Karl Jaspers – *On My Philosophy*

This essay was written in 1941. In it, Jaspers talks briefly about what led him to philosophy and what philosophy means for him, but the bulk of the essay deals with what he calls the “basic questions” that philosophy addresses and which each age must find their own answers to.

Philosophy is a practical activity for Jaspers and this attitude informs the basic questions that he feels drive philosophical inquiry; “What can I know?”, “What shall I do?”, “What may I hope?”, “What is man?” and “What is Transcendence?” To give a very brief overview of his answers, Jaspers says that in our age, knowledge tends to be reduced to science but the scientific approach is inadequate when it comes to the important questions in human life. Modern communities and technical organisations have isolated us and left us desiring true *communication* which we must pursue and, without which, we cannot “become human”. Hope leads us to *truth* and a discussion of Jaspers’ principal contribution to philosophy; the idea of the *Encompassing*, the transcendent, horizon-less source of all immanent horizons which grounds ultimate meaning for the individual human in a Being we can never grasp objectively but which all philosophizing, and human existence, is directed towards.

I. The Course of My Development

Jaspers talks about how his first classes in philosophy proved disappointing because they didn’t offer “the fundamental experiences of Being, nor guidance for inner action or self-improvement” he was seeking. In his career as a psychologist, he tried to remedy this failure by aiming to provide an “outline of the potentialities of the soul which holds a mirror up to man to show him what he can be, what he can achieve and how far he can go”. He would subsequently call this *Existenz Clarification*.

II. Making Tradition Our Own

We must engage with the thoughts of past philosophers but only in such a way that we take the history of philosophy and make of it a “concrete solution in [our] age.” In this way, philosophy is never complete nor can it ever aspire to be so. The questions of each age demand new approaches to philosophical history and new answers to the oldest questions. Jaspers holds that the only way I can successfully apprehend the thoughts of philosophical history is if I make “these historical origins my own.”

Since Jaspers saw philosophy as a primarily practical discipline, he also counselled that a “merely theoretical contemplation of the history of philosophy is insufficient.” The only way to really appropriate knowledge and thought is through a “living appropriation… To apprehend thought with indifference prevents its appropriation.” Indeed, we must always remember that the only reason to seek the knowledge of philosophical concepts is to “gain entrance to the exalted living practice of these past thoughts.”

To these ends, Jaspers outlines his view of philosophical history in five characteristics:

1. The only thing of importance in studying philosophical history is to further our understanding. Other considerations are secondary.
2. Understanding requires a thorough study of the texts.
3. Understanding philosophy requires a “*universal historical view*”, despite the fact that it occurs in a specific historical age.
4. Philosophy lives in an “*invisible realm of the spirit*”. This means that philosophy must not be objectified, as in schools or sects; “the freedom that can be attained in philosophizing cannot be handed down by the doctrine of an institution. Only as an individual can man become a philosopher”, although this self-development must take place in communication with other individuals.
5. Consciousness in the current age is only possible on a universal historical view. We cannot develop without taking into account history.

III. Drives to the Basic Questions

“Philosophical thought is a *practical activity*” and unique among other activities because it is to do with life itself. It is about attaining Being and one’s own self, not mere knowledge acquisition. Jaspers talks of philosophizing in an almost mystical tone, defining it as the “activity of thought itself, by which the essence of man, in its entirety, is realized in the individual man.” Again, it is “the inner action by which I become myself; it is the revelation of Being”. Objectivised philosophy (in texts, schools, systems, etc.) is mere preparation for the all-important personal philosophizing.

There are four basic questions of philosophy and since they emerge from practical activity; that is, life, their form must be considered in light of our *historical* situation and “translated” so they become “our own”. These questions are:

1. What can I know? In our age, this question must be considered in light of science.
2. What shall I do? Modern communities have produced individuals connected in a “technically functioning organization” but lacking inward connectivity. These communities have thereby created a “loneliness of soul… that seeks relief in vain in the erotic or the irrational” until we understand the importance of “*communication* between man and man.” The question our age therefore poses in this category is “How is communication possible?”
3. What may I hope? The limits of science (“science fails in the face of all ultimate questions”) produce a “confusion in which Being and truth vanish.” ‘Truth’ is more than scientific truth and our realisation of science’s limits calls us to this new task.
4. What is man? Our own existence is the closest and most important reality to us. Indeed, it is only though this existence that all which is real, comes to exist for us in the first place. What we are is our fundamental question.

However, man is not a “self-sufficient separate entity”. Rather, we are always related to something other than ourselves; “as a being to his world, as consciousness to objects, as spirit to the idea of whatever constitutes totality, as Existenz to Transcendence.” Only through absorption in the world of Being, “in the immeasurable space of objects, in ideas, in Transcendence”, can we become real to ourselves.

Jaspers sees this Transcendence as the certainty man lacks and is searching for, “a Being through which alone he himself is.” He calls this Deity and it leads to a fifth question…

1. The question “What is man?” naturally invokes the question, “What is Transcendence (Deity)?” “Transcendence alone is the real Being… Man is not worth considering. In the Deity alone there is reality, truth, and the immutability of being itself.” Whatever we are, we are it only in relation to the Deity.

But there is a catch here as noted in question 4. Deity, for all its perfection, “is only as it appears to us in the world”. The Deity is true reality but is only accessible to us in the world, through which it assumes concrete shape. “Only in ways that man can grasp does the Deity appear.” This seems to imply a limiting feature in our access to Deity. Whatever it is, we can only apprehend it in “the language of man and the world… as an image in the mirror of man”.

Despite this, Jaspers warns that we must not disregard Transcendence; it is here that our quest leads.

On the back of this preliminary investigation, Jaspers now delves a little deeper into these five questions:

1. *What is science?* Scientific knowledge is always of the particular and as such, “does not embrace the totality of Being but only a specific subject”. This means that it cannot answer the “essential problems that move man… it cannot even furnish a compelling insight into its own importance and significance.”

First, science is an urge to know the facts. Second, it has deeply impacted our age and must be engaged. Third, science is to be employed as a tool for philosophy. Although the totality is inaccessible to scientific knowledge, science lets us divine the methodology we need to go beyond it; it allows us to “become familiar with the fundamental possibilities, principles of knowledge, and the multiplicity of methods.”

1. *How is communication possible?* It is a central tenet of Jaspers’ philosophy that the “individual cannot become human by himself… only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery. My own freedom can only exist if the other is also free.”

He asserts that we need to forge a true bond with others (and if this is just with a “single human being, everything is achieved”). This communication is never completed and is not mere social intercourse but the “constant urge towards total revelation”.

Solitude is, of course, a “wonderful source of *self-being*” but we cannot remain isolated like this. Loneliness is, for Jaspers, something quite “pernicious”.

1. *What is truth?* This truth is more than a possession of the intellect. Scientific truth “unites us in the object that is understood, in the particular, but not in the totality.” It also unites us as “replaceable points, not… as human beings.” Communication is the path which allows truth to appear.

The truth Jaspers is talking about is what he calls the *Encompassing*. Briefly, all things we know as *objects* approach from the background of Being. “Every object is a determinate being… but never all Being.” The sum of all objects is not the totality of Being either, “all objects are encompassed by that in which they are.” Jaspers compares this background of Being to a horizon; “As the horizon encompasses all things in a landscape, so all objects are encompassed by that in which they are” and no matter how far we travel in order to move beyond it, the horizon moves with us, “re-establish[ing] itself ever anew as the Encompassing at each moment”. The Encompassing is “that which always makes its presence known, which does not appear itself, but from which everything comes to us.”

There are two divisions of the Encompassing; “the Being of the Encompassing as such is world and Transcendence; the Being of the Encompassing that we are is an existent, consciousness in general, spirit, Existenz”.

The clarification of these modes of the Encompassing derives from the impulse Jaspers calls *reason*, which is quite distinct from the intellect. Reason is the impulse within us to open up without limit and seek a relation with everything, apprehending truth as it emerges from all modes of the Encompassing.

This truth must be founded in our becoming *Existenz* and we do this by making the “*decision*” that “our life [be] guided by something unconditional”. The *decision* “makes Existenz real, forms life and changes it in inner action”. Jaspers is here talking about a commitment to seeking something more important than more money, a bigger house, more knowledge, etc.; in effect, to becoming human. The suggestion is that this is something which doesn’t happen automatically.

1. *What is man?* We can study ourselves but we are always more than we know or *can* know about ourselves. We can become aware of the Encompassing that we are in a number of ways; as physical existent, thinking consciousness, spirit which “shapes the idea of a whole in his world existence”, and possible Existenz “related to Transcendence through which he knows himself as given to himself in his freedom.”
2. *What is Transcendence?* We have already seen that we are not self-sufficient. Our being can only be disclosed through Transcendence. While we know ourselves as a “perceptive reality”, the being of Transcendence is unclear. Hence, “all philosophizing is directed towards the goal of achieving certainty about Transcendence.”

Jaspers acknowledges that this may be a task better suited to religion, which offers the experience of Transcendence. It “points paths of faith in revealed reality, in mercy and salvation, and it gives guarantees. Philosophy can achieve none of that.” Philosophy therefore cannot exclude religion, just as religion cannot exclude philosophy; “To remain truthful religion needs the conscience of philosophy. To retain a significant content philosophy needs the substance of religion.” Nevertheless, philosophy doesn’t look for Transcendence in the guarantees of revelation but rather approaches Being in the disclosures that are present within us and the world.

The final and decisive alternative in all philosophizing for Jaspers is “whether my thinking leads me to the point where I am certain that the “from outside” of Transcendence is the source of the “from inside”, or whether I remain in Immanence with the negative certainty that there is no outside that is the basis and goal of everything – the world as well as what I am myself.”

Philosophy cannot ‘know’ the source of being because reality is historical. Everything philosophy says and does in history remains relative and “has to be translated and appropriated in order to become a path to one’s own original comprehension of the Unconditional.”

The fundamental questions Jaspers mentions to close this section off and which underlie all philosophizing, are; “how the One is in the many, what it is, and how I can become certain of the One.”

IV. My Works

Finally, Jaspers notes his dislike for *System* “as a totality in which Being and truth lie clearly before one’s eyes and find their presentation in a book.” While *System* is a fundamentally inadequate approach to appropriate Being, being *systematic* is essential as it provides clarity of thought and makes possible a complete elucidation of what can be brought to light.