

Notation: This page is prepared with the idea that a few, like my children, will read it and ask questions or make comments. That is one reason my wife's illness is mentioned, for it helps to make a personal application through family familiarity. It might be helpful to others too timid or cautious to directly respond. Others are invited to comment or ask questions. I may paraphrase or rephrase the responses, and will not mention names without first seeking approval before adding them to this page.

HOW TO UNDERSTAND JASPERS

FROM THE EXISTENTIAL SEWING MACHINE TO EXISTENZ—An existential exercise and description of Existenz—an aid to understanding Jaspers. (12-1-05)

01. Preface: During a brief exchange with a surgeon I mentioned the word “existential” to which he responded: “I thought existentialism was dead.” I answered that existentialism is dead but not existentialistic thinking. He had used the word “miracle” relative to my wife's recovery. To show “miracle” could be used and still be psychologically and medically friendly, my interest in the theistic existentialist Karl Jaspers was mentioned. His response shows how a misunderstanding of terms can affect an aversion to a psychiatrist who can be helpful. We will return later for the rest of this story in item 2. below. Hopefully it, along with one of my early memories, can contribute to a proper understanding of Jaspers' use of the word “*Existenz*” (a Danish/German word for an existence emphasizing the individual as opposed to a predetermining consciousness beyond humankind's control). We might effectively delete the word after it's understood in the context of its history. The only reason existential, existentialism, and the non-English “*Existenz*” is being ruminated is because it comes up now and then especially relative to Jaspers whose influence is steadily increasing.

02. Our brief “existential” exchange shows there is good reason to think existentialism is dead, for the meaning of the word can ...simply...be too complex to define. When it is too defined it ends in an “ism”, loses a certain adjectival vitality, and rigormortis takes the form of fatalism and nihilism. This page is for the person who wants to understand “existential” from a...flexible selfhood...basis, i.e., from real life events rather than textbook learning. Textbook information attaches the word “existentialist” to Jaspers. To repeat, he has been and can be referred to as the father of theistic existential thinking. Distinguishing “existential” and “existentialist” from “existentialism” is a good prerequisite for approaching Jaspers. Thinking existentialism is dead has a subtle secondary effect which can become primary in significance. For one thing, it might mean one can dismiss Jaspers and avoid the therapeutic effect his writings have as the father of theistic existential thinking. This webpage amounts to a snap-bit of personalized

orientation, a personalization required for moving along with Jaspers' thinking.

03. I'm starting with an early-memory but not the earliest. So in a sense we are jumping into existence not quite where it starts. Earlier memories had just enough minor emotional traumas to keep those situations near and safe enough for recall. The one here involves pain but insignificant in itself, and so minor that to mention it as meaningful subjects it to ridicule. For instance I had routed it for posting and discussion on Muller's "Karl Jaspers Forum" and though it was posted for a short period, it soon became inaccessible. After several efforts to have it reposted it finally was posted under another context and then ridiculed. The reaction against it seemed to flutter too much, like a killdeer distracting from its nest, and aroused a suspicion that there was something disturbing about it. That indicated it had enough value to warrant ignoring by those inclined to object to its tutorial significance.

04. Early memories can be reliable, and maintained. I've never misused chemicals to a harmful degree that might short circuit the processes of distinguishing reality from fantasy. When I worked at the Northwest Indiana Alcoholism Clinic the Acting Administrator, an admitted recovering Alcoholic, seemed disturbed by the talk about early recall. He said that he could not recall anything before the age of 16. He had chronically abused alcohol to the point of having been institutionalized. He had experienced hallucinatory phenomena and the disorientation relative to delirium tremors. I understood that, but still argued for the benefits of some patients' recollections, at least recalling what should have been possible to remember. My point here though is that some can have more than less real, reliable recollections.

05. Rather than impediments to recollections I've been lucky to have some aids: **One**--I have a living brother and sister for confirmation in discussion. Their testimony would be welcomed to this webpage. Personal and shared testimony is important. They too do not abuse drugs (this is not a value judgment of those needing assistance). **Two**--Then there are the rather extensive and chronicled family photo albums maintained by my mother. My life was not such as might establish an aversion to family photos. And I had an unusual interest in reviewing--more often than the other family members--these albums. It was like I was reliving everything that surrounded the snapshots, but these fixated images captured nothing in comparison to whole situations. The photos of persons without the background, by in large, hid more than they revealed. They could be both opaque and transparent. **Three**--I spent my childhood within the vicinity of the recallable events. Whenever we would take the eggs to Ithaca, make three weekly trips to the Coe Christian Church; we would pass by these points of interest where feelings impacted thinking. We spent one winter, returned to Michigan, then again the next

winter in Summerdale, in Alabama's south along the Gulf when I was three and four. Each time we returned to the same Michigan farmhouse. **Four**--Though inherited late, there are my paternal grandmother's daily written accounts, which were of such importance that they helped win a court case—but the ranges of various images have no direct bearing on the recollection of the event below. Her daily records have verified a few other memories, which tends to support my confidence in this recall. **Five**--There are in-depth emotional aids too; e.g., that's the house where my brother Richard died, though before I was born in it, the wooded area where my sister, Lela, was buried. She born prematurely, cried and immediately died. Down the road, the homestead of my earliest memories--except one—is where we moved next, and where I spent most of the first four years.

1. THE SEWING MACHINE

1.1. In a tiny room sat the Singer sewing machine that my mother used frequently. Her hands working the cloth and her foot the treadle is a memory that's simply a given, given by what happened later. Alone in that small room and standing before that fascinating machine is where I found one of my more conscious selves...simultaneously with the pain of the needle going through the very tip of the right index finger. This was really my finger. It was not my brother Raymond's or my sister Ramona's but mine. With the pain came my cry, a focusing on the tiny reddish needle mark on the nail, and the comprehension of a clear inference that it was what ...I...had done.

1.2. My mother immediately came. As I showed her the fingertip she had that look of instantaneous understanding. Whatever transpired within and to my state of consciousness at that point included my understanding of her facial expression and quality of her words. Those words still echo verbatim. They seemed to ride in on the crest of that vortex of consciousness of which I was some sort of ingress-egress center. She said: "I thought you had shut your finger in the door. I told you not to go in there". I had caused the whole thing, and knew, then, the meaning of those words, understood guilt somewhat, for at that instant I recalled, i.e., my psyche retrospected within consciousness, and, yes, in fact she had told me not to go in there. She had not lied to me to preserve her parental responsibility, or to defend herself against any possible charge of child neglect. At that instant I remembered having sneakily pushed open the a-jar door, recalled entering, placing my finger, and then clearly placing my foot on the treadle and pressing. I don't recall the exact verbatim prohibition to not go in the room, but do recall the feeling of being stealthy.

1.3. It was the first event where I got the point that whatever “I-consciousness” I was before, I now knew that a consciousness without conscience could make an easy and avoidable mistake and suffer the consequences. But there was a conscience that was prior to that experience as an early science. This was not the first occasion, though, that dawned a state of conscience within consciousness. (An even earlier memory in particular shows beyond personal doubt that I had a conscience prior to a certain or special awareness of consciousness.)

1.4. What is interesting is that I became conscious of having been conscious. I do in fact remember immediate relative events and prior to and after the punctuated event and less as the rippling effect feathered away. The ripple effect had a past-tenseness-current as well as a present-tenseness-now currency, and included a future-current-tenseness all within an immediate encompassing consciousness and conscience.

1.5. All the thinking done above involves what *stood-out* differentiated from the normal flow of consciousness. That bit which *exited* the normal flow is *existential thinking*. Exit means out, the root meaning of exist. It exists in an intense way different from what followed and preceded. One’s first memory and surrounding variations of psyche and feeling states becomes then the beginning of existential thinking, and in its wake is dragged real feeling states made more or less real by the polarity of the thinking about differentiations. One comfort is compared to discomfort, or discontent with content, ease with disease, etc.

1.6. A popular and incorrect definition of “existential” is that in existential thinking existence is prior to essence. That is behavioristically wrong, as is the verbalization that experience is prior consciousness. Consciousness is fundamentally more basic. Consciousness with all its feathering into and out-of is the essence of existence and is prior to, and has initial primacy, over existence.

1.7. From the standpoint of thinking and feeling the words retrospective and prospective cognizing (thinking) seems most descriptive to me, i.e., most descriptive of that enlightening minor implosive-explosive event. This thinking is out of an awareness inclusive of a variety of constant feeling states. Reflective thinking, and retrospective in the sense that something predestined and foreordained the recallable point, like the wonders or circumstances of the fortunate motherhood into which I found myself, and almost prophetic in the sense that the future must be predicted as negative in order to avoid losing the essence of a relatively already established normal life without needling. All that adds up to approaching the future as potentially, predictably painful for a world of selves and that it must be approached with great care and attention given to inherited

warnings, like parental warnings. Here conscience simultaneously occurs along with consciousness and thinking.

1.8. A forewarning is in order here. There can be preconstitutional effects on consciousness and conscience potential too. Other than that which is attributable to chance and the unavoidable, there are such things as parental misuse of alcohol and the effects on progeny like the fetal alcoholism syndrome, and accompanied predispositional effects such as a conscience-handicap and the need for institutional care in extreme cases. These are extreme situations and are only mentioned here to show the importance of parental preconditioning both physically and mentally. Chance is also involved, e.g., my parents could have been child abusers. My mother conceivably could have replaced a memorial minor incident with a life-stifling disciplinary reaction for being disobedient. And, the sewing machine needle may have pinned my finger to the machine while mother was absent when nurturing was needed. Any number of variables could have coincided which would result in the suppression of this event by other more intense events. Personality changes due to such impacts might require a number of different props to maintain balance through life. Then, too, conscious processes can be drastically modified by wartime experience. And this is at least the second time the word experience is used and there is reason for this, for experience can become the existence that precedes essence. Experience can determine existence, experience can absorb consciousness but it is unnatural if natural is thought of as “the best of times.”

1.9. Normal events such as the sewing machine incident can show how time and space are tools used by a subject, an “I” conscious of itself in a particular situation. Time and space is subjective in the sense that time and space use is within the control of whatever self momentarily stands out. I misused time and space and was subject to the misuse. I went from the living room to the sewing room, and that involves objective and subjective space-time phenomena. I experienced fast time between the piercing and pain. If I had been pinned to the sewing machine, space-time would have become more objective in that I would have been more subject to it. But space-time is clearly objective, to me, in that my mother was in the space at the right time, and that was the proper parental use she made of the tools. Space is always dependent of differentiations between objects for some particular self or other purpose. Time is always a measurement of distance between moving or movable objects relative to our position, whether objects in or out of the head.

1.10. Time-space events (punctuations of varying intensity, positive and negative, beginning with differentiation by comparison) can show consciousness is like a shuttle while the ground of consciousness--never unconscious but only forgotten--

is like the main departure and arrival vehicle too great to recall but direct access to remains a fundamental constant. This is objectivity in the psyche dimension, while in the feeling dimension it is objectivity in the sense of an inherited comfortable or uncomfortable core prone respectively to producing inferiority or superiority manifestations. Subjectivism (note the “ism”) is the loss of objectivity in thinking and comes across as a superiority complex, a complicated defense system for others to contend with. A balance between subjectivity and objectivity was at stake in the sewing machine incident as in all the vicissitudes and subsidiaries of life. I may have good-lucked out more than bad-lucked out with the sewing machine situation but conceivably differently regarding earlier or later occurrences.

1.11. In all this where does *Existenz* apply? Without a comprehension of the meaning of this word, understanding Jaspers is more difficult. Let’s go back to the sewing machine but more to the environment, the whole situation of the home-life I was graced with during the early years. My father and mother were from non-denominational, religiously speaking, homes and of the protestant ethic sort. My father and mother were “converted” in an old fashion tent revival just before I was conceived. They had need of contentment, i.e., release from the guilt of having lost two children about which they felt a natural responsibility. I too was also therefore obligated to those siblings for their part in my parents’ conversion. When I came along they were committed to the study of the bible, verbally expressed belief in God, trusted Jesus’ words, appreciated his purposeful suffering, felt obligated to manifesting good works in appreciation, and liked to hope they were being guided by the spirit of Christ. My father had entered the ministry and my mother too. They made an effective team. That is the transcendental side of my home life, transcendental in the sense that a standard of conduct “given” was worth being crucified for by Jesus, who had an invisible father to whom he pointed others, and passed the spirit of the Decalogue--Ten Commandments--to us (I let the “Word” program capitalize those words). The atmosphere of the home life was that we are all children of the imageless God originally but can lose consciousness of it. All that idealistic thinking and feeling—regardless of the untold constancy of errors--qualified the *existential* situation. That qualification process is “*Existenz*”--the whole recallable situation surrounding and penetrating “selfhood” a self suspended between itself and Transcendent, not forgetting the indeterminate source, and includes the receptivity given for receiving personal enlightenment.

2. The rest of the story with which this Web Page opened points to the meaningfulness of *Existenz*; it is as follows:

2.1. My wife, Sheila, within a two-year stretch, had gone from 150 to 81 lbs. She could not process solids, and was surviving on cream-of-wheat, some digestible sweets, and liquid vitamins. She was also consuming large quantities of Milk of

Magnesia. So it was not obvious that she was finally also digesting her old blood. But she did not want to be hospitalized...again...and did not want exploratory surgery. She was waiting for the problem to resolve itself. I knew that the only thing that would get her back to the hospital was...pain. She reached that point with a perforated ulcer in the duodenum area—we learned later.

2.2. She had fallen unconscious in the bathroom from loss of blood. After several minutes she regained consciousness. I knew what it was like to not have enough blood for the brain to function properly because I had hemorrhaged thrice myself. Once I had passed out due to the lack of blood to the brain, then ten years later lost so much blood that to remain conscious I walked about with my head at the level of my heart, then about 20 years after that I passed out again and was rushed to the emergency room. But Sheila and I still were not convinced she was losing blood. Back in bed she adamantly refused to go to the emergency room. She began having more and more pain. Bent over in pain, I asked if she was ready for the hospital? She nodded. My son Jack and I wheeled her into the emergency room. She was in and out of consciousness depending on the pain somehow. Transfusions were begun. She needed immediate surgery, was going into shock, blood pressure hardly distinguishable, and still without pain medication.

2.3. Now prepared for surgery, first the Internal Medicine physician, then the Surgeon, prepared us for the possibility about which my son and I already understood, that she might not make it. She was weak and the impression we received was that the staff felt it was unusual that she was still alive. And we didn't suspect that was just defensive medical pretending. We wanted it known that the family, including Sheila, had the seek-life rather than the avoid-death psychology, and that avoiding-death supports was not an option if living was made too conditional. The Surgeon while leaving us for surgery felt secure enough to express the hope for God's assistance. His and our attitude was that it was mostly in God's hands, and that this attitude was more than a defensively sharing the risk of failure. My response was that we felt now most confident that the Surgeon would do the best he could and we had confidence in his ability but were aware of human limits too. That was easier to say after hearing his comment about trusting the ultimate source whatever the outcome of enlightened but limited efforts.

2.4. Surgery had to be done immediately. The perforation was closed and the area was sterilized. After several hours in the ICU leakage was found, and the Surgeon said she had to go back for surgery. He apologized and I tried to reassure him that I understood the emergency nature, the rush, and the human limits. When Sheila was alert enough, a few days later, in the hospital room he said that several of the staff met periodically for a prayer session and he asked if she would like to have her name added to the prayer list. She wanted that, and I agreed. After he left, Sheila

and I looked at each other, and the other patient overheard, and expressed what we were feeling. “Did he say what I thought he said?” We said yes, and she said, “That was unusual”. Another way of putting it at this point is that he was participating more in *Existenz* than existence.

2.5. On that later occasion when the Surgeon used the word “miracle” in reference to Sheila’s situation, I thought to myself that life as such is a miracle, and assent to trust in God was a constant come-what-may ideal. That was easy to say when not in pain and while talking about Sheila. When I said, “existentialism is dead not existential thinking” I needed to say it more than the Surgeon needed to hear it. I was leaning toward a word that might not be subjected to abuse by an institution or by an individual to support a feeling of superiority or propagate an industry. On another occasion a year or so earlier, Sheila, while hospitalized, told a physician that she was going to pray for improvement, because no treatable diagnosis could be made due to outdated apparatuses (later discovered), and his comment suggested that her trust in God was part of the problem. He had missed her meaning.

2.6. The occasion was an office visit and a few days before the third major surgery within a month. Sheila had survived but the initial problem was not resolved. Then, the hospital’s newly acquired state of the art technical apparatus revealed the definite area of the blockage in the duodenum area. Again in surgery, the ulcerated scar tissue duodenum was separated from the stomach, and part of the stomach considerably reduced, and the intestine the other side of the jejune area was reattached to the stomach. The Surgeon said he found a membrane like obstruction in the lower duodenum, which he simply broke through with his finger. My comment about existentialism being dead but existential thinking alive and well was a guarded effort to say that if we rely on a localization of what is unlimited, faith could be compromised. The openness to the Transcendent, the source of even our openness to the need and the necessity of being receptive to objective aid avoided existentialism and its nihilistic tendencies. *Existenz* is existence vitalized at least. It’s not a new concept but a replacement for a misused thinking about God and miracles.

2.7. Jaspers too was a physician. He was a psychologist, a psychiatrist, and a psychopathologist. He too understood the need for therapeutic words to assist recovery. He understood the circumstances that can bring about patients’ aversions to traditional stifling terms. It is in that situation that one can see the value of a word like *Existenz* if one is sensitive to the misuse of traditional language. As we approach Jaspers’ works, we must understand that he is theistic whatever else he might also be.