

TRUTH and SYMBOL

from

VON DER WAHRHEIT

by

KARL JASPERS

Translated with an Introduction

by

Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback and William Kimmel



COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven, Connecticut

1959

*The Consciousness of Being
in the Cypher*

In which sense Being can be present in the cypher (the symbol) must be discussed in greater detail.

A. *The path to the manifesting of the cypher.* The world and everything that occurs in it is a mystery. The crudeness of finding everything to be self-evident through force of habit and the mania for mystery to the point of the sensational and the superstitious must disappear where genuine astonishment begins. Philosophy illuminates the mystery and brings it completely into consciousness. It begins with astonishment and increases the astonishment. (Only false philosophy, which carries on its thinking like scientific research into the things of the world, casts out astonishment through an alleged knowledge.) Then the world as a whole and in every individual feature shows infinite depth. This mystery is quiet; in flaring up it becomes revealed in an unfolding. And this mystery is essential; in it Being itself speaks.

All of our investigation grasps empirical reality. But in this investigation we can despair of encountering Being in its essence. In the process we reach just the point of noticing that we have passed by Being itself.

domain. They are not an objective conclusion. They are rather hidden in all objectivity. Everything that is, can be a cypher. It becomes a cypher through a transformation of the mode of being-an-object in the act of transcendence. While the formal transcending occurs through a movement of thought in which all objectivity disappears, this substantial transcending is a consummation of cypher-reading in which the concreteness, stability, and definiteness of what is objective vanishes at once in the suspended Objectivity which makes it possible.

Every mode of objectivity becomes a shackle if it is simply regarded as Being itself; the lack of objectivity, however, becomes emptiness also in subjectivity. Only in the polarity of subject and object is our life. In this polarity the object can attain that suspension which at the same time allows it to exist and elevates it. This suspension makes possible the consciousness of Being; for this the object is imbued from the depths with spirit. From this depth of Being the object obtains an irreplaceable meaning.

The object is not destroyed but is transformed in the mode of its being an object. This means that the object which is flat and opaque becomes transparent in the transcending. The object which is dull and speechless becomes the cypher (metaphor, symbol). The objectivity can be transformed because it contains hidden within itself Transcendence which shows itself in the transformation. Vice versa, if the power of things to communicate ceases, then they sink back into the lovelessness of indifferent uniformity.

C. *Character of the symbol.* The symbol is *con-*

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

We become aware of the fact that in cognition we have moved in categories which, even in their totality, are like a fine filigree with which we grasp what at the same time we conceal with it. We bestir ourselves in order not to fall victim to any category. We should like to get through it and beyond it. Pushing ahead restlessly into the ocean of Being, we find ourselves always again and again at the beach of categorically secure, definite, particular knowledge. In contrast to the definiteness of the categories and of their restriction, in the symbol we become open to Being and at the same time filled with Being.

Our astonishment carries us rushing and plunging through the world into Transcendence. But we remain in the world and find ourselves again, not in Transcendence but in heightened presentness. Whatever there is for us, becomes more for us than it seemed at first to be. It becomes transparent, it becomes a symbol. The symbol catches what would otherwise stream out of us and be lost in the void. The symbol shows what would, without it, remain completely hidden to us.

B. *The transformation of objects into the cypher.* The cypher is the object which is least of all only an object, but rather in its being-an-object is already no longer an object like all other specific objects. As a cypher the object is, as it were, in suspension. In the very definiteness of what is objective, which is only its element, the cypher is lost. For it is itself not a definable object but that which encompasses both the subject and the object in what is objective. For this reason the cyphers are not still another new objective

false corporealities, of mere images. The symbols, too, as transformed objectivities, must remain in the flow of intangibility. Their being-in-suspension alone constitutes their infinity. Their becoming-form makes it possible for them to collapse into fixed forms which are regarded as finite knowledge but henceforth provide no real support. Measured by empirical realities they are now only deceiving illusions.

The symbol is the complete presentness of Being. In it is the strongest, most penetrating mode of being present of whatever is. Essential reality is more, is inwardly more gripping, than the empirical reality which only dominates my daily life. If someone says, "God is more real than this table here," it is a distorted expression. In no way is God real like the table; it is a difference not of degree but of kind. Being bound by the absolutism of empirical existence closes one off from the essential reality of the Divinity. The assertion of God's existence as an existence greater than that of this table is a tyrannical form of the will to believe which, as a matter of fact, still clings to empirical reality as the absolute.

The cypher is listened to, not cognized. All talk about it, so unavoidable because the cypher only steps forth more clearly in communication, is already mistaken in its roots. For this reason the character of the cypher is only encircled but not reached if, in metaphor, we call it speech.

The characteristic of the cypher separates the signification from that which is signified in it. This separation is false. If we call cyphers a form of communication then

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

munication [*Sprache*]. In the contact of the soul with Being it is the enkindling in which Being acquires communicative power. In this respect comprehension of the symbol is knowledge of Being; however, it is not a scientific knowledge of objects but a philosophical awareness of Being.

The symbol makes not only clear but *real* [*wirklich*]⁷ what would otherwise be like nothing. In the groundlessness of empirical realities [*Realitäten*] we gain a foothold, as it were, through symbols of essential reality. Being is not another reality which is hidden behind empirical realities. Within empirical existence itself the symbol speaks: in the concreteness of existing things we experience the essential reality of the symbol. There takes place a turning from the everyday thinking about concrete things toward an actual consciousness of essential reality.

The symbol is *infinite*. In pursuing the symbol, and with it the experience of essential reality, thought stands still. No thought is adequate to the symbol. The symbol opens us up for Being and shows us all Being.

But communication, essential reality, and infinity belong to the symbols only as long as they remain in the suspension of their appearance. As soon as they become definite images, fixed signs, and, thereby, things in the world, we again move with them to a beach, a beach of

7. Jaspers' distinction between "*Realität*" and "*Wirklichkeit*" can be rendered in English only by qualifying the word "reality." "*Realität*" refers to the empirically verifiable world of experience and has been rendered "empirical reality," "empirical existence" or "concrete reality." For "*Wirklichkeit*" we have used "essential reality" or "reality itself."

the listening to the language of *the* cypher is itself a metaphor for something merely analogous but in itself quite different compared with our mode of listening to Being *in the* cyphers. The signification of the cyphers is not such that something present signifies something absent, a here signifies a beyond, but it lies simply in a presentness which is no longer translatable into knowledge of something. Being-a-cypher is a signification which signifies nothing else. Signification is itself only a metaphor for being-a-cypher. Language is a metaphor only when it is articulated by a cypher-status.

To call cypher-status a language is, to be sure, a metaphor corresponding to an object. We do, indeed, question the cypher as to its meaning. We attempt interpretations in regard to every cypher. With such clarification we experience at the same time a deepening of the cypher. But it becomes evident that no given interpretation suffices. The cypher is the inexhaustible signification with which no definite interpretation is commensurate, but which rather demands in the interpretation itself an endless movement of interpreting. Interpreting is not a form of cognition of the meaning of the cypher, but is itself a metaphorical act, a game. To interpret is impossible; Being itself, Transcendence, is present. It is nameless. If we speak of it, then we use an infinite number of names and cancel them all again. That which has significance is itself Being.

Finally, being-a-metaphor is itself only a metaphor, the transferring of a relationship in the world to this fundamental encompassing movement of Being in it.

The cypher is the metaphor which is Being, or the Being which is metaphor.

It is hopeless to make the categories apply, as definite categories, to the Encompassing. In such application the categories themselves change their meaning, become cyphers themselves, and so also the "reality" and the "infinity" which we attributed to the cypher.

What brings our consciousness of Being to fulfillment in truth cannot be made available as a content of knowledge. We circumscribe it in order to keep ourselves free for this truth, not in order to know what it is.

D. *The transparency of sensuousness.* Empirical reality has the characteristic of sensuous presence. Sensuousness shows at its borders the darkness of the unpenetrated, of the "being-thus." We lose Being when we veil the empirically real. We have to hit against the hardness of stark reality. Here is the inevitable outcome both for rational knowledge, which results in the mastery over things, as well as for contemplative observation which results in self-revelation by becoming transparent.

Philosophizing, in the transforming of the Being of objectivity into a cypher, creates free space for the movement toward Being itself. In it arises the unfettered, the infinitely possible. This, however, becomes real only in its being bound to what is sensuously present. It must for the moment speak effectively to this historical moment in such a way that eternity is in the now and Being is in the disappearing.

In order for Being to be in cypher-status, the sensuous present is, therefore, inevitable. The profoundest quality of Being must also appear and appear essentially in the

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

sensuously concrete. In philosophizing, sensuousness is not abandoned but is endowed with meaning and soul.

For Being anywhere and at any time, the here and now of the sensuous present is, to be sure, the very least, the most indefinite condition. It shrivels together into the nothingness of that which is merely disappearing, which no longer persists. But in it all content is present which itself disappears and is no more if it does not assume the forms of a here and now.

Soil, landscape, and love, the institutions of community, friends, the beloved, are for me not only the sensuous reality of perceptibility but the historical presence of Being itself.

Also the past is there for me only through the mode of its sensuous presentness. Only in this presentness does it show its content. The past is real for me only in so far as I experience it in its concreteness. This is then, as it were, doubly transparent as directed towards the past and through it towards eternal Being.

Transparency of sensuousness signifies at the same time disassociation from sensuousness as such. Absolute adherence to the sensuous draws one into the darkness of transparentlessness. The grasping of the content of Being in adherence to the sensuous goes beyond the sensuous.

There is no simple parallel between the fullness of the sensuous and the fullness of the content of Being. The consciousness of Being arises in the many layers of Being which crowd forth from the depth and whose immediacy and, as it were, mere surface is the sensuous present. The richest fullness of the sensuous can be poor in being

CONSCIOUSNESS OF BEING IN THE CYPHER

without this depth. The most meager, perhaps only barely hinted at sensuousness can be a powerfully effective carrier of the depth of Being.

Since penetration into the depth of the sensuous present loosens the attachment to the sensuous as such, sensuousness becomes relative. Its empirical reality is no longer absolute Being. Consequently, man can find himself without foundation if the original, infinitely certain, nonsensuous content of Being, the essentially real within the empirical, is lost to him. The sensuous loses its value; the nonsensuous no longer remains. A sceptically experienced unreality surrounds man, neither essentially nor empirically compelling. He becomes abstract; he can no longer lay hold upon empirical reality since it has long since become veiled to him; he no longer believes in any essential reality since it has disappeared from him. In the dissolution of his consciousness of Being the impulses of his actions become capricious and arbitrary. (Since his existence remains, it is now unreasonably exposed to the forces of vitality, suggestion, blind obedience, and tyranny.)

To live in the transparency of empirical reality easily makes possible slipping into groundlessness. It seems that sensuous concreteness which, without transparency, wills nothing else than to be itself, is for most men a requisite for living. At any rate, the right truly to philosophize is only for people for whom the cypher, even in the meagerest of sensuous realities, is so unconditionally effective and is the real, just as sensuousness as such is for those who are sense bound.

For religions, in contrast to philosophy, the mode of

To be sure, thought cannot be completed without a minimum of sensuous supports—signs, images, language—but this which is sensuously present is no longer as such that which is convincing but only that which is indispensable. It is the nobility of man to be able through the quiet contemplation of pure thought to transcend his entire sensuousness into this region of a spiritual self-affirmation.

This speculation is play. It is unreal. It leads as does thinking about objects, to a collapse of thought which, however, is precisely that which does the revealing. In the evaporation of all contents Being becomes palpable.

This never occurs, however, through thought alone. In thinking, something which is not this thought itself awakens, and something becomes apparent from the certainty of the existence of consciousness up to the source of Existenz in Transcendence. Rational thought as such, therefore, falls indifferently to the ground if that is missing which first gives it meaning and weight. It is the point at which I think without thinking about it, where I am myself present in thought. Real philosophy in the highest state of consciousness is yet unconscious in what is decisive. And yet it exerts itself unceasingly to render more conscious this that is unconscious. It is the restless movement which, in the steps of the thought which is becoming transparent, attains at times a moment of rest through that thinking which carries thought. In speculation there lies hidden what I cannot grasp in thought but which is given to us with thought through its movement.

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

the sensuous presence of Transcendence is characteristic. In the cult, God is operative; in the saint, suprasensuous power. That God is tangible in the here and now—in the man Jesus—is a main thought of Christianity.

Augustine does not believe in the revelation of the Bible as a book of the past but he expressly believes only because the finite presence of the authority of the Church demands this belief.

This religious corporeality—if one compares it with being bound to transparent realities—causes an uprising into the suprasensuous. Compared with philosophical presentness, however, it stands out from all other empirical realities as a distinctive empirical reality. It is itself a corporeal reality among other corporeal realities of the world. Not the transparency of sensuousness but the concreteness of Transcendence in a particular empirical reality of the world is, at any rate, the result. But what there might possibly be in the origin of true religion through such corporeality, or what the cult actually is, this is concealed from philosophy.

E. *The transparency of thought.* There are philosophical thoughts which, with a minimum of representation, bring about in the most extreme abstraction a full presence of the thinker: in thinking, despite the disappearance of the contents, Being is joined with Existenz precisely through this disappearance.

Thought itself becomes a cypher. No longer in the sensuous, but in thought, Being becomes present. It is the fascinating trait of philosophical speculation, how, unloosened from the sensuous, it confirms itself in the pure spiritualization [ideation] of Being.