The Paradigmatic Origins of Transcultural Morality:
Chikuro Hiroike and Karl Jaspers

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PRELIMINARY

After the First and Second World Wars, after Nanking, after the Holocaust, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after Hitler and Stalin, after the genocides in Africa and the former Yugoslavia, after September 11th and other terrorist bombings, after the many smaller wars in the world since 1945, after almost 65 years of living under the threat of a nuclear Armageddon, it is clear that we need a new awareness of our common humanity, a moral re-orientation. Yet, one may ask, are such an awareness and re-orientation either possible or likely?

Questions that are even more basic beckon. What does it mean to be human and what are the moral foundations of our humanity? Though large, these questions are not only theoretical. They are also historical, compelling us to reflect on what we have been in human history, where we have come from, and what the relationship may be between our past and our present. They are practical as well, for they move us to reflect on how we should live. Chikuro Hiroike dedicated most of his life to these questions. On the other side of the world, completely ignorant of Hiroike's work and thought, separated from him by oceans, traditions and languages, Karl Jaspers asked himself the same questions.\(^1\) Remarkably, both these men approached these questions in similar ways and arrived at many of the same conclusions. In this essay, as I explore the similarities and differences in these two thinkers, I am also exploring the following question: is morality culturally determined or can it be universal? If morality is culturally determined, is it also therefore culturally limited? I do not pretend to have definitive answers to these questions, but one must think about them if one's intention is to identify and possibly establish a universal morality. Both Hiroike and Jaspers sought the origins of that universal morality in a particular period in human history now known as “the Axial Age”.\(^2\)
THE AXIAL AGE

Karen Armstrong has written, explicitly following some of the insights of Karl Jaspers, that “from about 900 to 200 BCE, in four distinct regions, the great world traditions that have continued to nourish humanity came into being: Confucianism and Daoism in China; Hinduism and Buddhism in India; monotheism in Israel; and philosophical rationalism in Greece.” The age is called “axial” because it was the central axis of a deeper understanding of the universe and human nature that began the spiritual awakening of humankind. Shuntaro Ito perhaps also followed the work of Karl Jaspers in calling this period a “spiritual revolution”, one of the five great revolutions in human history. Jaspers himself called it a “spiritualisation” and an “overall modification of humanity”. As Jaspers described the Axial Age in his 1949 book, Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte (The Origin and Goal of History), this time saw the appearance of wise men, of strong philosophizing, and of substantial religious thought. In China, Confucius and Lao-tzu appeared, as well as Chuang-tsu, Lieh-tsu, Mo-ti and “all the schools of Chinese philosophy.” In Iran, Zarathustra taught that the world was a battle zone between the forces of good and those of evil. India produced the Upanishads and the Buddha as well as an entire range of philosophical and religious thought from skepticism and materialism to nihilism. In Palestine, the prophets held forth: Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Deutero-Isaiah. Greece saw the work of Homer and the thought of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle, as well as the drama of the tragedians and the analyses of historians like Thucydides. Jaspers summed up the period thus: “In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created. The step into universality was taken in every sense.” The richness of this cultural, spiritual and intellectual explosion is as astonishing as the fact that none of the main thinkers in the regions of the axial period — China, India, Palestine, and Greece — was aware of the work done in any other region. The parallelism of these profound developments in the spirituality of humanity is, Jaspers maintained, not coincidental, though it may be appear to be so. He believes that the answer lies in our common humanity, a point to which I will return.

JASPERS

In his work The Great Philosophers, Jaspers designated four men from these four disparate regions of the world and called them the “paradigmatic individuals” of mankind: Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus Christ. He called
them “paradigmatic” because they were paradigms of the moral life, “beacons by which to gain orientation” but not “models” to be combined into one ideal type which we should try to imitate or worship as deities (“durch die wir die Maßstäbe haben und die wir doch nicht vergöttern”). They very much remain individuals for Jaspers. Also, he did not think of these men as “philosophers” per se, a term that he reserved for thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel, men who “wrote” philosophical works and created philosophical systems. Though the four paradigmatic individuals wrote nothing, it was through the power of their words and actions that they founded enduring moral systems. Three of those moral systems became religions. One of those individuals, Socrates, became the center of the philosophy of Plato, from whom, as Bertrand Russell famously said, subsequent philosophers are descended, somewhat in the manner of footnotes deriving from the major text.

As he considered which figures to identify as paradigmatic, Jaspers discarded Isaiah, Mohammed and Pythagoras for one reason or another. Mohammed, for example, he discarded because, whereas Mohammed “might be comparable in historical importance,” he is not comparable to the four paradigmatic figures in “individual depth.” The four thinkers chosen by Jaspers share a number of characteristics. The texts associated with them came into existence after their deaths. They were actual historical figures of undeniable historical importance. Each of them experienced a “vision” of reality that not only influenced them but also has retained “all its original freshness” for later generations. Each of them transcended his era, though he is recognizable as a type from his era: Socrates was considered a sophist; Confucius was considered a wandering adviser; Buddha was viewed as a founder of a monastic order; Jesus was a Jew with a messianic message. Psychologically, each of them was “masculine” in character; that is, each was devoted more to his masculine disciples than he was to a wife or to family. None of them, according to Jaspers, experienced ecstatic and prophetic visions, and yet each considered that his life to be in “the service of the Godhead”.

Each of them demanded a radical change in the world, for the world as they knew it was in trouble. Each of them experienced an illumination that came about through meditation. Each of them taught that their wisdom was not only or even primarily contemplative but that it was deeply practical. Each of them required of their followers that they transform themselves, in both outward action and inward thinking, a transformation considered as a kind of rebirth. Each of them understood the reality of suffering, and each possessed abundant compassion. In fact, for each of them, love was universal and unlimited, extending to all beings. None of them was interested in abstract metaphysical speculation, yet
each knew that their particular wisdom was “grounded in an absolute which
may be called Being, eternity, God”.12)

HIROIKE

On the other side of the world, writing well before Jaspers had even
imagined his “paradigmatic individuals” to constitute an axial age, Chikuro
Hiroike identified in chapter twelve of Towards Supreme Morality the “five
great systems of supreme morality” on which his own thinking is based,
systems which he associated with Socrates, Jesus Christ, Sakyamuni, Con-
fucius, and, lastly, Amaterasu Omikami.13) What did Hiroike see in these four
men that Jaspers also saw and how does the addition of the figure of Amaterasu
Omikami affect any subsequent discussion of Hiroike’s theory of morality?

Hiroike chose the same four male sages for many of the same reasons that
Jaspers did, though in some instances he seems to have given the universality
of their personalities and teachings an oriental tinge. Here are the ten charac-
teristics that, for Hiroike, are common to the four sages. First, the sages
believed in only one fundamental God and in the obedience to his will, aban-
doning their ego in the process. By God’s will, Hiroike here meant “the law of
nature”. Second, the sages were inspired frequently by revelations. Third,
they respected the ortholinons and the teachings of prior sages. Fourth, they
possessed the spirit of benevolence, that is, an impartial love for all things.
Fifth, they were dedicated to understanding the divine spirit and to developing
their own moral character. Sixth, they did not establish formal organizations
that dispensed authority, such as chief temples, shrines, or churches. Seventh,
they were not ostentatious but rather were modest in their manners and
etiquette. Eighth, they respected the golden mean, which for them meant more
than ‘moderation’; for them, it “meant not only the middle way between
hardship and comfort but also ... the spirit of supreme morality, transcending
both hardship and comfort,” something like “the middle way” of Sakyamuni.
Ninth, they based their actions and thoughts on ‘the will of God’ in order to
bring spiritual salvation to mankind. In other words, they adhered to the
bodhisattva ideal. Tenth, they were universalist in intention and in practice,
that is, they did not limit themselves to helping a single sect or a small group
of people but, rather, thought in terms of entire world, of all mankind.14)

Three of these ten characteristics point to important differences between
Jaspers and Hiroike that in my view are both substantive and cultural. First,
Hiroike requires modesty and moderation of his sage. While western moral-
ists and philosophers may praise modesty and moderation, they do not consider
them requirements for wisdom. In my experience, modesty and moderation
are virtues more prized by Asian cultures than by western ones. Second, Hiroike emphasizes, I believe, not so much “the golden mean” in the Aristotelian sense of the term but rather “the middle way” in the Buddhist sense.15) Third, Hiroike places particular importance on the respect for prior sages whom he calls the spiritual ortholinons. The history of western thought, by contrast, is largely the history of iconoclasm, as thinkers, reformers and philosophers tend to make their reputation by being critical of their predecessors. The prime examples in western philosophy of the “philosopher as iconoclast” are, of course, Descartes and Nietzsche. Each of these three characteristics — modesty and moderation; the middle way; and respect for prior sages — highlights virtues more prized in the East than in the West, virtues that Hiroike called quintessentially Confucian, thus directly associating Moral Science with the Confucian tradition.16)

The most critical difference between Jaspers and Hiroike lies in the concept of the ortholinon. By adding the ortholinon to the characteristics of the sage, and by making Amaterasu Omikami the embodiment and source of the ortholinon principle, Hiroike gives his theory of universal morality a distinctively Japanese flavor. In his view, it is the figure of Amaterasu Omikami which both explains and justifies the longest unbroken line of royal succession in the history of the world and thus is the source of the Japanese reverence for tradition and figures of authority from the head of a family to the head of a corporation to the emperor himself. This tradition of reverence is said to be reflected in the lives of the emperors themselves, as they not only show reverence for their own extensive family traditions but also participate in official ceremonies honoring Amaterasu Omikami.

What happens then in Hiroike’s thought is quite interesting. Having identified the ortholinon as quintessentially Japanese, and having made it a source of national pride, he attempts to universalize the principle by attaching it to the paradigmatic figures he identifies as being at the heart of supreme morality. Thus Socrates, for example, upon being condemned to death, refuses to go into exile, preferring instead to accept the authority of the court and its verdict, however unjust it may be. To use Hiroike’s terminology, in the manner of his death Socrates shows his “esteem for the national ortholinon,” that is, for the laws of Athens.17) Philosophers have frequently disagreed on the meaning of Socrates’ final decision to accept the authority of the court. Some interpreters say that he deliberately sought martyrdom; others say that his act was one of judicial suicide in which he intentionally used the court in order to end his own life. In criticizing these interpretations, Jaspers proposes one that resembles what Hiroike actually espoused. For Jaspers, Socrates is
not so much a martyr to philosophy or to the idea of truth, as he is a martyr to the idea of law and to the need to preserve national order through obedience to the law. As a citizen, says Jaspers, Socrates has the obligation to follow the law. Here Jaspers advances what we might call, in hindsight, an ortholinic interpretation of the death of Socrates.

CONCLUSIONS

Jaspers himself is aware, as he states in The Origin and Goal of History, that the parallels that he discovered among his four paradigmatic individuals might be described as merely coincidental, and he himself might be accused of elevating similarities into a unity that, in fact, is not supported by history. The same accusation might be leveled at Hiroike and, mutatis mutandis, at the comparison of Jaspers with Hiroike.

It is tempting to leave this comparison at the level of a parallelism that presents little more than interesting historical coincidences and similarities. To do so, however, would be a disservice to both of these thinkers and, in truth, to the subject itself, the “paradigmatic origins of transcultural morality”.

The fact that both Jaspers and Hiroike, from the opposite ends of the earth, identified the same four paradigmatic individuals as central to a moral and religious orientation of the world, together with the fact that they spoke of them in such similar ways, suggests that more is going on here than mere coincidence. There is, of course, an undeniable parallelism between the Axial Age and the 19th to mid-20th century: both were eras of extraordinary intellectual and spiritual originality as well as of great political and social upheaval; both eras experienced numerous wars and the establishment of empires that then collapsed, followed by an era of further change and instability. Such parallels, however, are general enough to describe other eras as well. The grounds for comparison in this essay are neither conventionally historical nor biographical. Nor are those grounds based on the principle of historical parallelism to any significant degree. Rather, the grounds are ontological. Ontology — or the nature of reality itself and the quest for understanding it in relation to morality — is the tertium quid of the comparison between Jaspers and Hiroike, the third thing associated with both thinkers. Moreover, that quest leads both men to a search for what it means to be human.

For many thinkers, to be human is to possess a body, a mind, and a soul. However, there is more to it than that. Let us take Jaspers’ view first. For him, to be human is to have an irreducible relationship to the world, to the environment, and to other human beings, a relationship that is in the deepest sense moral.
Jaspers uses three terms to explain the nature of this irreducibility, terms that run throughout much of his thought: in German, the terms are \textit{das Umgreifende}, \textit{Existenz}, and \textit{Existenzerhaltung}. \textit{Das Umgreifende} has been translated as “the encompassing.” \textit{Existenz} has been rendered as “irreducible human existence.” \textit{Existenzerhaltung} refers to “the illumination of irreducible human existence.”

Gerhard Knauss explains “the encompassing” in the following manner. Philosophy is thinking from totality itself; it is coming to terms with totality, with the wholeness of wholeness. That totality or wholeness contains the basic structure of the all-encompassing, which is the “simultaneity or unity of subject-being and object-being”\textsuperscript{19} There is no other “being” beyond that simultaneity-unity. That simultaneity-unity is the human being or “man” who, as William Earle writes in his essay on Jaspers’ anthropology, “is not an object which can be investigated empirically.” Man simply “is.” Jaspers labels this irreducible human existence as “Existenz”. Though this irreducible human existence cannot be known, as an object is known, it can be “illuminated.” “To illuminate” is to talk about “man” (the irreducible human existence) without making him into an object, a flesh-and-bone object of our consciousness as, say, anatomists would. The state of \textit{Existenzerhaltung}, or the condition in which our irreducible human existence is illumined, describes an “existential consciousness” of ourselves, a consciousness that is not cognitive but experiential and at the same time transcendental.\textsuperscript{20} Perhaps the best way to think of the state of \textit{Existenzerhaltung} is to think of it as a kind of satori, a term that, as far as I know, appears nowhere in Jaspers’ writings, though the idea of satori is central to his thought.

Except for “satori,” these terms and their definitions belong to Jaspers’ critique of western philosophy. In the West, according to Jaspers, we fall into the trap of the subject-object relationship when we philosophize. Our culture and our traditions of thought encourage that way of proceeding, even though the result generally is a false reductionism that makes everything into an object. The reality, however, is that there is a unity of subject-object that should not be separated. In general, Jaspers says, western philosophy has striven toward that separation as a means of obtaining clarity. Eastern thought, says Jaspers, tends not to separate the subject-object unity; hence, he is interested in figures like Confucius and Lao-tse.

The four sages, in speaking from the ground of their vision of totality or wholeness, understand the nature of the irreducibility of man. They understand that to speak about man simply as an “object” of consciousness is to rob him of humanity. The irreducible transcendence of that humanity associates
him with the divine or what Hiroike would call the spirit of Kami, a spirit that possesses both ontological and moral dimensions. Both Jaspers and Hiroike assert that the four sages have this kind of understanding.

Hiroike may not have Jaspers’ philosophical profundity or sophistication. Nevertheless, he possesses an intuitive wisdom that is just as profound. Moreover, Hiroike always directs his thought to the practical art of living. Jaspers thinks like a practical philosopher; Hiroike does too, but he also lives like one.

Hiroike conceives of the unity of mankind as a unity of consciousness that transcends any one philosophical system or religion, that goes beyond any one faith, world view or political system, beyond any single culture or ethnicity. The sages of the Axial Age also conceived of mankind in this universalizing manner. That is why it is neither coincidental nor accidental that both Jaspers and Hiroike identified the same four male sages, for both were searching for the most profound embodiments of a transcultural unity consciousness. We might well follow Jaspers and call it “axial consciousness”; or we might just as well follow Hiroike and give it the name “supreme morality.” Such a transcultural, universal ethics is our right as human beings and our legacy from the paradigmatic individuals of the Axial Age as well as from Amaterasu Omikami, from Karl Jaspers, and from Hiroike himself.

It would be naïve to imagine that merely the ability to perceive the presence of supreme morality or transcultural unity consciousness would be enough to transform individuals and societies, resulting in a world in which supreme morality would be a reality and not a dream. It is doubtful that the future will be morally better than our present or our past. Even the Axial Age, as Jaspers admits, “ended in failure.” Yet, Jaspers continues, the most fundamental issue for us is the “the manner in which the unity of mankind becomes a concrete reality for us.”

There it is. There is the great insight that unites Jaspers and Hiroike, the insight that leads both of them to identify Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and Jesus Christ as paradigmatic and central to the moral re-orientation of mankind. In other words, the insight concerns a key question: how can ontology be transformed into ethics? Had Hiroike read these remarks by Jaspers, he might have made more explicit what was implicit in them by adding the words “nature” and “practical” to Jaspers’ insight. Hiroike might have rewritten Jaspers in the following way: “the most fundamental issue concerns the manner in which the transcultural unity of mankind and nature might become a concrete and practical reality for us.”

If one pays close attention to any ancient, profoundly spiritual text, such as
the Heart Sutra, the Bible or the Bhagavad Gita, one becomes very much aware of the cultural specificity of its terminology, of its allusions, of its general orientation. Because a spiritual text is culturally based, however, does not mean that it has to be culturally bound. Thus, for example, while the Bhagavad Gita remains always a deeply Indian text, it is also universal in its reach and its relevance. The same principle applies to morphology. It is culturally based in Japanese culture specifically and in Asian culture generally. Though culturally based, and though some of its concepts, such as the ortholinic principle, are difficult for westerners to appreciate, morphology is not culturally bound. Let me repeat this final thought: morphology is culturally based but not culturally bound. That, after all, is why we have come to Reitaku University to participate in the Second International Conference on Moral Science.

Notes
1) As far as I have been able to determine, Jaspers knew almost nothing about Japan, and he seems never to have heard of Chikuro Hiroike. When he thought of East Asian cultures, he thought of China. When he discussed East Asian thinkers, he referred only to Chinese ones. In his general work on the course of history, entitled The Origin and Goal of History, published in German in 1949 and in English in 1953, Jaspers devoted a few pages, toward the end, to the topic of the danger of the absolute destruction of humankind. He mentioned the atom bomb, but, astonishingly, did not mention the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is as though the bomb were a completely theoretical subject. This oversight is as surprising as it is rare in a thinker and scholar so concerned with the practical, with the world as it has been and is. Karl Jaspers, The Origin and Goal of History, Trans Michael Bullock, reprint, 1949 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1953), 206-10.

2) I believe that I am the first to explore the relationship between these two men through this comparison. However, I am not the first to have noticed the similarity between Jaspers and Hiroike concerning the thinkers of the “Axial Age”. In An Outline of Moralogy, we read the following about the Jaspers/Hiroike relationship: “The establishment of universal moral criteria is being strongly demanded today from people in various fields in the world, such as conscientious and thoughtful scholars, thinkers, and men of religion. For example, Karl Jaspers, a great twentieth-century philosopher, seeks such moral criteria in the thought and morality of the sages. According to Jaspers, the great sages — Socrates, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, and other distinguished thinkers and sages — appeared in the ‘axial era’ in both the East and the West and gave humankind great teachings. The history of humankind developed under the influence of the teachings and theories of these sages. With the development of science, however, their influence diminished considerably; consequently, many amoral phenomena have appeared in society. Jaspers maintains that in order to overcome this crisis, the advent of people who can give new moral paradigms to mankind is absolutely necessary.” “An Outline,” in An Outline of Moralogy: A New Approach to Moral Science, trans. Keisuke Kawakubo et al., reprint, 1982 (Kashiwa–shi: The Institute of Moralogy, 1987), 65–66. Among the scholars at Reitaku University’s Research Center for Moral Science,
only one scholar — Akira Tamai — has written on Karl Jaspers. In two linked essays, published in *Studies in Moralogy*, nos. 13 (1982) and 14 (1983), he approaches Jaspers as an existentialist thinker. The essays are entitled, respectively, “The Paradigmatic Figures and Existential Transcendence” and “The Paradigmatic Figures and Existential Communication.” As far as I can determine, Tamai does not attempt to compare Jaspers with Hiroike.


6) Jaspers, *Origin*, 2. Karen Armstrong has pointed out that Jaspers had an uncertain grasp of chronology in his discussion of the Axial Age. In her words, “Jaspers believed that the Axial Age was more contemporary than it actually was. He implied that the Buddha, Laozi, Confucius, Mozi, and Zoroaster, for example, all lived more or less at the same time. Modern scholarship has revised this dating. It is now certain that Zoroaster did not live during the sixth century but was a much earlier figure. It is very difficult to date some of these movements precisely, especially in India, where there was very little interest in history and no attempt to keep accurate chronological records. Most Indologists now agree, for example, that the Buddha lived a whole century later than was previously thought. And Laozi, the Daoist sage, did not live during the sixth century, as Jaspers assumed. Instead of being the contemporary of Confucius and Mozi, he almost certainly lived in the third century.” Armstrong, *Transformation*, xxiii


9) Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 97. Jaspers could have excluded Mohammed on historical grounds. That is, he simply could have said that since Mohammed died in the 7th century of the Common Era, he just was not part of the Axial Age, which ended about eight centuries earlier. But Jaspers did not. Rather, he excluded Mohammed for reasons that, in my opinion, had more to do with prejudice than with philosophical argument or spiritual assessment. Like many Europeans of a certain time, perhaps unconsciously influenced by the long history of European antagonism toward Islam, Jaspers did not want to acknowledge the spiritual depth of Islam, while accepting its historical importance. Hiroike discarded Mohammed from consideration for a different reason, a practical one: it simply “has not been convenient in Japan to make a detailed study of his teachings and achievements.” Chikuro Hiroike, *Towards Supreme Morality: An Attempt to Establish the New Science of Moralogy*, reprint, 1928 (Kashiwa -shi: The Institute of Moralogy, 2002), 147.

14) Hiroike, *Towards*, 148-49. One may of course call into question Hiroike’s characteristics seven and eight. The messianic message of Jesus Christ is not “modest” by any means, and his extremist advice to his potential followers to forsake their families and follow him does not advocate “the middle way.”
15) For the Greeks in general and for Aristotle in particular, the “golden mean” was a principle of moderation, a principle which advocated the middle point between two extremes, for example bravery and cowardice. It was also an aesthetic principle, the result of the right balance among three attributes of beauty: harmony, proportion, and symmetry. For Buddhism, the “middle way” was not an aesthetic principle but a moral one that encouraged one to take the middle path between, say, austerity and hedonism. “The middle way” thus became the central strategy of the noble eightfold path toward enlightenment and salvation: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
18) Jaspers, *Great Philosophers*, 19–25 After quoting John Lubbock, *The Use of Life* (London: Macmillan, 1932, p. 98), who describes Socrates’s acceptance of his death sentence also as an action that St. Peter would have approved, Hiroike writes: “Indeed, Socrates’s daring acceptance of the death penalty in defence of the national law was his most important lesson to mankind, showing his respect for the national ortholinon for the protection of human welfare.” *Hiroike, Towards*, 164.

**Bibliography**


