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From Karl Jaspers to Irvin D. Yalom and Emmy van Deurzen:

Boundary situations and ultimate concerns in existential therapy

Keywords: Jaspers, Yalom, van Deurzen, boundary situations, ultimate concerns, existential therapy

1 Introduction

According to a 2015 survey by Correa et al., Irvin D. Yalom's book "*Existential Psychotherapy*" (1980) ranks second among the works influencing practice of 'existential/existentially informed' counsellors and psychotherapists. Only Viktor Frankl's "*Man's Will to Meaning*" (1946) was mentioned more often by the 1359 participants of the study. The books that followed were Ernesto Spinelli's "*Practicing Existential Therapy*" (2007), Frankl's "*The Doctor and the Soul*" (1946), and Emmy van Deurzen's "*Everyday Mysteries*" (1997).

The ranking might differ today, but Yalom's book still is an influential work in the field. Its central concept is that of 'ultimate concerns', which he understands as "certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part, of the human being's existence in the world" (Yalom 1980: 8). Yalom names four such ultimate concerns – death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness (Yalom 1980: 8 f.) – and observes that it is often the sudden, anxiety provoking awareness of one or more of these concerns that lies at the heart of his patients' troubles.

As Emmy van Deurzen points out, Yalom's concept of ultimate concerns might be "inspired by Tillich" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 212), who employs this exact phrase several times in "*The Courage to Be*", e.g. when he speaks of spiritual life as "a matter of ultimate concern" (Tillich 1952: 47). Moreover, there are similarities between Tillich's "three types of anxiety" (Tillich 1952: 40 ff.) – fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness, guilt and condemnation – and Yalom's ultimate concerns, and Tillich's influence on other leading figures of the American existential-humanistic branch of Existential Therapy like Rollo May – his mentee and later close friend – is well established (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 99 ff.).

In this essay, however, I want to examine a different set of similarities, namely between Yalom's ultimate concerns and Karl Jaspers' 'boundary situations'. Yalom indicates in the introduction to his book, that there is a connection between

the experience of “‘boundary’ or ‘border situations’” (Yalom 1980: 9) and the awareness of ultimate concerns, and that it’s often the former that “catalyze” (Yalom 1980: 9) the latter. He points out that the concept of boundary situations originates from Jaspers (Yalom 1980: 31), but at no point engages in a deeper discussion of his ideas. Therefore, it remains implicit that Yalom’s ultimate concerns can actually be matched one by one to Jaspers’ individual boundary situations, especially when considered in their early version of “*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*” (1919).

In order to make this argument, I will start with a brief introduction to Jaspers’ concept of boundary situations and Yalom’s ultimate concerns within their respective theoretical frameworks. In the next step, I will compare Jaspers’ individual boundary situations to Yalom’s ultimate concerns one by one and highlight parallels and differences. Finally, I will broaden the perspective and consider Emmy van Deurzen’s map of “four existential dimensions” (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 138) that integrates both concepts into a larger framework.

2 Jaspers’ boundary situations and Yalom’s ultimate concerns

Jaspers first introduces the concept of boundary situations in the third part (“The Life of the Mind”) of his “*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*” from 1919, where he defines them as “certain decisive, essential situations that are tied to and inevitably given with finite existence” (PW: 229; here and in what follows, I use my own English translations of Jaspers. The page numbers refer to the German editions). Their common characteristic is that “nothing firm exists in them, no indubitable absolute, nothing to hold on to that would remain firm in all experience and thought” (PW: 229).

Human beings experience boundary situations due to the “antinomical structure of existence” (PW: 230), i. e. the presence of irresolvable contradictions and oppositions both in “thinking and knowing” (PW: 233) and in “valuing and acting” (PW: 237). In the experience of the individual, they are bound to suffering, and this suffering is perceived “as ultimate, as a limit, as something unavoidable” (PW: 251). Jaspers eventually names four distinct boundary situations – struggle, death, chance, and guilt – and explains the underlying antinomies as follows:

In each case—struggle, death, chance, and guilt—an underlying antinomy is present. Struggle and mutual aid, life and death, chance and meaning, guilt and the consciousness of absolute are bound together; one does not exist without the other. But in the empirical world, the ultimate limit, the final point, is always the value-negative side [...]. All empirical aid is

merely a basis for the formation of units within an empirical worldview, which are in conflict with each other; all meaningful connections are ultimately limited by chance, all life by death, all decisions by ever-new guilt, as long as humanity exists (PW: 256f.).

Boundary situations are a constitutive part of human life, but that does not imply that all people experience them in the same way. On the one hand, it is possible to temporarily “avoid” (PW: 242) these situations. On the other hand, people find support in ideological or religious-metaphysical “shells” or “ housings” (*Gehäuse*, PW: 280), which resolve the underlying antinomies of boundary situations to one side. In doing so, they prevent the individual from confronting the “infinite movement” (PW: 283) that these antinomies impose on thinking, and from making their own decisions in “absolute responsibility” (PW: 283). “The person existing within the housing is, by tendency, shielded from boundary situations. These are replaced for them by a fixed image of the world and values” (PW: 305).

‘By tendency’ is here to be understood as: not for certain, and not permanently. For if the housing cracks and the individual is thus exposed to experiencing a boundary situation after all, “the movement of boundless reflection [...] initiates a process that dissolves the previously self-evident housing” (PW: 281). According to Jaspers, this opens up a space in which the individual must face the contingencies of their existence, their mortality, their need to struggle, and their inevitable guilt. They may experience a break down, develop mental illnesses (cf. Fuchs 2013, Mundt 2014, Frick 2025), or attempt to flee back into a housing. However, they may also find “support in the infinite” (PW: 327) and experience what Jaspers will later call “existential elucidation” (PhII).

In “*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*” this concept of existential elucidation is not present yet. Conversely, in the second volume of “*Philosophie*”, Jaspers no longer makes use of the metaphor of the ‘housing’. Further differences between Jaspers’ earlier and later formulation of boundary situations are that from 1932 onwards, suffering is treated as an individual boundary situation, while chance is omitted as such. Instead, chance is discussed as one form of the “historicity of existence” (PW: 210 ff.), which takes the place of suffering as the overarching commonality of all boundary situations. Whether these differences are indeed “relatively minor”, as Piecuch (2022: 140) puts it, depends on the interest of the researcher. For this paper they play only a subordinate role, so that I will now turn to Yalom and the way he adopts the concept of boundary situations in his “*Existential Psychotherapy*”.

Alongside Rollo May, James Bugental and Kirk Schneider, Yalom is considered one of the main proponents of the American “existential-humanistic” branch of Existential Therapy (Cooper 2003: 63), which he understands as “a form of dynamic psychotherapy” (Yalom 1980: 6). The term ‘dynamic’ or ‘psychodynamic’ refers

Table 1: Boundary situations according to Jaspers

<i>Psychologie der Weltanschauungen</i> (1919)	<i>Philosophie II. Existenzerhellung</i> (1932)
Individual boundary situations	
Struggle	Death
Death	Suffering
Chance	Struggle
Guilt	Guilt
Overarching commonality	
Suffering	Historicity of existence (Chance as one form or manifestation)

to the Freudian discovery “that there are forces in conflict within the individual, and that thought, emotion, and behaviour, both adaptive and psychopathological, are the resultant of these conflicting forces” (Yalom 1980: 6). Existing at “varying levels of awareness” and with some of them “indeed [...] entirely unconscious” (Yalom 1980: 6), the exact nature of these forces is not easy to determine. The basic conflict, that lies at the heart of mental illnesses, is often “deeply buried, encrusted with layer upon layer of repression, denial, displacement, and symbolization” (Yalom 1980: 6). However, and this is where Yalom’s approach diverges from Freud, it is “neither a conflict with suppressed instinctual strivings nor one with internalized significant adults, but instead a conflict that flows from the individual’s confrontation with the givens of existence” (Yalom 1980: 8; for a deeper comparison of Freud’s and Yalom’s approaches to psychotherapy cf. Sölch 2023).

This brings up the question of *how* this ‘confrontation’ usually comes about, *how* these givens are discovered, and here Jaspers’ idea of boundary situations comes into play. Yalom writes:

[I]f we reflect deeply upon our “situation” in the world, upon our existence, our boundaries, our possibilities, if we arrive at the ground that underlies all other ground, we invariably confront the givens of existence, the “deep structures,” which I shall henceforth refer to as “ultimate concerns.” This process of reflection is often catalyzed by certain urgent experiences. These “boundary” or “border” situations, as they are often referred to, include such experiences as a confrontation with one’s own death, some major irreversible decision, or the collapse of some fundamental meaning-providing schema (Yalom 1980: 8).

Yalom identifies Jaspers as the originator of the concept of boundary situations (Yalom 1980: 31), but then references him only four times throughout “*Existential*

Psychotherapy". A look at the footnotes suggests that he did not read him in the original but got to know his ideas mainly through Jacques Choron's "*Death and Western Thought*" (1963) and Viktor Frankl's "*The Will to Meaning*" (1969). Nevertheless, a closer comparison of Jaspers' boundary situations and Yalom's ultimate concerns reveals striking similarities. Besides the obvious match of the boundary situation and the ultimate concern of death, Jaspers' 'guilt' and Yalom's 'freedom', Jaspers' 'struggle' and Yalom's 'isolation', Jaspers' 'chance' (or historicity of existence) and Yalom's 'meaninglessness' seem to correlate.

3 Comparison one by one

3.1 Death

The first and most obvious correspondence is that of Jaspers' boundary situation of death and Yalom's eponymous ultimate concern. Both emphasise that mere knowledge of one's mortality and the experience of death as a boundary situation are not the same. As Jaspers notes, "Our general knowledge of death and our lived relationship to death are entirely heterogeneous things. We can simultaneously know of death in general and yet have something within us that instinctively does not consider it necessary or possible" (PW: 261). Yalom shares this view, but for him the inner disposition of 'not considering it necessary or possible' is already the result of repression and denial (Yalom 1980: 41). Both authors point out that even children are familiar with the fear of death and can be profoundly shaken by it (PW: 260; Yalom 1980: 75 ff). In adulthood, however, death is usually experienced as a boundary situation only when close relatives die or when a concrete threat to one's own life breaks down our defence mechanisms, turning mortality into something no longer merely known but felt in an existential manner (PhII: 221f.; Yalom 1980: 40 ff). Further, both Jaspers and Yalom identify anxiety as the main quality of this experience, with Jaspers distinguishing between "the anxiety of existential non-being" and "the anxiety of vital non-existence" (PhII: 226). Yalom, referencing an empirical study (Diggory and Rothman 1961: "Values destroyed by death"), first outlines seven aspects of this anxiety before differentiating between the fear of "(1) what comes after death, (2) the 'event' of dying, and (3) ceasing to be" (Yalom 1980: 43). For both, what ultimately matters is how the individual confronts their fear(s) of death and whether they are able to move through this experience and actualise their existence, or, as Yalom puts it in Heideggerian terms, "to live life in an authentic fashion" (Yalom 1980: 31).

3.2 Guilt and freedom

Regarding the other boundary situations and ultimate concerns, the correlations are less obvious, but still evident. First, Yalom's ultimate concern of freedom relates to the boundary situation of guilt. In *"Psychologie der Weltanschauungen"* Jaspers attributes special significance to this boundary situation: "Here, in this boundary situation [of guilt], the very root of a person is touched. [...] The root of independent value and meaning is destroyed, bringing the person to complete despair" (PW: 274). Guilt, for Jaspers, can result from both "acting" and "not acting" (PW: 274), "attitudes and motives" (PW: 274) as well as "feelings and any kind of emotional movement" (PW: 275). As a boundary situation it is experienced when "the controlling self-reflection [...] which always strives to bring order to the psyche as a whole [...] is driven into a bottomless infinity" (PW: 275). The individual experiences guilt "somehow alone" (PW: 275), and silence is "somehow inevitable despite all will for communication" (PW: 275).

On the other hand – and here Jaspers cites Kierkegaard –, guilt also represents "the strongest self-assertion of existence" (PW: 277), for it is through guilt that the individual steps out "from a veil of abstract generalities in which he lives his life as if it were self-evident" (PW: 277). This is only the case, however, if the individual neither conceals their guilt nor explains it away, nor merely resigns themselves to it (PhII: 248). Instead, what matters is to take unconditional responsibility and accept the absence of any fixed reference point in ethical reflection. The individual must strive "to genuinely avoid avoidable guilt in order to reach the real, deep, unavoidable guilt—but even here, without finding rest" (PhII: 249). For Jaspers, this unavoidable guilt results from the fact that every decision excludes other possibilities: "If I exist as possible existence in the world, I actualize myself through the One [*das Eine*]. To grasp the One means to reject [...] other possibilities. But these are people as potential fellow existents [*Menschen als mit mir mögliche Existenzen*]" (PhII: 247).

It is striking that in his discussion of the boundary situation of guilt, Jaspers speaks of responsibility but not once mentions freedom as its necessary condition. The connection to the ultimate concern of freedom is evident nevertheless, and Yalom in his chapters on freedom addresses guilt extensively. Unlike Jaspers, he distinguishes between neurotic and real guilt (Yalom 1980: 276) as well as existential guilt as a third, distinct form of guilt, which relates to "transgressions against oneself" (Yalom 1980: 320). "[W]e feel ourselves guilty on account of the unused life, the un-lived life in us" (Yalom 1980: 287). According to Yalom, existential guilt is often experienced as a boundary situation when the individual is faced with a serious, irreversible decision. In the section "Decision–Choice" he even speaks of "Decisions as a Boundary Experience" (Yalom 1980: 319) and elaborates:

To be fully aware of one's existential situation means that one becomes aware of self-creation. To be aware of the fact that one constitutes oneself, that there are no absolute external referents, that one assigns an arbitrary meaning to the world, means to become aware of one's fundamental groundlessness. Decision, especially an irreversible decision, is a boundary situation in the same way that awareness of 'my death' is a boundary situation (Yalom 1980: 319).

The idea of self-creation seems to contradict another of Jaspers' boundary situations, namely chance or the historicity of existence, which the individual must contend with. That aside, Jaspers, too, knows about existential guilt in essence, e.g., when he speaks about 'the One' through which the individual actualizes their existence, and that unavoidably excludes other people and ways of life. On the linguistic level, another parallel can be observed in the imagery of a "bottomless infinity" (PW: 275) or "fundamental groundlessness" (Yalom: 1980: 319) which both Jaspers and Yalom employ to describe the boundary situation of guilt and the ultimate concern of freedom respectively.

3.3 Struggle and isolation

The boundary situation of struggle and the ultimate concern of isolation don't seem to correspond at first sight, but rather to be mutually exclusive. Struggle always involves some kind of interaction and, therefore, cannot take place in isolation. That there *is* a connection, however, becomes apparent in that both Jaspers and Yalom address the question of how interpersonal relationships succeed and fail in the context of struggle and isolation respectively. It is the relational dimension of human existence and its boundaries that forms the backdrop to both concepts and ties them together.

Jaspers begins his discussion of the boundary situation of struggle by distinguishing between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' as well as 'material' and 'spiritual' struggle (PhII: 33f.). The latter, he argues, is "the origin of the revelation of true self-being" (PhII: 34) and, as 'Agon' or contest, does not aim at the destruction or subjugation of the opponent, but at creation "in the infinite space of the spirit" (PhII: 34). He further differentiates between "struggle with force", which "can compel, limit, suppress, and conversely create space", and "struggle in love", which is nonviolent and unfolds "without the will to victory, with the exclusive will to openness" (PhII: 34).

In the boundary situation of material, violent struggle, the individual recognises how they are "a beneficiary of the use of violence" (PhII: 241) in their physical existence and that they "themselves will eventually suffer violence" (PhII: 241) or must "limit the clear either-or and [...] bend it into agreement and com-

promise" (PhII: 241). The boundary situation of loving struggle, by contrast, is about the actualisation of the individual as an existent. It unfolds as "existential communication" (PhII: 243) that involves the "ultimate questioning of the other" (PhII: 243) on the basis of an unconditional solidarity (PhII: 243). It fails "when, at its core, the struggle is about the affirmation of my empirical individuality, rather than about existential openness" (PhII: 245), and in this case "the possibility of solitude becomes visible as an expression of existential non-being" (PhII: 246). Thus, toward the end of his discussion on the boundary situation of loving struggle, Jaspers himself relates it to isolation as that which can be overcome within it.

It is Yalom who adopts a more pessimistic stance here, asserting that isolation is an inescapable fundamental condition of human existence. He views even deep interpersonal relationships as merely ways of coping with this isolation, rather than as a means of overcoming or transcending it (Yalom 1980: 363). Distinguishing between interpersonal, intrapersonal, and existential isolation (Yalom 1980: 353), Yalom defines interpersonal isolation as loneliness or separation from others. Intrapersonal isolation refers to "dissociation" (Yalom 1980: 354), or the separation of unwanted parts of the self, and existential isolation means "separation from the world" (Yalom 1980: 355). Yalom elaborates:

Individuals are often isolated from others and from parts of themselves, but underlying these splits is an even more basic isolation that belongs to existence – an isolation that persists despite the most gratifying engagement with other individuals and despite consummate self-knowledge and integration. Existential isolation refers to an unbridgeable gulf between oneself and any other being. It refers, too, to an isolation even more fundamental – a separation between the individual and the world (Yalom 1980: 355).

No interpersonal relationship can overcome this form of existential isolation, according to Yalom. However, there is the possibility of sharing it and finding solace in love and friendship (Yalom 1980). The prerequisite is that the individual must first learn to accept and endure their inescapable existential isolation. If this is not achieved, every relationship will become merely a means to numb the fear of loneliness. "If [...] we are overcome with dread before the abyss of loneliness, we will not reach out toward others but instead will flail at them in order not to drown in the sea of existence" (Yalom 1980: 363). Thus, the unresolved fear of existential isolation often leads to dysfunctional relationships and interpersonal isolation (Yalom 1980).

3.4 Chance and meaninglessness

The last pair of concepts is that of Jaspers' chance (or historicity of existence) and Yalom's meaninglessness. Jaspers defines chance as "a being, an event in relation to some necessity, with respect to which this being or event itself cannot be understood as necessary" (PW: 270). There are various kinds of chance: "chance in relation to causal necessities, to purposeful, intentional actions, and to objective contexts of meaning" (PW: 270). The contingencies of life and their effects can be repressed by the individual or interpreted within predetermined structures of meaning, yet "at the boundary of our existence" (PW: 271) chance remains omnipresent.

As a boundary situation, the underlying antinomy is "that we must see the world both as necessary and coherent (rationalism) and as accidental and chaotically incoherent (irrationalism)" (PW: 271), and that any seeming resolution of this contradiction to either extreme appears equally unacceptable: "If necessity becomes absolute, it is as unbearable as chance. Man alternates between seeking to free himself from one through the other" (PhII: 217). According to Jaspers, mythical and religious-metaphysical concepts, such as the workings of the Greek goddesses of fate, Christian predestination, or the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation, are attempts to cope with the boundary situation of chance (PW: 272).

Yalom, too, acknowledges the importance of chance: "An existential position holds that the world is contingent – that is, everything that is could as well have been otherwise" (Yalom 1980: 423). His primary interest, however, lies in the question of how the contingent structure of the world affects the human capacity to experience life as meaningful – particularly in an era where religious-metaphysical systems have lost their binding authority for people. In this context, Yalom distinguishes between 'cosmic meaning' on the one hand and 'terrestrial meaning' (Yalom 1980: 423) on the other:

Cosmic meaning implies some design existing outside of and superior to the person and invariably refers to some magical or spiritual ordering of the universe. *Terrestrial meaning* may, as we shall see, have foundations that are entirely secular—that is, one may have a personal sense of meaning without a cosmic meaning system (Yalom 1980: 423).

Those to whom the great religious-metaphysical systems no longer resonate, can still give personal, earthly meaning to life. This is crucial for Yalom, as "meaning systems cannot be relinquished without some substitute" (Yalom 1980: 427). While the question of *why* we live may perhaps be set aside, the question of *how* to live is harder to avoid (Yalom 1980: 427). Drawing on the ideas of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, Yalom discusses a range of "activities" (Yalom 1980: 431) that may con-

tribute to earthly meaning-making, because “they seem right; they seem good; they are intrinsically satisfying and need not be justified on the basis of any other motivation” (Yalom 1980: 431). Yalom considers “[a]ltruism” (Yalom 1980: 431), “[d]edication to a cause” (Yalom 1980: 434), “[c]reativity” (Yalom 1980: 435), “[t]he hedonistic solution” (Yalom 1980: 436), “[s]elf-actualization” (Yalom 1980: 437), and “[s]elf-transcendence” (Yalom 1980: 439) as possible paths to personal meaning, before highlighting, with reference to Buber and Frankl, the shortcomings of hedonism and self-actualization as purely self-centered options (Yalom 1980: 439f.).

More distinctly than in other passages, an important difference between Yalom and Jaspers emerges here. It lies in the fact that Yalom, as a practicing therapist, is more inclined to accept pragmatic solutions and the creation of new ‘housings’ as part of the patient’s gradual growth toward “maturity” (Yalom 1980: 165). Jaspers, on the other hand, places emphasis on radical philosophical honesty that does not aim at growth, but at (self-)transcendence. “To experience boundary situations and to exist are the same” (PhII: 204) means that becoming existent is only possible *within* the boundary situation, and that enduring it “with critical bravery” (PhII: 225) is what ultimately matters. In the boundary situation, “man experiences the call to his freedom, from which he first becomes what he can be, but is not yet. [...] The meaning of this path is transcendence” (GSZ: 137; for a critical discussion of the concept of meaning [*Sinn*] in medicine and psychotherapy cf. Frick (2022)).

4 Emmy van Deurzen’s existential dimensions

“Karl Jaspers has been much underestimated”, Emmy van Deurzen writes about the German existential philosopher and his contribution to Existential Therapy in “*Everyday Mysteries*” (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 47). As outlined in the previous chapter, this might be particularly true for Irvin D. Yalom, who discusses Kierkegaard, Sartre and Heidegger in some length but refrains from any deeper, first hands engagement with Jaspers – despite the importance of boundary situations within his own therapeutic approach.

Van Deurzen, by contrast, is well familiar with Jaspers and acknowledges the influence he had on her thinking and therapeutic practice (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 47ff.), highlighting the concept of boundary situations (van Deurzen’s preferred translation is ‘limit situations’) as well as that of “loving communication” (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 51) and “passion for the night” (2025: 127). In this chapter, I want to focus on her model of “four existential dimensions” (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 138) and examine how it integrates both Jaspers’ concept of boundary situ-

ations and Yalom's concept of ultimate concerns into a larger, "onto-dynamic" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 138) framework.

Van Deurzen's premise is that human beings as "bio-social-psycho-spiritual organisms" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 131) are "defined by their relationships to a physical world, to other people, to themselves and to a network of meaning" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 131). Drawing from Ludwig Binswanger's *Grundformen und Erkenntnis menschlichen Daseins* (1942) and Rollo May's discussion of Binswanger's ideas in the introduction to *Existence* (1952), she names the first three of these dimensions "Umwelt", "Mitwelt" and "Eigenwelt" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 135), but adds 'Überwelt' as a fourth distinct dimension to account for the importance of the spiritual realm. In combination, 'Umwelt', 'Mitwelt', 'Eigenwelt', and 'Überwelt' form the "four dimensional force field" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 138) in which the human life unfolds. Reminiscent of Jaspers' antinomical structure of the world, van Deurzen writes that each of the four dimensions

is hold taut by its own particular boundaries, arranged in broad opposition to each other, like the poles of the earth. In everyday life these poles manifest themselves to us as paradoxes, dilemmas, contradictions and conflicts (1997/2010: 136).

In the physical world a polar opposition exists between the desire for life/pleasure and the fear of death/pain, in the social world between the desire for love/belonging and the fear of hate/isolation, in the personal world between the desire for identity/integrity and the fear of freedom/disintegration, and in the spiritual world between the desire for good/purpose and the fear of evil/futility (cf. van Deurzen 1997/2010: 141, Fig. 13.3). In each of these force fields, one side cannot exist without the other, and the tension in between can never be fully resolved. Instead, human life is defined by the constant need to reconfigure and reassert itself between these poles of tension (cf. van Deurzen 1997/2010: 136).

Table 2: Four existential dimensions according to van Deurzen (1997/2010: 141).

	Desires	Fears
Physical	Life, pleasure	Death, pain
Social	Love, belonging	Hate, Isolation
Personal	Identity, integrity	Freedom, disintegration
Spiritual	Good, purpose	Evil, futility

As van Deurzen points out, Yalom's ultimate concerns correspond to the minus poles of this scheme (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 212), and so Jaspers' boundary situations can be aligned with the four dimensions, too. The boundary situations of death relates to the physical dimension or *Umwelt*, guilt relates primarily to the personal dimension or *Eigenwelt*, struggle is situated in the social dimension or *Mitwelt*, and chance (or historicity of existence) relates to the spiritual dimension or *Überwelt*. It's an approximate alignment, as the boundary situation of the death of the other has a social dimension as well, just like guilt in the non-existential sense. But as van Deurzen's model is intended as a "plausible map" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 135) rather than a definitive system, that just illustrates how in real life the four dimensions "interlock and interweave" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 135; for a more complex and elaborate version of this scheme, in which each sphere is split again into four, cf. van Deurzen 1997/2010: 142).

Despite these similarities van Deurzen takes a critical stance towards Yalom, who in her perspective "recognizes four levels of polarities and challenge in life, but [...] does not attach these in a systematic manner to the philosophical dilemmas described by existential authors" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 212), and who for this reason misses "the poignancy of the tensions that exist in human paradoxes, as he emphasises the basic concerns and anxieties rather than seeing these as part of the complex interchange between fears and desires that make up the dynamic framework of human living" (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 212). For van Deurzen, the real challenge of human life – and especially for the patient in therapy – lies in accepting the tensions of being in the force field and learning to reassert themselves within it time and again:

Existence is the tension between life and death and the play of forces between them. Without this tension, that involves us in continuous aspirations and desperations, and ups and downs, there would be no existence at all. Life takes places in the force field created by the pluses of our pleasures and the minuses of our displeasures (van Deurzen 1997/2010: 137).

If this criticism applies to Yalom, the question is whether it doesn't also apply to Jaspers. Because for Jaspers, too, "the ultimate limit, the final point, is always the value-negative side" (PW: 256) of the antinomical structure of the world, and "[t]o experience boundary situations and to exist are the same" (PhII: 204). Only with regard to the boundary situation of struggle does Jaspers attribute the same value to the positive pole of "existential love" (PhII: 24) and indeed speaks of the "loving struggle" or "revealing struggle" (*offenbarender Kampf*) as a boundary situation in its own right (PhII: 243). Apart from love, however, the positive poles do not possess the same existential value for Jaspers, and the tensions of the force field concern him mainly as catapults towards the boundary.

To conclude, I want to highlight another commonality between the authors discussed in this essay, and that is the transformative potential that all three of them attribute to the experience of boundary situations. Jaspers writes that “we arrive at selfbeing by entering open-eyed into boundary situations” (1932: 204), for Yalom, the experience of boundary situations “catalyze[s]” (Yalom 1980: 8) the confrontation with the givens of existence, and van Deurzen recounts from her therapeutic practice that “it is often when we have the courage to sit patiently with a client’s pain and despair in their encounter with limit situations we frequently come to a breakthrough” (van Deurzen 2025: 118). It is in this sense, that boundary situations are not only limits but also “frontiers and possible pathways towards something further” (van Deurzen 2025: 117).

Yet another way to think of the transformative potential of boundary situations could be in terms of the “transitions” (Holzhey-Kunz 2025: 78) which they precipitate. Beyond the transition towards transcendence, envisioned by Jaspers, Holzhey-Kunz identifies a range of other possible transitions from being in a boundary situation, including the ‘regressive’ transition towards collective identities and the ‘progressive’ transition towards “a process of transforming one’s own special sensitivity” (Holzhey-Kunz 2025: 78). Across all these conceptualizations, boundary situations emerge as “philosophical experiences” (Gutschmidt 2022) *par excellence* that can, and often do, profoundly change a person’s life, for better or worse.

5 Summary

The primary objective of this essay was to demonstrate how Jaspers’ individual boundary situations correlate with Yalom’s ultimate concerns. Starting from an introduction of both concepts in their respective theoretical frameworks (chapter 2), it was examined how not just the boundary situation of death and the eponymous ultimate concern, but also guilt and freedom, struggle and isolation, as well chance and meaninglessness are conceptually linked (chapter 3). Following this comparison of Jaspers and Yalom, Emmy van Deurzen’s model of four existential dimensions was considered. It was shown how the four dimensions of ‘Umwelt’, ‘Mitwelt’, ‘Eigenwelt’, and ‘Umwelt’ each span out a force field between their respective polar opposites, and how the minus poles of each dimension correspond to Yalom’s ultimate concerns and Jaspers’ boundary situations. Eventually it was highlighted how all three authors discussed in this paper, despite diverging perspectives on the meaning of existence, emphasise the transformative potential of boundary situations for the individual.

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