THE CIPHERS OF TRANSCENDENCE

1. From the Foundering and the Encompassing to the Concept of Cipher

The experience of the foundering, which deepened the awareness of the boundaries of Existenz, refined Karl Jaspers’s awareness that Existenz cannot exist without constituting a real relation toward a Being external to it and more encompassing than it. While this experience undermined the basic insights achieved in the explication of selfhood, it did not make Existenz irrelevant, nor did it lead to its becoming closed within its boundaries, but instead opened to it new horizons that served as a target for clarification and experience. The two insights achieved through the elucidation of the foundering—placing Being as the central target of the philosophization, and making finitude, instead of Existenz, the starting point for elucidating the Being beyond Existenz—altered the basic understanding of immanence compared with the one typical of the discussion within the elucidation of selfhood. Immanence was no longer perceived as the opposite pole to Existenz, or as hiding the real and the original from philosophy. Quite the opposite, at this stage the understanding formed in Jaspers’s thought that it is immanence that holds the key to elucidating Being itself—an understanding following which immanence became the symbol or cipher (Chiffre) of transcendence. Jaspers usually used the terms symbol and cipher synonymously. Immanence, as the concrete reality of the world and as the real consciousness of human beings regarding this world and themselves, is now perceived as a possible source for elucidating transcendence due to the metaphysical depth it contains.

The connection between the experience of the foundering and the new perception of immanence as a cipher of transcendence, and the more general distancing from the existential viewpoint, arises from the following passage:

… The foundering is the covering ground of the entire cipher-Being. Seeing the cipher as the reality of Being originates first and foremost in the experience of foundering. From it, all the ciphers that are not rejected receive their final approval. What I allow to sink into annihilation, I can receive back as a cipher. 

As we have seen, the experience of the foundering indicated two possible ways: the negative one, which Jaspers defined as “despair,” returned the discussion to Existenz, apparently recognizing that Being and transcendence were blocked to it.
Alongside it appeared an option that against the background of the discussion of the encompassing can be seen as preferable to the previous one. This possibility, bearing a more positive nature, makes the foundering the starting point for clarifying transcendence, and indicates that what “must be doubted before the uninterpretable foundering” is perceived from the viewpoint of the cipher as capable of elucidation and as a basis for “the source of the life that experiences… Being.” What in the foundering was blocked from understanding becomes in the perception of ciphers a source for the understanding of Being. In this respect we can state that the perception of immanence as a cipher of transcendence realizes the constructive possibility that arose from the foundering. It turns Being, which had been a source of dissatisfaction for Existenz in the experiences included in the transition mechanisms and blocked for interpretation in the foundering, into a target that the philosophical elucidation approaches with faith that it can succeed.

However, the perception of the encompassing, explained in the previous chapter, also reflected an attempt to propose an elucidation of Being and transcendence, and this raises the question regarding the necessity of the concept of the cipher for the framework of the explication of Being. This question is even more important since the framework of the perception of immanence as a cipher of transcendence contained no direct explication of this immanence, but it relied on the premise that it is an existing entity—a premise appearing from World Orientation onwards. Different scholars of Jaspers’s thought have already dealt with this question. Johannes Thyssen asks whether Existenz’s experience of transcendence as self-insufficiency, through the absolute consciousness, is not enough. His answer is that beyond and because of the existential experience of finitude, the need arises for transcendence to be represented in the finite reality that is split into object and subject. The concept of the cipher, which Thyssen defined as a “semi-objective” form portraying the existential attitude toward empirical reality, enables, in his opinion, the representation of transcendence in finality without turning it into an object.

Xavier Tilliette discussed the question of the necessity of ciphers in Jaspers’s philosophy from another direction by asking whether ciphers were destined to lose their importance in light of periechontology and philosophical logic as rational elements on which the discussion of Being was based. In his opinion, the ciphers enable the inception of the method of transcending, and they exist precisely for those who were unable to divert themselves from the path of objective consciousness, but especially for Existenz, which is the only one that hears the “voices” of the ciphers and determines the criterion according to which their truth is determined. He believes that Existenz experiences these “voices” as “shining lights” showing the way to transcendence, and only thanks to them does it not move blindly in circles around itself. On the basis of the premise that “the scheme of Existenz in its structures and situations is the formal skeleton of the experience of cipher,” Tilliette concluded that this experience “must be revealed as an image