

Rico Gutschmidt

# Existential boundaries. Jaspers on the interminable struggle with our finitude

Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy.  
This wide and universal theatre  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.  
Shakespeare, *As you like it*, Act 2, Scene 7

**Abstract:** In his later work on philosophical faith, Jaspers argues that acknowledging the limits of knowledge can be releasing. However, in his works on boundary situations, when he discusses the boundaries of life and action, he claims that acknowledging these boundaries can provide existential elucidation, but not peace of mind. In this essay, I explore the concept of epistemic and practical boundaries, demonstrating that these notions are absolute metaphors whose meaning is revealed only through a practical-existential understanding. I interpret Jaspers' concept of existential elucidation as such an understanding and argue that acknowledging epistemic and practical boundaries can be releasing, but is an everlasting process.

**Keywords:** Karl Jaspers, boundary situation, finitude, human condition, mystery, philosophical faith

Boundaries are a central theme in Karl Jaspers' philosophy. He discusses both epistemic and practical boundaries. According to Jaspers, boundaries of knowledge arise because we cannot fully oversee our situation or answer fundamental questions such as: "How do we find ourselves in the world? Where do we come from? What are we?" (PGO: 111; here and in what follows: my translation). When Jaspers speaks of the boundaries of life and action, he considers the fact that we cannot avoid guilt and suffering, must strive to establish ourselves in life, and will ultimately die (PGO: 220–249). According to Jaspers, we must acknowledge these epistemic and practical boundaries, rather than ignoring or suppressing them. He even claims that we are only truly human when we are fully aware that we cannot transcend these boundaries and align our way of life accordingly (PGO: 115).

In this essay, I discuss the significance of acknowledging and being aware of these boundaries. At first glance, one might think that acknowledging such boundaries is an imposition. Isn't it unsettling that we cannot fully oversee our situa-

tion and answer fundamental questions about life? Is it not tragic that we must fight, suffer and die, and cannot escape guilt? Do these boundaries of knowledge and action not lead to despair? However, as I will demonstrate below, Jaspers' philosophy implies that, strictly speaking, we do not really know what it should mean to transcend these boundaries. Can we imagine a life without struggle, guilt, suffering and death? Can we imagine what it would be like to fully oversee our situation and answer life's fundamental questions? If we take these questions seriously, the meaning of 'boundaries' in these contexts becomes unclear.

The question of the status of such boundaries becomes particularly pertinent when Jaspers claims that it is already a boundary situation that one is always in a situation, i.e. in a particular meaningful reality (PhII: 203). We cannot leave one situation without entering another, and we can never have a complete overview of the situations in which we find ourselves (PhII: 202–203). But why is this a boundary? What would it mean not to be in a situation? While we can abstractly understand the idea of not being in any situation at all, can we really imagine what this means? Jaspers describes boundary situations as "a wall that we bump up against, against which we founder" (PhII: 203). However, can we really speak of hitting a wall or failing to transcend a boundary here? I would rather say that we founder when we try to imagine being outside of any situation. Nevertheless, Jaspers seems to be addressing an existential discomfort here. The thought of never being able to be outside of situations can have a constricting and unsettling effect, even though it is a concept that we only grasp in an abstract sense.

The same applies to the epistemic boundaries that Jaspers discusses in the context of philosophical faith. "How do we find ourselves in the world? Where do we come from? What are we?" (PGO: 111). Jaspers emphasises that answers to such ultimate questions are impossible (PGO: 114–115). The problem with ultimate questions is that every answer leads to further questions. For example, if we identify a 'whence' from which we come, we can ask where this 'whence' comes from. If we identify a 'wherein' in which we find ourselves, we can ask wherein this 'wherein' lies. When we consider what we are, we cannot simultaneously consider ourselves as beings that think about their own existence without entering an infinite regress. Therefore, although we can grasp the meaning of the above questions, we do not have the answers and cannot even imagine what they might be. Therefore, it is unclear to what extent we can speak of encountering boundaries that we cannot cross. Does it make sense to talk about a boundary if we cannot imagine what lies beyond it?

And yet, the inability to answer these questions can also lead to existential unease. Even if we cannot imagine what the answers to these questions might be, they do not leave us indifferent. They point to the mystery of existence, which can be seen as the starting point of myths, religion and science. Since

one cannot imagine answers to these questions, one could argue that they are illusory and falsely posed, like asking what lies north of the North Pole. However, unlike the question about the North Pole, ultimate questions affect us personally, and being unable to answer them can cause deep existential unease.

Beyond these epistemic boundaries, the practical boundaries discussed by Jaspers also affect us personally. He claims that we become aware of existence through experiencing boundary situations: "A situation turns into a boundary situation when it awakens the subject to existence by radically shattering its being" (PhI: 56). The boundaries of life and action include the aforementioned boundary that we always find ourselves in situations. As I argued above, it is questionable whether it makes sense to speak of a boundary here, since we cannot imagine what it would mean to transcend this border. We cannot imagine what it would mean to not be in a situation. The case seems to be different with the boundary situations of death, suffering, struggle and guilt. Not only do we understand the notion of a life without death, suffering, struggle and guilt in the abstract, but we can also imagine it. Really?

To begin with, if we did not die, we would live forever. We can grasp the concept of the infinite amount of time we would experience, but can we truly imagine this kind of infinity? When we try to do so in relation to space, we become lost in the endless regress of going beyond any imagined boundary. The same applies to time. We can imagine arbitrarily long periods of time, but not infinity. On an abstract level, however, we do understand the notions of infinite space and time. However, when we try to imagine infinity in relation to space or time, we are unable to do so. If we take this seriously, can we really say that our life is limited by time? Not only can we not imagine being outside of any situation, but we also cannot imagine being unlimited in time and living infinitely. In both cases, we understand the notion of a boundary in an abstract sense, but we cannot imagine what lies beyond it. So does it make sense to talk about boundaries?

However, the idea of our own temporal limitations can be existentially unsettling. This can be illustrated by the fact that our own non-existence is inconceivable. Although we can understand in the abstract that we will cease to exist when we die, we cannot imagine it. We cannot think of nothingness without turning it into an object, nor can we imagine a world without ourselves, since we remain spectators in every such attempt, as Freud points out. Therefore, the notion of the boundary is also inappropriate in the context of the transition to nothingness, since here again we cannot imagine the beyond of the boundary. Nevertheless, the unease in the face of this boundary is comprehensible. The inconceivability of one's own non-being can trigger feelings of a loss of control, and thus fear. This situation appears to be similar to that of epistemic boundaries. Even if answers

to ultimate questions are unthinkable, this unthinkableability can still trigger feelings of a loss of control.

When it comes to suffering, struggle and guilt, Jaspers argues that they are all necessary aspects of life (PhII: 230). According to Jaspers, striving for a utopia in which suffering would finally be overcome would be deceptive and avoidant (PhII: 231). Similarly, he claims that it is impossible to escape the boundary situations of struggle and guilt, because “by the very fact that I am there, I contribute to bringing them about” (PhII: 233). According to Jaspers, we are embroiled in struggle and guilt simply by existing, and it is impossible to act otherwise. He is explicit about this, emphasising that we cannot avoid struggle by choosing neutrality since struggle is a condition of all existence (PhII: 236). In contrast to the Christian attitude of radical renunciation of struggle, Jaspers explicitly states that such an approach would amount to self-annihilation (PhII: 239). For Jaspers, human life without struggle is inconceivable: “In any case, a final state of rest in human coexistence is neither empirically present, nor constructible as a possibility, nor vividly apparent as an ideal to be realised” (PhII: 241). For Jaspers, a life without struggle would lead to an “emptiness of existence” (PhII: 245). Finally, guilt is also unavoidable for Jaspers (PhII: 249). He claims that one inevitably falls into guilt, regardless of whether one acts or does not act (PhII: 247). To deny this fundamental guilt would be to conceal the boundary situation of guilt (PhII: 248).

Adopting Jaspers’ view that suffering, struggle and guilt are integral to life implies that, while we can abstractly understand the concept of a life without these elements, we cannot truly envision it. Therefore, desiring a life without suffering, struggle and guilt would be akin to desiring to be outside of any situation. Not only can we not realise this wish, but we cannot even imagine what it would mean to do so. As I argued above, the same applies to the desire to overcome death. While the desire to be outside of any situation may be difficult to comprehend, the desire for a life without death, suffering, struggle and guilt is easy to understand. However, it is questionable whether the concept of a boundary is appropriate in all these cases. If we cannot imagine beyond the boundary, then the metaphor of the boundary does not seem appropriate.

Against that, I argue in the keyword on boundaries that precedes the papers of this volume that the notion of a boundary with nothing behind the border can be interpreted as an absolute metaphor in the sense of Hans Blumenberg. Such metaphors do not refer to objects of experience or imagination, yet they still function as instruments for our orientation in the world. Building on this, I argue in what follows that Jaspers employs the concept of ‘boundary situations’ to convey an existential-practical understanding of the human condition, which can be attained through experiencing exceptional situations. According to Jaspers, such ex-

periences can lead to existential elucidation, yielding, in my interpretation, an existential-practical understanding of our finitude in many respects.

To begin with, the idea developed above alongside Jaspers that it is impossible to imagine how the desire to transcend existential boundaries could be realised does not immediately spring to mind. However, if one accepts this idea, the desire itself seems questionable. If a wish cannot be fulfilled for fundamental reasons, it would be reasonable to abandon it. However, for Jaspers, it is a considerable existential shock that we cannot transcend these boundaries: "In every boundary situation, the ground is pulled out from under my feet, as it were. I cannot grasp existence in its existing solidity. There is no perfection in the world, not even in loving communication, which appears as a struggle" (PhII: 249). He speaks of an unfulfillable longing for solidity and perfection because, as I argued above, such perfection is inconceivable. According to Jaspers, since this longing for solidity and perfection cannot be fulfilled, we cannot find peace, and existence is questionable, fragile, and contradictory: "The questionability of all existence means the impossibility of finding peace in it as such. The way in which existence appears everywhere in boundary situations as fragile in itself is its antinomic structure" (PhII: 249).

According to Jaspers, existential boundaries are experienced in a special way in exceptional situations. Life is always shaped by the boundaries of death, suffering, struggle and guilt, but these boundaries are particularly salient in the face of death, serious illness or other forms of concrete suffering, or when one is deeply embroiled in struggle and guilt. When Jaspers speaks of an elucidation of existence that can stem from such experiences, he seems to mean that we can gain an existential-practical understanding of our boundaries that goes beyond theoretical knowledge. Although we cannot imagine a seemingly perfect world where ultimate questions are answered and death, suffering, struggle and guilt do not exist, we still understand on an existential-practical level that our world is fragile and contradictory. From a theoretical perspective, it seems unreasonable to discuss the limitations of the human condition when we cannot conceive of what lies beyond them. However, on an existential-practical level, we understand that our world is finite. Thus, when considered as an absolute metaphor, the concept of the boundaries of knowledge, life, and action has meaning on an existential-practical level that is not apparent on a theoretical level due to the inconceivability of what lies beyond these boundaries. This practical understanding stems from experiencing exceptional situations and goes beyond theoretical understanding.

In addition, this existential-practical understanding appears to encompass an unconscious desire to transcend these boundaries. As quoted above, for Jaspers, the realisation that we cannot be outside of situations and that we are not free

from death, suffering, struggle and guilt comes as an existential shock. In exceptional situations in which these boundaries are experienced in a particular way, there seems to be a strong desire to transcend them. This desire appears to be deeply rooted in humanity. In a sense, the myth of the Fall illustrates this desire and its inherent unattainability as a fundamental aspect of the human condition. While there may be cultures or epochs of human history in which this desire does not exist, I would argue with Jaspers that large parts of human history are driven by it. With regard to suffering, struggle and guilt, one need only consider political utopias. The desire for immortality is evident in various reincarnation teachings, as well as in present-day post-humanist fantasies. The search for answers to ultimate questions has always driven philosophy and science. When Jaspers says that the ground is being pulled away from under our feet in the face of the impossibility of crossing these boundaries, he is presumably referring to this deeply rooted human desire.

The desire to transcend the boundaries of existence is, of course, understandable, given that people really suffer from death, suffering, struggle and guilt. Thus, the existential unease described by Jaspers when one realises that it is impossible to transcend these boundaries is also understandable. However, since we cannot imagine what it means to transcend these boundaries, does it make sense to suffer from the insurmountability of death, suffering, struggle and guilt, on top of the actual suffering caused by these boundaries? I have argued that we can gain an existential-practical understanding of these boundaries that goes hand in hand with the desire to transcend them. But how should we deal with the fact that we are unable to fulfil this desire? Is it appropriate to say that we are suffering on a meta-level in this respect?

Interestingly, when Jaspers argues that existence is questionable and finds no peace, he also refers to the absolute, stating that “existence sinks before the question that seeks the absolute” (PhII: 249). In a sense, the desire to transcend human limitations can be rephrased as the desire to be like God. But why should we suffer from the impossibility of being like God? It seems almost trivial that such a desire is misguided. Perhaps we unconsciously suffer from not being like God; however, if we become aware of this unconscious desire, it can be releasing to let it go. In both his philosophy of boundary situations and his major late work on philosophical faith (PGO), Jaspers recommends acknowledging our fragile existence and living within its boundaries. Philosophical faith involves consciously accepting the unanswerability of the aforementioned ultimate questions and learning to live with this.

Acknowledging our boundaries does not mean embracing death, suffering, struggle and guilt. It is tragic that we inevitably become entangled in guilt and have to fight and suffer before ultimately dying. Experiencing the insurmountabil-

ity of these human conditions in boundary situations can be existentially unsettling. However, acknowledging this insurmountability, and thus our finitude, can also have a releasing effect. Indeed, one might argue that such acknowledgement is relatively straightforward, given that we cannot fathom what it means to transcend our existential boundaries. It is not reasonable to suffer from being unable to do something that we cannot even imagine doing. Perhaps such acknowledgement is less straightforward if one gains an existential-practical understanding of these boundaries through existential elucidation and the experience of exceptional situations. Indeed, although Jaspers' concept of philosophical faith is based on the idea that acknowledging our epistemic finitude can be releasing, he still argues that we do not gain peace of mind through acknowledging boundary situations.

With regard to the various boundary situations, Jaspers considers what it means to acknowledge our limitations. While we should always try to avoid avoidable guilt, we should also acknowledge that guilt cannot be entirely avoided. According to Jaspers, this does not bring peace of mind (PhII: 248), but it can help to prevent self-righteousness (PhII: 247), for example. When it comes to struggle, there's no clear answer on how to handle this boundary situation (PhII: 241), since it's not possible to fully withdraw from fighting (PhII: 242). With regard to suffering, Jaspers speaks of an "appropriation of suffering" (PhII: 232). With regard to death, he claims that one can find a sense of belonging in transcendence by acknowledging the boundary situation of death (PhII: 222) and that the fear of non-being can be suspended in the present moment (PhII: 226). However, he also argues that it is impossible to attain a final attitude towards death (PhII: 229). Overall, acknowledging our limitations is not a simple process that leads to peace of mind; rather, it is an ongoing challenge.

In philosophical faith, Jaspers is concerned with epistemic finitude. For him, striving for ultimate certainty is futile, and relinquishing this pursuit can paradoxically have a releasing effect. This concept is described in a similar way in ancient scepticism. Sextus Empiricus claims that peace of mind (*ataraxia*) ensues in the moment one lets go of the search for certainty. Through his concept of the 'boundary situation', Jaspers addresses the practical limitations of life that must also be acknowledged. Here, the releasing effect of acknowledgement is less explicit. In fact, it seems that not only is there no peace of mind, but there is also no releasing effect, since Jaspers claims that suffering persists: "In boundary situations, it becomes apparent that everything positive is bound to the corresponding negative. There is no good without possible and real evil, no truth without falsity, and no life without death. Happiness is bound to pain and achievement to risk and loss" (PhIII: 221). In his early work "Psychology of Worldviews", Jaspers describes suffering as the connection between the various boundary situations (PW: 247).



However, he later suggests that there is a kind of existential happiness that transcends superficial happiness and is achieved through the experience of boundary situations: “If there were only happiness in being, possible existence would remain dormant. It is astonishing that pure happiness seems empty. Just as suffering destroys factual existence, so happiness seems to threaten authentic existence. [...] Happiness must be called into question in order to become authentic; the truth of happiness arises from the ground of failure” (PhII, 231–232).

The idea that happiness can arise from failure can be interpreted to mean that it stems from acknowledging the inevitability of suffering. If we distinguish between suffering from boundary situations and suffering from the inevitability of those situations, we could argue that, as with philosophical faith, acknowledging the latter can paradoxically have a releasing effect. We are not God, and letting go of our unconscious desire to be like God can be releasing. Therefore, it seems possible to transfer the attitude of philosophical faith, which is primarily related to epistemic boundaries, to the boundaries of life and action. Alternatively, one could consider the epistemic boundaries discussed by Jaspers in the context of philosophical faith as another type of boundary situation. In either case, acknowledging these boundaries can provide moments of release. However, a final attitude of acknowledgement is impossible, leaving us with an ongoing challenge. This sense of release does not include peace of mind or pure happiness, but rather the authentic happiness that comes from faithfully dealing with life’s boundaries.

Furthermore, one could argue that a positive approach to life within boundaries can be found in the concept of love, which transcends the loving struggle of existential communication discussed by Jaspers (cf. VE). As with death, suffering, struggle and guilt, love is an existential experience involving a boundary, but not one of limitation; rather, it is an experience of transcendence. One feels connected to another person, and love can go hand in hand with feeling connected to everything. Building on this, the experience of love can also be understood as a response to the epistemic and practical boundaries that Jaspers discusses. We can experience ourselves as transcending these boundaries through love.

Theologically speaking, one could argue that, when faced with experiences of death, suffering, struggle and guilt, we should not lose faith in God. On the contrary, we realise God’s love in a special way through these experiences. In this sense, Simone Weil links affliction to the love of God (cf. Weil 1942/2024). St. Paul formulates the certainty of being sustained in God’s love, even and especially in boundary situations, as follows: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Against



the background of this religious formulation, the aforementioned faithful way of dealing with life's boundaries can be interpreted as experiencing support from an incomprehensible love.

Drawing on Luther's distinction, one can be certain of this love (*certitudo*), but one cannot guarantee it oneself (*securitas*). On the contrary, attempting to guarantee a final attitude of acknowledgement towards boundary situations can lead to feelings of loss of control and fear. We cannot ensure that we will always experience a sense of release through groundless love when confronted with boundary situations; we may also feel despair. The other side of the boundary remains incomprehensible to us; it is a mystery beyond our control. This implies that we may never adopt a final stance on acknowledging boundaries. As discussed above, Jaspers emphasises that we cannot find peace of mind or a definitive stance when dealing with practical boundary situations. Life remains fragile and contradictory.

Similarly, when discussing the epistemic boundaries of philosophical faith, Jaspers talks about an endless struggle (PGO: 251–260). Philosophical faith is never complete; it is an ongoing challenge. In his radio lectures on 'Introduction to Philosophy', Jaspers discusses a philosophical way of life whose goal is not to be understood as a final, complete attitude towards life (EP: 99). Instead, Jaspers' philosophical way of life must be practised through reflection and meditation in a process that can never be completed (EP: 94). This ongoing challenge may be connected to our unconscious desire to control the uncontrollable and our aspiration to be like God. It seems that we cannot get rid of this desire. Luther argues that even when we are righteous, we remain sinners: *simul iustus et peccator*. However, if we attempt to control love, we lose it, as Orpheus did. To use Rudolf Otto's terminology, the union with the *mysterium fascinans*, which is experienced as blissful in love, can become an uncanny encounter with the *mysterium tremendum* when we attempt to control the uncontrollable.

Once again, it is tragic that we are inevitably entangled in guilt and must struggle and suffer before ultimately dying. Realising the insurmountability of these human conditions can be existentially unsettling. However, acknowledging this insurmountability, and thus our own finitude, can also have a releasing effect. We can experience ourselves as being carried by an incomprehensible love, without ground. We cannot guarantee this experience, nor can we make it permanent. The acknowledgement of our finitude must always be regained, time and time again. It must be practised. Even religious masters, as they are subject to the greatest temptations, may not be able to embody this acknowledgement permanently. It seems to be our fate not to find rest between the poles of *mysterium fascinans* and *tremendum*. To quote St. Augustine: "Our heart is restless until it rests, O God, in

you". While we are alive, we cannot rest in God; we can only practise dealing with the mystery of boundaries. However, we cannot come to terms with the mystery.

## Reference

Weil S (1942/2024) *Das Unglück und die Gottesliebe*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.