthy, even those who for other reasons are xenophobic.
 - 12 Jaspers writes (J 101 = 74): “The territories between India and Egypt have always been subject to an Indian influence as well – that is an intermediate region possessing unique historical fascination – but it is of such a kind as to render simple, clearly discernible analysis in terms of universal history impossible.” But the particularly selective reception of Indian culture in Southwest Asia, and from there to Europe with marked gaps does indeed make an analysis possible. At any rate, the claim that the Greeks, followed by the Europeans, practised an unlimited openness of mind and of cognitive curiosity is untenable. In addition to the well known sceptical philosopher Pyrrho, Onesicritus, a cynic philosopher and biographer of Alexander, participated in Alexander’s “India campaign”. However, knowledge acquired in India can only be detected in the biological writings of Aristotle and his disciple Theophrastus, but not in their philosophical work (cf. Albrecht Dihle, “Indien”, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, Stuttgart: Hirsemann 1996, instalment 137: 7). Philosophical works were translated from Sanskrit into Arabic and Persian in the 11th century by al-Biruni and in the 17th century by the “Esfahan school”, although with modest influence. They were not carried farther to the west. However, in 1651 a volume of poetry (“The Rose Garden” *Golestan*) by the Persian moral philosophical poet Sa’di from Shiraz (13th century) was published in Latin in Amsterdam. Shortly before this, partial French and German translations had been published.
 - 13 Conspicuously in the ancient Hellenic world and in the modern era in Europe (cf. J 85 = 59)
 - 14 This is becoming increasingly clear in the case of China.
 - 15 It was not during, but after his best years that Goethe devoted himself to non-European poetry.
 - 16 For example Akhenaton’s in the 14th century B.C.E. in Egypt.
 - 17 Cf. H. and H. A. Frankfort, eds., *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Chicago: Chicago UP, 1946 (later reissued under the title *Before Philosophy*); Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, New York: Appleton, 1927, expanded edition published by Dover, 1957.
 - 18 Cf. Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992. In the case of the earliest Ionian philosophers, contact with Indian ideas cannot be excluded either. Cf. M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971: 201: “The fact is that the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* [800-600] alone throws more light on what Heraclitus [Ephesus 550-480] was talking about than all the remains of the other Presocratics together.”
 - 19 In ancient Egypt, Hegel finds “surprisingly ... in addition to African stupidity a reflective understanding” (H 12.252). Jaspers makes do with aesthetic admiration, similarly to the case of the “primitive peoples”. He senses “a lofty feeling for a style of solemn magnitude” (J 74 = 49), and “amongst the Polynesians it is in splendid evidence” (J 100 = 73). It would be possible to make more analytical statements. Hegel had no chance to become acquainted with the Egyptian wisdom books dating back to the 2nd and 3rd pre-Christian millennia, but Jaspers could have. In Athens, Socrates was convinced of the innate intelligence of (male) slaves, in Egypt almost two millennia earlier Ptahhotep was convinced of the innate intelligence of (female) domestic ser-

vants (“slaves”). Now, Socrates was convinced of the mathematical knowledge of the slave Menon, comparable to that of a scholar, but Ptahhotep of the worldly wisdom of the women working at the millstones, for its part comparable to that of educated people. “Thinking became its own object” (J 20 = 2), but not just in the Axial period, rather ever since humanity has been capable of meta-language.

- 20 *India – what it can teach us*, London, 1883.
- 21 Hegel had no way of knowing of the most important philosopher in China in the modern era, Wang Yangming (1472-1529), a contemporary of Martin Luther (1483-1546). Much of what Hegel wrote about Luther’s internalising of truth in the human “heart” he could also have written – *mutatis mutandi*, of course (as is generally the case in history) – about Wang Yangming, the founder of the “heart school” (*xinxue*); and he could even have written the following statement *tale quale*: “It is the heart, the sensitive spirituality of the human being, which can and should gain possession of the truth, and this subjectivity is the subjectivity of *all human beings*” (H 12.496). In China and Japan, Wang Yangming has become a source of stimulation for political dissidents of the Right and the Left alike, as has Luther in the West for religious “protestants”.
- 22 Hegel found a “national work of language”, particularly poetry, lacking among the ancient Egyptians. According to him, they only left behind “mute works of art”, and writing only as figurative hieroglyphs rather than abstract letters (H 12.246 f.; 13.559; 16.441). Hegel had no way of knowing that in the 12th or 13th century B.C.E. a scribe from Der el-Medina, a village on the west bank of the Nile near Luxor and home to tomb builders, was of the opinion that books were more valuable and enduring than burial chambers, stone monuments, houses and palaces. The latter decay, are buried and forgotten. But the authors of “teachings” are forever cherished in memory. “Their teachings are their Pyramids.” The papyrus (Chester Beatty IV) on the rear of which the scribe wrote his conviction was only discovered and deciphered 100 years after Hegel’s death. Nowadays the Egyptians are extolled for having given the world its oldest book of wisdom (*The Teachings of [the Court Official] Ptahhotep*, 3rd millennium B.C.E.). A model of one of the biblical Psalms which Hegel particularly admired and quoted in detail, Psalm 104, was Akhenaton’s sun hymn. Hegel had no way of knowing that the “de-deification” of nature – today this would be called “demythologising” – by “cutting it down” (*herabdrücken*) to a mere “creature” of God was not an original deed of the Jewish Bible; rather, it is attributable precisely to Egypt, where Hegel thought he saw “an iron band brandished across the brow of the mind” (H 12.256); for Jaspers, this demythologising was one of the reasons for placing the Jewish prophets and those who wrote the book of Genesis on a par with the Greek philosophers as representatives of the Axial Period.
- 23 Before the decoding of the Mesopotamian cuneiform script, Hegel was not in a position to know that today his remark about Persia would have to be corrected and would be applicable to Sumer: “The Persians [Sumerians] are the first historical [historiographically documented] people, Persia [Sumer] is the first Empire to have met its downfall” (H 12.125).
- 24 The *locus classicus* of this view of “universal history” is in Friedrich Schiller’s inaugural lecture in Jena in 1789: “The discoveries [made by European seafarers ...] show us peoples positioned around us at diverse levels of education, as children of different ages stand around an adult, reminding him by their example of what he himself once was and where he came from.”
- 25 Jaspers specifically mentions the “Sanskrit renaissance in the twelfth century” in South Asia and the “Confucianism of the Han period” and the “neo-Confucianism of the Sung period” in East Asia (J 82 = 56). In Jaspers’s work, the “Gupta period” in South Asia (4th-5th centuries) is conspicuously missing. An argument could be made that as far as the systematic development of its accomplishments is concerned the “Axial Period” in South Asia occupies a longer period than in the Mediterranean. The brief period between the emergence represented by the pre-Socratics and Socrates himself in Hellenistic philosophy and its creative and systematic development by Plato and Aristotle corresponds to a longer incubation period in South Asia – assuming that the *Upanishadas* and the Buddha’s sermons can be compared with the fragments of the pre-Socratics and Socrates’s dialogues, and the classical *Sutranis* of the six foremost Hindu *Darshanani* (which were only fixed in writing after the beginning of the common era) as well as the texts attributed to the Buddhaitic philosophers Nagarjuna (2nd century) and Vasubandhu (4th-5th century) with Plato’s and Aristotle’s writings. – In China, it would be tempting to compare the metaphysical writings of the Song period (960-1218) with the writings of Plato and Aristotle. Hegel seems only

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- to have been familiar with the translations of the ancient Confucian classics as well as the Daoitic *Daodejing*. He had no way of knowing the Confucian Xun Zi (-3rd century), the most reflective and argumentative in the Axial Period. By the same token, he seemed not to be familiar with the “neo-Confucian” philosophers since the 10th century. In view of this acquaintance, Hegel’s concluding remarks about the *Yijing* and the *Daodejing* are understandable: “A philosophical emergence of all things from these abstract ideas of absolute unity and duality can be detected here. All symbols have the advantage that they intimate ideas and give rise to the opinion that they, too, were there. That is how one begins with ideas, but after that the going gets steep; and the philosophising stops right away.” – “If philosophising has not got any farther than such expressions [“the one”, “the nothing”, “the last”], then it is on the first step.”
- 26 Jaspers speaks forbearingly of “the recession that has taken place in India and China since the seventeenth century”. The question with which he continues, however, is demeaning: “Is not the problem of our destiny to avoid sinking back into the Asiatic matrix from which China and India had also raised themselves up?” (J 78 = 53).
- 27 Hegel’s published writings (in contrast to those of the earlier authors Herder and Kant) make no mention of Japan (not even in the list of countries in which Buddhism had been disseminated (H 12. 209). Either Hegel regarded Japan as a mere satellite culture of China and a latecomer, or there was no room for a “land of the rising sun” east of China, for a land which obviously conceived the world not as massive substance, but rather as volatile vapour (*ukiyo*). For Hegel, “the external, physical sun” and with it the “light of the spirit” had risen in China (H 12.130, 134), the light “of consciousness” as the “relationship to other” in Iran with Zarathustra (215), and the “inward sun of self-awareness” in Greece (134). Ultimately, Hegel found the most recent “splendid sunrise” in the West, in the philosophically based constitution of the the French Revolution (529). Moreover, had Japan not received its “illumination” or “Enlightenment” (*satori*) from India by way of China?
- 28 Ito Jinzai (1627-1705) and Ogyu Sorai (1666-1728) were influenced by contemporary Chinese and Korean debates, but they were independent philosophers who (in Jaspersian words) “took thought from their own origin” and critically grappled with “neo-Confucianism”. The last “great philosopher” of China who could be expected to gain a worldwide readership is the “neo-Confucian” Wang Yangming (1472-1529; mentioned in note 21), who picked up on Daoitic and Buddhaitic experience and thought. Korea also had neo-Confucian philosophers who must not be underestimated: Yi Hwang and Yi Yulgok. In that same 16th century, philosophy in Islam enjoyed in the “school of Esfahan” the last renaissance it was to go through independently of the European challenge. Finally, in Ethiopia in the 17th century, Zar’a Ya’ecob must be mentioned as a philosopher (in a technical sense of the word) and not merely as a “teacher of wisdom”. In the countries mentioned, there can be no talk of a continuous state of stagnation in philosophy or similarly in aesthetic culture since the 15th century (in Asia as a long-term after-effect of the Mongolian invasions in the 13th century).
- 29 The non-European scholars who have discussed European culture since the 19th century do not by any means refer only to the classics of their own cultures dating back to the 1st millennium before the Christian era, but with conspicuous frequency to thinkers of the more recent “renaissances”. A symptomatic example: in his book on *Nationalism* (New York, 1917), Rabindranath Tagore refers to “our holy men ... Nanak [1469-1639], Kabir [1440-1518], Caitanya [1486-1533].” It is remarkable that the first two are mentioned inasmuch as they linked Islamic and Hindu thought with each other.
- 30 *La philosophe de l'histoire* (1765: Chapitre 18^e).
- 31 Hegel would have no future prognoses: “... in history we have to do with the past” (H 12.422). But a distinction would have to be made between prognoses for the future and projects for the future.
- 32 Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht* (1861): *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Karl Meuli, Basel: Schwabe, 1948: 16 (Preface).
- 33 In Jaspers, anachronistically oriented on views of the philosophy of science dating from the 18th and 19th centuries (Kant and positivism), philosophy and science go their all too separate ways: “We know nothing of the soul of the man of 20,000 years ago” (J 50 = 29). “Nothing can be known with certainty but the purposes of the implements” (J 54 = 32). Today there are too many

archaeological data, and they are better interpreted explicitly, on methodological reflection. Otherwise, the background assumptions, which can never be completely excluded, will be left up to uncontrolled inspirations. The maxim is the same as in other fields of knowledge: better explicit and falsifiable than tacit, non-committal and undecidable. It may be that what is lacking for a sufficient explanation of the “emergence” of human consciousness is not so much the required initial and frame conditions, but rather the presupposed (philosophical) categories and theories. This, among others, is Noam Chomsky’s conjecture. Cf. “Language and Nature”, in: *Mind* 104, 1995: 1-61.

- 34 Colin Renfrew & Paul Bahn, *Archaeology*, London: Thames & Hudson, second edition 1996: 369-402.
- 35 Hegel was quite satisfied with Johannes von Müller’s back-dating (1806) of the deluge to the year 3473 B.C. The non-mention of the deluge in Chinese history books then need no longer be “embarrassing”.
- 36 See by way of comparison the logographic numerals and the stubborn tendency – stubborn in the face of puristic orthographic reforms – to write homophonic words differently for the sake of better readability: English *night* / *knight*, German *das* / *dass*.
- 37 That is, a historical document with the same information in a known and an unfamiliar writing system.
- 38 A readable account of this story can be found in Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, London: Thomas & Hudson 1992.