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An Epistolary Exchange

Ian Alexander Moore and Barbara Wahl, eds.

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie
française et de langue française, Vol XXIX, No 1-2 (2021) pp 173-181

Vol XXIX, No 1-2 (2021)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2021.956
www.jffp.org

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Jean Wahl and Karl Jaspers on Descartes and Kierkegaard

An Epistolary Exchange

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1. Jean Wahl to Karl Jaspers, 22 October 1937

Sir,*

Thank you very much for sending me the German text of your study on Descartes.¹ It gave me the opportunity to reread it and to admire once again the strength of this portrait, the beauty of many of these pages.

My attitude about Descartes is evidently not the same as yours, although perhaps we share similar starting points. For a long time, I have concluded that, apart from the ideas in which he diverges most from himself, such as the union of soul and body,² Descartes had nothing to teach me, except for Descartes; and that, when faced with him, as with almost all of the great philosophers, it was best for me to adopt the attitude of the historian of philosophy and to try to revive his thought, to make mine, momentarily, his mode of thinking, and to admire his effort. I indeed admire this effort, which you condemn, to unite the Cogito as the form of all thought³ and the thoughts that are the successive matters of our mental life, to create something that is at once science and philosophy, to build up a type of truth that is both that of the Cogito and that of scientific affirmations, to formulate demonstrations of God that are both constraining and self-constraining, both rational and

grounded in the supra-rational divine abyss (where God appears as the richness of being and at the same time as principle of the criterion of truth), to apply the idea of clarity both to relations and to the terms they join (which explains the “confusion” that you note on p. 38 [of the German text] between the clarity of imagined terms and the clarity of the rational relation).

You say on p. 116 (of the translation): “Faith no longer expresses itself in him with all its vigor, and philosophy, on the other hand, does not yet make itself felt in him as a source of life.”⁴ Could one not say almost as well: “Faith still expresses itself in him with all its vigor, and yet philosophy makes itself felt fully as a source of life?” Could one not see, in the fact that he allows authority to persist without understanding it (p. 117), the meaning of what is respectable and mysterious in authority?

I see in him a mind [*esprit*] that is both eager for authority and aware—at least quite often—of its limits. And it is as you describe it in certain pages that I find of model of philosophical description.

I feel so far from Descartes, and on the other hand find him so lofty [*haut*]—so proud [*hautain*]—that I try simply to admire him and, by a sort of mimicry, to give to my thought for a moment the color of his.

However, I sense in him, as you show so forcefully, tensions, conflicts, a possibility of diverse interpretations, a lack of transparency. But, for a reader and admirer of your *Philosophie*,⁵ isn't this what characterizes philosophy itself?

I am searching for why you do not spare Descartes any contradiction, and insist less on the presence in him of the “source” than on the fact that it is hidden (yet it is in every great philosopher), less on the cipher of transcendence than on the fact that it appears only in flashes (yet it is the same with the other great philosophers)? It is because you have, no doubt, made him responsible for the deviations of the modern spirit [*esprit*], and because you have personified in him the universal [*le général*], a rather flat universal, in his opposition to the individual as the philosopher can conceive of it today, after the passage of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

I am well aware that you say that in Descartes, the mystery hides an absence of mystery, a flatness [*platitude*], a non-philosophy. For my part, I see in him an illustration of your theory: namely, that the source never appears except in flashes, and that all philosophy fails, wanting to become conscious of what surpasses consciousness.

I see problems everywhere in Descartes's system, whether in the theory of freedom, in the provisional morality, in the union of soul and body, in the relation between God and the criterion of certainty. But even this I admire, as a sign of the vigor of a thought which could not hide itself in the too rigid worlds it fashioned for itself.

These last words show you how, despite these observations, I feel close to you; I would like you to take these observations themselves only as testimony of the ardent interest with which I have read you, as the echo of a dialogue that, thanks to your book, I have enjoyed starting with you.

I ask you please to accept the expression of my feelings of great sympathy, admiration, and dedication,

Jean Wahl

2. Karl Jaspers to Jean Wahl, 30 January 1938

Dear Mr. Wahl!

Thank you very much for your letter from October 22, in which you comment so thoroughly on my “Descartes.” I read your remarks with lively interest. It seemed to me that, in the end, we might be more in accord than it seems to you. I can follow your “attitude”⁶ toward Descartes without difficulty. You, too, see the questionable issues that I believe I see. In what seems to me a most ingenious way, you underscore the possible depth of rationality as such. (I nevertheless believe I also hinted at this in my treatise.) I go along with you, even if, at the moment of my work, it was more essential for me to call Descartes into question. You interpret this from the polemical position that it was necessary for me to take there as a result of modern developments. Indeed: Descartes is not Anselm.

From my presentation, you single out the following sentence about Descartes: “that faith no longer spoke from him with all vitality, and that, on the other hand, philosophy as the origin that grounds life had not yet come to life in him”⁷—and you think one can say the inverse almost just as well: “faith still speaks in him with all its might and yet philosophy can be perceived in him as a source of life.” Indeed, there seems to be an extreme contrast between us here in our esteem for Descartes. But the difference is perhaps that you mean the sentence only tentatively as a paradox. Perhaps I am more resolute in my sentence. This is because the content of your sentence seems to me to express an impossible state of affairs: for, wherever calm belief is decided, there is actually no longer any philosophy; rather, only rational thoughts that have come from a once-original philosophy remain, or it is a matter of theology. I must agree with you if you mean your sentence biographically in the following way: Descartes’s life testifies to the complete seriousness of his philosophy; but it does not testify to the seriousness of his faith with the same visibility; therefore, the debate about his “mask” does not stop. If we base ourselves on the imparted philosophy alone, then I believe I may contradict your reversal of my sentence in accordance with my explanations.

[. . .]⁸

I thank you once again heartily.

Your most devoted,

[Karl Jaspers]

3. Karl Jaspers to Jean Wahl, 9 April 1938

Dear Mr. Wahl!

Your great work—*Kierkegaard Studies*⁹—cannot be read casually and in a hurry. It requires study. Unfortunately, I have to postpone this until the moment when I wish to engage with Kierkegaard again, as according to my plans. But until then I cannot wait to express my heartfelt thanks to you. With this I can connect only superficial remarks that came to me while quickly paging through your book and reading parts of it. Your method of penetrating reflection (instead of a transparent presentation of a supposed whole) seems to me entirely appropriate. One will be interested to follow you when you pursue the intricate thoughts and possibilities under the guidance of questions that are in each case specific. It is also extremely interesting to see how you detect relationships between authors, analogies, coincidences, and influences.

In particular, I am grateful to you for the diligent effort you have put into my writings. It has been a pleasure for me to read in your work how diversely my thinking has grown out of Kierkegaard or rather been nourished by it. When I then read that I am not a philosopher but a professor,¹⁰ this not only coincides with what I have occasionally answered for the last twenty years when I was addressed as a philosopher, but is like a liberation from false claims and false fame. Even Kant did not want to be called a philosopher. This is a repetition of what, in antiquity, first led to the word “philosopher” in contrast to *sophos*.¹¹ The only difference is that we are not creating a new word now, but rather retreating to teaching and to “professor.” I also want to study closely this critical analysis of yours once more.

As far as I can see, your work is the first attempt on a large scale to naturalize Kierkegaard in France. One can see from the information you provide what was there before you. I was astonished to read that Kierkegaard had been written about in France as far back as 1900 and 1903, and also astonished by how much of his work had recently been translated into French.

In addition to the extensive literature you have cited, I would like to draw your attention to a short article that would, I imagine, be of great interest to

you: Alker, “Zur Biographie Sören Kierkegaards” [On Kierkegaard’s Biography] (*Hochland* XXXIV, pp. 277 ff. 1936–1937). He reports on recent Danish research that is not without relevance. It is also perhaps worth citing an earlier critical review of the literature: F. J. Brecht, *Die Kierkegaardforschung im letzten Jahrzehnt* [*Kierkegaard Research in the Last Five Years*] (“Literarische Berichte aus dem Gebiete der Philosophie,” ed. A. Hoffmann – Erfurt, Volume 25, 1931, Stuttgart, Kurt Stenger).

Once again, my heartfelt thanks.

You most devoted,

[Karl Jaspers]

4. Jean Wahl to Karl Jaspers, 16 April 1938

Dear Sir and Colleague,

Thank you for your letter, which I was very glad to receive. What you say touched me deeply.

I realize how unsatisfying the pages I have devoted to your philosophy are. And I am glad that you read them with indulgence and sympathy.

The few questions that I had asked, the critiques that I have sometimes ventured to make, were directed at myself; for, there is perhaps no philosophy to which I feel so close as yours. And it is a continual mistrust of myself and of what is familiar to me that explains my objections.

I haven’t yet read *Existenzphilosophie*.¹² I am waiting to read it more easily with the help of Mr. Pollnow’s translation,¹³ and at a moment when I will have a little more time. But I reproached myself for not having thanked you sooner for a book that will, for me, be educational and nourishing.

I also haven’t yet thanked you for your very interesting letter in which you spoke about Descartes as well as about my ideas on transcendence.¹⁴

As for Descartes, I would well admit that the sentence I wrote, reversing your terms, is less satisfactory and has something paradoxical, even “questionable” (as one would say in English) about it.¹⁵ However, I believe that Descartes’s belief was “serious,” and I am not very willing to accept the thesis of the masked philosopher.

Regarding the points you mention about transcendence, everything you say has been very valuable for me. I tried to respond, and thanks to Mr. Pollnow, your text, translated, appears in the *Bulletin de la Société de Philosophie*, together with the response that I tried to make, not to all of your observations (for, with respect to some of them, I believe that there is hardly

anything to respond), but to certain ones. I would like to continue this conversation, and once I have read *Existenzphilosophie*, I will be sure to do so.

Please accept, sir and dear colleague, the expression of my feelings of great sympathy and profound devotion, and admiration.

Jean Wahl

Appendix: Jean Wahl's Letter of Recommendation for Karl Jaspers

I would hesitate to bother you if were not a matter of a colleague so eminent as Karl Jaspers.¹⁶ I know in particular his philosophical works, not having had the chance to study his great work on mental pathology.¹⁷—I consider him to be one of the two German philosophers (the other being Heidegger) who do their country the greatest honor, and whose work has, and deserves to have had, the most impact. I have carefully studied his *Philosophie*¹⁸ and his volume on Nietzsche.¹⁹ I devoted two articles to them, which appeared in the *Revue de Métaphysique* and in *Recherches Philosophiques*.²⁰ Gabriel Marcel and Maurice Boucher, my colleague at the Sorbonne, have also studied his work, the one in *Recherches Philosophiques*, the other in the *Mélanges Lichtenberger*.²¹ The *Revue Philosophique* considered it an honor to open its issue for the centenary of Descartes with an article by Jaspers.²²

What in Jaspers draws me in is the great seriousness of his reflection, whether it applies to Descartes or to Kierkegaard. It always reaches the essential points. One sees a thinker in the face of other thinkers, enriching himself by them, sometimes reacting against them, but always in a personal way. His book on Nietzsche is one of those that best captures both the multiplicity and the complexity of Nietzsche's thought and its ultimate essence.

What makes Jaspers so important is, however, the masterful set of his three-volume *Philosophie*. It is a response to the question that every contemporary philosopher cannot fail to ask: what form must philosophy take in order to survive after the passage of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard?

Jaspers's influence on young French philosophers shows not only that philosophy can survive, but that it retains its appeal, even in our painful and troubled times.

Please accept, Sir, the expression of my feelings of complete dedication.

Signed: Jean Wahl

Professor of the Faculty of Letters²³

Translated by Ian Alexander Moore

* Édition originale: Jean Wahl and Karl Jaspers, “Sur Descartes et Kierkegaard: Un échange épistolaire,” *Nouvelle Revue Française* no. 649 (July 2021).

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Descartes und die Philosophie* (Berlin: Springer, 1937). In English as “Descartes and Philosophy,” in Karl Jaspers, *Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, trans. Ralph Mannheim (London: Routledge, 2009), second essay. Below, Wahl refers to the German version as well as to a French translation (“La pensée de Descartes et la philosophie”) prepared by Hans Pollnow for a special issue of *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* on Descartes, vol. 123, no. 5/8 (May-August 1937): 39-148. Wahl, too, contributed a text titled “Notes sur Descartes” to the special issue (pp. 370-72). The latter text is available in English under the title “On Descartes,” in Jean Wahl, *Human Existence and Transcendence*, trans. and ed. William C. Hackett (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 59-61.

² Wahl adds the note: “a theory that, for me, shows the breadth of his thought and makes visible a certainty without distinction.”

³ Wahl adds the note: “not necessarily empty.”

⁴ I here translate from the French version cited by Wahl.

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Philosophie*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Springer, 1932). In English as *Philosophy*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969-1971). For Wahl’s discussion of this work, see especially Jean Wahl, “The Problem of Choice: Existence and Transcendence in the Philosophy of Jaspers,” trans. Scott Davidson. Abridged version (with an introduction by I. A. Moore) in Jean Wahl, *Transcendence and the Concrete*, ed. Alan D. Schrift and Ian Alexander Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), chapter 6; complete version in the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2016): 224-58.

⁶ Jaspers uses the French homograph *attitude*.

⁷ Here and below, I directly translate Jaspers’s German translation of Wahl’s French, so as to give the Anglophone reader a sense for the differences between the two.

⁸ The remainder of Jaspers’s letter is already available. It forms a part of Wahl’s famous lecture and debate “Subjectivité et transcendance,” *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie* 37, no. 5 (October-December 1937): 161-211. “Subjectivity and Transcendence,” trans. Anna Johnson and Ian Alexander Moore, in Wahl,

Transcendence and the Concrete, chapter 7 (letter on pp. 189-92; Wahl's response on 192-93).

⁹ Jean Wahl, *Études kierkegaardienes* (Paris: Aubier, 1938). Portions of this book have appeared in English as "The Problem of Choice"; "Hegel and Kierkegaard," trans. Russell Ford, in Wahl, *Transcendence and the Concrete*, chapter 4; and "Heidegger and Kierkegaard: An Investigation into the Original Elements of Heidegger's Philosophy," trans. Ian Alexander Moore, in Wahl, *Transcendence and the Concrete*, chapter 5.

¹⁰ Wahl, "The Problem of Choice" (*Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* version), 257n82, in reference to Jeanne Hersch's book *L'illusion philosophique* (Paris: Alcan, 1936).

¹¹ Greek for "sage" or "wise one."

¹² Karl Jaspers, *Existenzphilosophie: Drei Vorlesungen* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1938). Translated by Richard F. Grabau as *Philosophy of Existence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

¹³ It appears that this translation either never materialized or remains unpublished.

¹⁴ See endnote 8, above.

¹⁵ "Questionable" is in English in the original.

¹⁶ Based on Wahl's references, this recommendation letter must date from 1937 at the earliest. In view of Wahl's comment about "our painful and troubled times," and of the fact that he does not cite any of his postwar publications on Jaspers, the letter was presumably written during World War II. The editors have been unable to determine its addressee.

¹⁷ Karl Jaspers, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie: Ein Leitfaden für Studierende, Ärzte und Psychologen* (Berlin: Springer 1913).

¹⁸ Jaspers, *Philosophie/Philosophy*.

¹⁹ Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: Einführung in das Verständnis seines Philosophierens* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1936); *Nietzsche: An Introduction to his Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Wallraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965). See also Wahl's preface for the French translation: *Nietzsche: Introduction à sa philosophie*, trans. Henri Niel (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), i-vii.

²⁰ Jean Wahl, "Le problème du choix: L'existence et la transcendance dans la philosophie de Jaspers," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 41, no. 3 (July 1934): 405-6; republished in Jean Wahl, *Études kierkegaardienes* (Paris: Aubier, 1938), 510-52. In English as "The Problem of Choice." Jean Wahl, "Le Nietzsche de Jaspers,"

Recherches Philosophiques 6 (1936-1937): 346-62; republished in Jean Wahl, *Poésie, pensée, perception* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1948), 119-43.

²¹ Gabriel Marcel, "The Fundamental and Ultimate Situation in Karl Jaspers," in Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Noonday, 1964), chapter VIII. Maurice Boucher, "Jaspers et l'Existenzphilosophie." in *Mélanges Henri Lichtenberger: Hommage de ses élèves et ses amis, juin 1934* (Paris: Stock [Delamain et Boutelleau], 1934).

²² Wahl is referring to the third centenary of the publication of Descartes's *Discours de la méthode*. See Jaspers, "La pensée de Descartes et la philosophie," trans. Hans Pollnow, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 123, no. 5/8 (May-August 1937): 39-148. Jaspers's text was not the lead article, however. Perhaps Wahl was confusing it with a different lead article published in the journal's pages a couple years later: Karl Jaspers, "Essence et valeur de la science," trans. Jean H. Pollnow, *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 127, nos. 1-2 (January-February 1939): 5-13.

²³ Namely, "of the Sorbonne."