

Max Weber: A Profile from Karl Jaspers' Perspective¹

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Abstract

Max Weber, who was a well-known sociologist both of his own time and today, has been one of the most influential names – besides, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, and Friedrich Nietzsche – for Karl Jaspers, who is one of the original names that comes into minds when the 20th-century existential philosophy is mentioned. In fact, it can easily be asserted that Weber had a huge personal role in Jaspers' carrier as a philosopher. Karl Jaspers is known for his uniquely discussed concepts such as, freedom (*Freiheit*), communication (*Kommunikation*), Existenz, limit situations (*Grenzsituationen*), the encompassing (*das Umgreifende*), guilt (*Schuld*), and responsibility (*Verantwortung*). And it is obvious that Jaspers was affected by Weber considering his two specific concepts: guilt and responsibility. This is the case because Jaspers himself explains how and in what ways he was influenced by Weber. In this article, we will discuss Weber from the perspective of Jaspers. This discussion will be held in two aspects: i) personal features of Weber given by Jaspers, and ii) Weber's effects on Jaspers from the viewpoint of Jaspers and what they share considering politics and ethics at the theoretical level.

Keywords: Karl Jaspers, Max Weber, Guilt, Responsibility, Influence.

Max Weber: Karl Jaspers'in Perspektifinden Bir Profil

Öz

Kendi çağında ve günümüzde oldukça iyi tanınan bir sosyolog olan Max Weber, 20. yy Varoluş Felsefesi dendiğinde akla gelen orijinal isimlerden birisi olan Karl Jaspers'i - Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard ve Friedrich Nietzsche yanında – en çok etkileyen isimlerden birisi olmuştur. Hatta Jaspers'in bir filozof olarak kariyerinde, Weber'in kişisel olarak etkisinin oldukça büyük olduğu da rahatlıkla iddia edilebilir. Karl Jaspers, özgürlük (*Freiheit*), iletişim (*Kommunikation*), varoluş (*Existenz*), sınır durumlar (*Grenzsituationen*), Kuşatan Varlık (*das Umgreifende*), suç (*Schuld*) ve sorumluluk (*Verantwortung*) gibi özgün bir biçimde ele aldığı kavramlarla tanınır. Jaspers'in, belirli iki kavramı bağlamında - suç ve sorumluluk – Weber'den etkilendiği aşikârdır. Çünkü Jaspers'in bizzat kendisi, Weber'den hangi açılardan ve nasıl etkilendiğini ifade etmiştir. Bu makalede de, Weber'i Jaspers'in gözünden görüp ele alacağız. Bu değerlendirme, i) Jaspers'e göre Weber'in kişisel özellikleri ve ii) Jaspers'in bakış açısından kendisinin Weber'den nasıl etkilendiği ve teorik düzlemde politika ile etik alanlarında hangi düşünceleri paylaştıkları bakımından iki açıdan ele alınacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Karl Jaspers, Max Weber, Suç, Sorumluluk, Etkilenim.

1 This paper is part of a speech that I gave at a colloquium that was organized at the *Karl Jaspers Haus* in Oldenburg/Germany after my stay to do research for my Ph.D. thesis. Therefore, although this paper is conceptually related to my Ph.D. scrutiny, it is apart from the thesis.

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Introduction

The writings of Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), because of his highly variable professions, are various; they include writings on psychiatry, psychology, philosophy, and politics. Jaspers' contribution to philosophy can be classified according to the themes of his works, such as philosophy of existence, philosophy of religion, philosophy of reason, and political philosophy.

Like every philosopher, Jaspers was impressed by his antecedents like Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Max Weber³: “Besides Weber, there are only three whose impact can be traced through all phases of Jaspers' philosophizing. These three are Kant, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.”⁴ Kant had an effect on Jaspers considering the concepts of reason (*Vernunft*), freedom, and transcendental ideas; Jaspers inspired by or with his own words he borrowed Kierkegaard's *Existenz*; Nietzsche, with his unique character, influenced Jaspers in terms of the theory of subjectivism and his perspective on exceptional individuals. However, maybe because of the lively relation and communication between the two – even though it lasted only eleven years from 1909 to 1920 - Weber's effect manifests itself through Jaspers' psychiatric, philosophical and political writings. “Until 1914 my basic attitude was strictly non-political. ...What I have thought since the outbreak of the war in 1914 has stood under the influence of Max Weber. Through him, my political attitude underwent a change.”⁵ Weber's charismatic leadership theory, ideal types (*Idealtypus*) methodology, and especially his ethics of responsibility have an impact on Jaspers personally and on his writings:

Among my contemporaries, the actuality of human greatness, the standard for men historically distant, became embodied for me, in a singular, marvelous fashion, in the person of Max Weber. ... His thought as well as his nature became as essential for my philosophy, even 'til today, as no other thinker.⁶

There are five written texts in which Jaspers discusses Weber *per se*, his political deeds, scholarly writings, and his personality. The first essay is actually a speech that Jaspers gave after Weber's death at a funeral service which was held by Heidelberg students. Jaspers contributed to the service with a pretty impressive speech and it was printed with the title “Max Weber - Rede bei der von der Heidelberger Studentenschaft am 17. Juli 1920 veranstalteten Trauerfeier”⁷. Later on, this speech, like other speeches he gave, was appeared in a book edited by Hans Saner under the title of *Aneignung und Polemik – Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Philosophie*⁸. The second essay also takes place in this very book with the title of “Max Weber – Politiker, Forscher, Philosoph”⁹, and moreover, there are some remarks on Weber's political thoughts in the same book which can be considered as the third article. The fourth essay entitled “Max Weber” (1960-1961) originally occurred as a book chapter in *Die großen Philosophen (Nachlaß I)*¹⁰. And, finally, the last source con-

3 Moreover, North-German liberalism and Protestantism also had an influence on Jaspers' cast of mind.

4 Ernst Moritz Manasse, “Jaspers' Relation to Max Weber” in *The Library of Living Philosophers: The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1981), 379.

5 Karl Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography” in *The Library of Living Philosophers: The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1981), 55.

6 Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography”, 29.

7 The English translation of this first essay is called “Max Weber: A Commemorative Address”.

8 Karl Jaspers, *Aneignung und Polemik – Gesammelte Reden und Aufsätze zur Geschichte der Philosophie* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1968).

9 English translation takes place in Karl Jaspers, *Three Essays – Leonardo, Descartes, Max Weber*, trans. by Ralph Manheim. (New York: A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1964).

10 Karl Jaspers, *Die großen Philosophen, Nachlaß I* (München, Zürich: Piper Verlag, 1981).

sists of some excerpts from his letters to Hannah Arendt and is from the book *Hannah Arendt – Karl Jaspers Correspondence (1926-1969)*¹¹ which is translated from German by Robert and Rita Kimber.¹²

All these writings, when examined carefully, show us that Weber has a huge effect on Jaspers, his life, and his way of thinking. “Just as Plato’s philosophy could be interpreted as his attempt to say what he had experienced through Socrates, so it is possible to consider Jaspers’ thinking as his way of expressing what he had experienced through Max Weber.”¹³ In addition, Jaspers speaks frankly about his being influenced *in all aspects* by Weber as follows: “I never philosophized without thinking of Max Weber. I asked, What would he say? in adopting his basic position – not to continue his sociology and sociological research, but to make this philosophizing conscious.”¹⁴

When someone first reads articles and books on Max Weber¹⁵, it is inevitable that s/he encounters different interpretations, while Weber wrote fragmentarily with a metaphorical richness and used a lot of homonyms. His style of writing, therefore, makes arriving at a definitive interpretation difficult. Although his writings permit a wide range of interpretations, the main issue here is how Jaspers understood him. That is why the main aim throughout this article, for the reader, is to understand how Weber influenced Jaspers from the perspective of Jaspers himself. With this aim, we will have two focal points considering the above-mentioned writings of Jaspers, namely i) personal features of Weber given by Jaspers, and ii) Weber’s effects on Jaspers from the viewpoint of Jaspers and what they share at the theoretical level.

1. Personal Characteristics

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) gives a delicate depiction of Max Weber (1864-1920) in his writings as follows: he was honest and more precisely he was the truth itself, was a modern human being, the greatest German of the era, the last national German, lived passionately, suffered constantly, struggled aimlessly with himself, had independent thinking and was an inconceivably prolific writer. Weber, for Jaspers, was a patriot. He was extremely eager to serve the fatherland. That is why he was always in a restless movement both in politics and in scholarship. Weber also had strong veracity about himself and the world around him, he never included illusions into reality and hence had a clear view about the future.

Jaspers mainly describes Weber’s character as a scientist and gives the subject matters on which Weber worked. The chief point which Jaspers emphasizes is, however, the fact that Weber’s life and his writings had integrity. That is, Weber’s personal character and his character as a scholar, or as a politician, or even as a philosopher (Jaspers sees Weber as a philosopher) did not differ from each other dramatically.

11 Lotte Köhler & Hans Saner, *Hannah Arendt – Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, trans. by Robert and Rita Kimber. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1992).

12 All these texts were gathered in a book edited by John Dreijmanis namely *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber*. And in order to avoid potential confusions, all the references considering the above-mentioned articles will be given to this book.

13 Manasse, “Jaspers’ Relation to Max Weber,” 371-372.

14 Karl Jaspers, “Max Weber: Concluding Characterization” in *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber*, ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 140.

15 Max Weber was and still is an influential name. He stylized and gave a new meaning to sociology with his contributions like the iron cage, understanding (*Verstehen*) theory, ideal types (*Idealtypus*) in relation to society, culture, modernity, economy, religion, politics, and ethics. However, his theories will not be examined here, because the aim of this article is to present Weber from the viewpoint of Jaspers.

On one issue, Jaspers is critical: the fragmentary character of Weber's works: "He hardly ever published a book; once there appeared a Roman agrarian history and a booklet about the stock market and in recent years a few notebook discourses – otherwise nothing. Everything else is in periodicals, archives, newspapers."¹⁶ Despite his fragmentary writings, he had an enormous effect on both the political and academic worlds. Jaspers expresses this as follows: "He dominated the technical mechanism of the scientific trade."¹⁷ Moreover, Jaspers asserts that Weber's life was also fragmentary just like his works because of the political structure of Germany, his illness, and his death.

According to Jaspers, Weber was neither a specialized scientist nor a politician in the proper meaning of the words. On the contrary, he was a philosopher (an existential philosopher more precisely). "What makes Weber a philosopher" is the question that Jaspers always keeps in his mind. The essence of being and what a human being should do: these are the problems that Weber tries to solve through science because science gives clarity, and this science is philosophy: "The discipline of philosophy and the philosophical principle discussions of the individual disciplines try to achieve this."¹⁸ However, as Jaspers asserts, Weber does not philosophize directly. His philosophizing must be traced to his politics, sociology, and his personal being. In order to make this clear, Jaspers gives a definition of a philosopher: "The philosopher is, therefore, a human being who is always true to his personality, standing up for himself wherever he sets himself up."¹⁹ Given the characteristics of Weber, such as being honest, hardworking, realist, having an unconditional will for truth, and so on, the definition of a philosopher given by Jaspers may seem true for Weber.

Although Jaspers had affirmative thoughts about Weber, he was deeply shaken by the possibility of a love affair between Weber and his one of former students Else Jaffe. Jaspers was deeply shocked by this idea and it confused his views on Weber's truthfulness radically because for Jaspers the writings of Weber and his personal life are one and the same thing: he was the truth itself. "Jaspers does not propagate a pluralism of possible values, but rather a monism with individual existence as its frame of reference"²⁰ and he criticized Weber from this point of view while Weber himself sustained "value pluralism". At this point, it is not possible to disagree with John Dreijmanis' opinion, according to which, "Jaspers' criticism of Weber on these grounds has not substantially diminished Weber's importance, but has rather made him more human."²¹

2. Weber's Influence on Jaspers: Science, Politics and Ethics

In addition to Weber's personal features, Jaspers mentions Weber's thoughts on the knowledge of a human being and on politics in relation to *freedom* and *responsibility*. As mentioned above, Jaspers addresses Weber as a politician, sociologist, and philosopher.

16 Karl Jaspers, "Max Weber: A Commemorative Address" in *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber*, ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 4.

17 Jaspers, "Max Weber: A Commemorative Address," 18.

18 Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 1922), 550. (Translation from German belongs to me).

19 Jaspers, "Max Weber: A Commemorative Address," 9.

20 Matthias Bormuth, *Life Conduct in Modern Times – Karl Jaspers and Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Susan Nurmi-Schomers. (Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 57.

21 John Dreijmanis (Ed.), "Introduction" in *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), xxiv.

As Jaspers asserts, Weber dealt with politics with an everlasting enthusiasm. For Jaspers, Weber as a sociologist is deathless, because he saved sociology from being a meaningless occupation and carried it to the level of science. For Weber, the difference between reality and illusions was important. He always took the status of an observer which makes him free from fanaticism and allows him to see things behind the veils. His being honest personally and giving importance to reality instead of illusions shows that his personality shows itself throughout his works. This parallelism between his character and his works, for Jaspers, is a feature of being a philosopher: “I consider the person engaged in philosophizing inseparable from his philosophic thoughts. Nothing in philosophy is separable from man.”²² Therefore Weber is, as Jaspers asserts, a philosopher. Weber’s fulfilling his being comes from philosophizing his own existence, floundering: “Max Weber was the richest and deepest realization of the meaning of floundering in our time.”²³ Moreover, Weber’s being a politician, scientist, and philosopher cannot be discussed separately:

If Max Weber was a politician, scientist, and philosopher, then he was, nevertheless, not merely one and also the other, but the whole human being who grasped the world in an unprecedented vastness from the depths of his being, which, indivisibly one, is really what a human being as a human being can be: a seeker of truth. As a philosopher, he is a politician; as a philosopher, he is a scientist.²⁴

Jaspers argues that, maybe due to Weber’s fragmentary being, the whole was not a subject for Weber. A human being cannot comprehend the whole due to his/her being finite and the limitations of his/her knowledge: “Man as a finite being, can only make individual things subject of his will.”²⁵ This is the place where Weber affects Jaspers and they share a thought at the theoretical level. As evidence one may refer to this quotation from Jaspers’ book *Philosophy*, Volume I: “Let us look first at the world as objective reality. As extant knowledge, it appears disjoint. It would be the one world if all things were interrelated; but for us they remain so neither in visionary and systematic conception nor in scientific fact.”²⁶ One can only know individual things and particular realities. For this reason, knowledge is relative.

According to Jaspers, Weber as a scientist tried to understand “how human existence came into being” and “the limits of knowledge”. Weber’s scientific method consists of three factors: possibilities, comparison, and the ideal type. By the way of possibilities, one can understand what is really going on and comparison is the key to finding the “objective possibility”: “By comparison and contrast the source of each particular can be found which, for its part, is conceived as a possibility.”²⁷ An ideal type, for Weber, is a means through which one can gain the clearest awareness of reality. Moreover, Jaspers draws attention to some important topics for Weber’s understanding of science that affirm Weber’s being an empirical sociologist: i) the difference and correlation between facts and values in sciences, ii) the subjectivity of reality, iii) the relativity of knowledge:

The natural conditions, technical means, situational connections as ideas and purposes intended by people, religious conceptions in their consequences, as well as the fact of the power of political connections, all became for him empirical subjects of relative significance.²⁸

22 Jaspers, “Philosophical Autobiography,” 39.

23 Karl Jaspers, “Max Weber: Politician, Scientist, Philosopher” in *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber*, ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 37.

24 Jaspers, “Max Weber: Politician, Scientist, Philosopher,” 38.

25 Jaspers, “Max Weber: A Commemorative Address,” 14.

26 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume I*, trans. by E. B. Ashton. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 101.

27 Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume II*, trans. by E. B. Ashton. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 87.

28 Jaspers, “Max Weber: Politician, Scientist, Philosopher,” 97.

As a politician or a political writer, what Weber cared about most was national power and honor, in other words, the dignity of the person and the political worth of the nation. He saw the preservation of European culture as the mission and *responsibility* of the German in world history. For Jaspers, Weber always had a clear vision of political steps that should be taken. Despite Weber's true insights and recommendations, he never became a political leader because he lacked the ethical tolerance although he, for Jaspers, already had the three qualities – passion, responsibility, proportion - that a politician must have according to Weber: “An eye for the fact of power, belief bearing responsibility and veracity are prerequisites for political thinking, but they all require expertise.”²⁹ Herewith, for Weber, knowledge is an unconditional supreme principle for politics and politics is always based on responsibility.

Jaspers mentions Weber's remarks on politics and says that: “Politics for him was not a matter of belief, but a question of expert knowledge, objectivity, responsibility, and compromise.”³⁰ No wonder, this explanation parallels Weber's assertion about the three qualities that a man must have to take up political power.³¹ Moreover, politics can exist only in freedom and responsibility because they, to Weber, are the mediums for the growth of a subject (or citizen in today's context) above the personal: “The cornerstone of Weber's political existentialism is the ethic of responsibility, in which human life freely assumes totally decisive historical accountability for itself. At the heart of this accountability is the freedom to produce laws.”³² This relation between politics, responsibility, and freedom is another point by which Jaspers is influenced. For Jaspers, there is no freedom without knowledge, without an arbitrary act, and law.³³ Just because the law is the body of rules which occurs in politics, one can assert that politics and freedom are interrelated concepts in Jaspers' philosophy. Jaspers, as being - mostly - known as an existentialist philosopher, even thinks that without freedom in the external world, one cannot have existential freedom, i.e. political freedom prioritizes existential freedom.

Another point that Jaspers mentions is the difference between the two kinds of ethics, a difference between ethics of principle (or conviction) and the ethics of responsibility that Weber presented in his “Politics as a Vocation”. According to Weber, each action takes place with one of these political ethics. Moreover, these are not incompatible, but rather supplementary: “The uncanny boundary where the conscious responsibility ethic seems to call the principle ethic into question, though finally the former exists only through the latter...”³⁴ and these two ethics are “not absolute opposites, but complements, which together just constitute the authentic human being.”³⁵

Moreover, in addition to the relation between politics and responsibility, there is another relationship that should be mentioned. According to Jaspers, man always encounters his/her existence within the boundary situations. Guilt, as a boundary situation, is one of the most repeated concepts in Jaspers' existential and political philosophy. He returns to it in his *Philosophy* and says: “Responsibility is our word for a man's readiness to

29 Jaspers, “Max Weber: Politician, Scientist, Philosopher,” 71.

30 Jaspers, “Max Weber: A Commemorative Address,” 17.

31 These qualities are passion, responsibility, and proportion. One can find detailed information in Weber's article entitled “Politics as a Vocation”.

32 Chris Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers – Politics and Metaphysics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 66.

33 Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume II*, 156- 157.

34 Jaspers, “Max Weber: Politician, Scientist, Philosopher,” 73.

35 Karl Jaspers, “Observations on Max Weber's Political Thought” in *Karl Jaspers on Max Weber*, ed. John Dreijmanis (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 174.

take the guilt upon himself.”³⁶ This is the statement that constitutes the relation between guilt and responsibility, man can escape neither guilt nor responsibility. Also, this is the point by which Weber’s effect on Jaspers can be seen easily because “a concern with the responsibilities that face the morally serious person constitutes the core of Weber’s ethical perspective. Values alone, he proclaims, cannot guide morally serious human beings; hence moral seriousness brings inevitable risk, struggle, and guilt.”³⁷

Apart from the often-mentioned concepts in politics like freedom, responsibility, guilt, and knowledge, Weber also addresses another significant notion: communication. For Weber, people should engage in communication under all circumstances because “even to bring the differences to clarity is only possible by speaking to each other.”³⁸ In a similar manner, Jaspers thinks that “human life realizes its potentials most adequately not in politics, but on the basis of communicative situatedness in a common cultural lineage. The specifically human way of being is conditioned by communication within a tradition.”³⁹

Conclusion

Tracing the influence of Weber on Jaspers’ philosophy and personal life is easier when one pays attention to similar concepts in their works, such as freedom, communication, guilt, responsibility, and politics. Weber’s influence on Jaspers manifests itself not only in Jaspers’ writings but also in his political activities in real life. Moreover, even though Weber’s effect on Jaspers can be traced with the help of some important notions and elements, this does not mean that his effect on Jaspers is limited to these concepts or elements. Rather, he is just more than that to Jaspers.

Jaspers mentions his marriage to Gertrud Mayer and the National-Socialist “criminal-state” as the two turning points in his life in “Philosophical Autobiography”. However, as can be seen above, his relationship with Weber enables Jaspers to take a political stand and therefore makes him understand the importance of responsibility which constitutes the axial point of his political writings. For this reason, setting aside this relationship would be a restricted manner in grasping Jaspers’ philosophy and philosophical concepts that were embodied by his own life. Therefore, calling his relation to Weber as the third turning point would not be erroneous.

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36 Jaspers, *Philosophy, Volume II*, 217.

37 Bradley E. Starr, “The Structure of Max Weber’s Ethic of Responsibility,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 27, (2002): 419.

38 Jaspers, “Observations on Max Weber’s Political Thought,” 176.

39 Thornhill, *Karl Jaspers – Politics and Metaphysics*, 67.

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