Karl Jaspers – *Reason and Existenz*

This book contains five public lectures given by Jaspers in 1935 upon invitation from the University of Groningen in Holland.

In the first, he pays tribute to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as having opened up a new path in philosophy and analyses their contributions. The second outlines in admirable detail the crux of Jaspers’ philosophy, the *Encompassing*, a term which denotes ultimate Being, the transcendent source of all being, and *reason* as the bond or “will to unity” between the different parts of the Encompassing. In the third and fourth lectures, Jaspers explores what truth means for authentic human existence and how thought moves in both positive and inhibiting ways, respectively. The final lecture contains a discussion regarding some of the ways contemporary philosophy ought to progress.

Lecture 1 – The Origin of the Contemporary Philosophical Situation

The central theme in this lecture is the relationship philosophy has to reason and its opposite, the non-rational.

Starting with the Greeks, Jaspers says they “touched… upon what was inaccessible to reason.” The Greek gods’ knowledge and power was limited by “the sublime incomprehensibility of Fate”. Socrates had his daimon, Plato recognised divine madness and even Aristotle believed that “there were men, the *alogoi*, who had a better principle than deliberative reason”.

In Christianity, the “opposition between reason and non-reason developed as struggle between reason and faith”. In fact, the non-rational became connected with Providence, to the point where every “rational, literal interpretation of faith became a heresy.”

More recently, Descartes spearheaded a movement which “attempted a radical grounding of reason upon itself alone” but he and his followers were resisted by others who noticed the limits of reason. Finally, German idealism went beyond all previous possibilities and “made an astonishing attempt to create a reconciliation, seeing in reason more than reason itself”, principally in Kant.

In general, over the course of human history, while non-reason continued to appear in a variety of forms, it was always superseded or eclipsed by reason… until Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

Jaspers holds both of these philosophers in the highest regard and spends the rest of the lecture praising their thought, which he saw as creating a “new atmosphere” and producing a “shock… to Western philosophizing whose final meaning can not yet be estimated.”

They both; questioned reason from Existenz, regarded science and scholars as suspect, rejected any form of *system*, saw “authentic knowing” as interpretation and therefore infinite, and communicated indirectly through “concealment and masks” as the only way to convey genuine truth.

Jaspers thinks both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were rejected by the age in which they lived and hails them as *exceptions*. He notes that they both rejected prevailing cultural norms and standards; Kierkegaard railed against what he saw as ‘false’ Christianity (albeit *with* Christianity) while Nietzsche proclaimed that God was dead.

Their thought was most pronounced in the way they “both leaped toward Transcendence”; Kierkegaard to “a Christianity which was conceived as an absurd paradox” and Nietzsche “to the eternal return and supermen.”

The relevance of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for us today is difficult to ascertain. They were both ambiguous so a follower of them must approach their work with an honest and probing mind and carefully assess “what they are to him… [and] what he can make out of them.” One significant problem is that they are both “exceptions and not models for followers. Whenever anyone has tried to imitate Kierkegaard or Nietzsche… he has become ridiculous.” The question is how we can follow these exceptions when we are not exceptions ourselves. Essentially, they have posed a question (of our existential experience) which has forced us out of our comfortable modes of thought and now stands open before us awaiting our answer. They have stripped away all self-evident foundations and secure backgrounds for our thought and left us with no roadmap of the way forward.

However, this ambiguity is quite appropriate to philosophizing for Jaspers. “Since existence, man, and his world are not at an end, a completed philosophy is as little possible as an anticipation of the whole. We men have plans with finite ends, but something else always comes out which no one willed. In the same way, philosophizing is an act which works upon the inwardness of man, but whose final meaning he cannot know… Philosophy as thought is always a consciousness of Being which is complete for this moment, but which knows it has no final permanence in its form of expression.” We do not philosophize in certainties and absolutes; rather, we “live… in a seething cauldron of possibilities” out of which we must “elicit those ideas which bring forth what is real to us: that is, our humanity.”

The ancient problem of the rational and the non-rational must now, post-Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, be seen in a new light, which Jaspers formulates as “that of reason and Existenz.” “Reason” means clarity and truth, while “Existenz” means a looking “into infinite depths at what defies all determinate knowledge.” This word is not, Jaspers emphasises, simply a synonym for “being”.

Lecture 2 – The Encompassing

We never know the whole of being. Whatever object we posit for our thought always remains merely a part of a greater whole. “We can secure no standpoint from which a closed whole of Being would be surveyable… We always live and think within a horizon.” Hence, the centrepiece of Jaspers’ thought, the *Encompassing*.

The Encompassing is not a horizon (which by definition always indicates something beyond it) but is “that within which every particular horizon is enclosed as in something absolutely comprehensive which is no longer visible as a horizon at all.”

There are two fundamental *modes* of the Encompassing, “Being itself, in and through which we are… [and] the Encompassing which we ourselves are, and in which every mode of Being appears to us.”

There are three modes of the Encompassing which we are.

*Existence* is the way we are as particular empirical existents. Jaspers explicitly refers to “matter, living body, and soul” when talking about this aspect of the Encompassing that we are.

Jaspers divides consciousness into two. The first is *empirical consciousness* in which we are as the “consciousness of living beings… split into the multiplicity of endless particular realities, imprisoned in the narrowness of the individual and not encompassing.” We are but “countless single consciousnesses, which are more or less similar to one another”. The second is *consciousness as such* where we “think we can refer to Being, not only in similar ways of perception and feeling, but in an identical way… this is the other sense of consciousness which we are as Encompassing.” The former is temporal, the latter is timeless.

The separation between the “actuality of living consciousness in its temporal process and the inactuality of consciousness in general, as the site of timeless meaning of the one common truth,” is by no means absolute. Rather it is an abstraction which can be transcended through what Jaspers calls, “the clarification of the Encompassing. The actual existence of this timeless meaning insofar as it is something produced, something temporal… is called spirit.”

*Spirit* is “the process of fusing and reconstructing all totalities in a present which is never finished yet always fulfilled. It is always on its way toward a possible completion of empirical existence where universality, the whole, and every particular would all be members of a totality.”

Spirit is temporal, unlike the abstraction of timeless consciousness as such, so is similar to empirical existence, but operates by a “reflexivity of knowledge” and so is always “directed toward the universality of consciousness as such.”

This Encompassing which I am “is not conceivable in itself but refers beyond itself. The Encompassing which we are is not Being itself, but rather the genuine appearance in the Encompassing of Being itself.”

This aspect of the Encompassing is independent of, and prior to, us and represents a fundamental limit for the Encompassing which we are. “It is not made by us, is not interpretation, and is not an object.” Being itself “shows an immeasurable number of appearances to inquiry, but it itself always recedes and only manifests itself indirectly”. It is called *World*.

As a mode we can encounter, Being itself is World, but there is also a part of Being itself which “shows itself to no investigative experience, not even indirectly.” This is what Jaspers calls *Transcendence*.

*Existenz* is “the sole possible revelation of the depths of Being as historicity. In all modes of the Encompassing, the self can become genuinely certain of itself only as Existenz.” It is ‘located’ in all of the immanent modes of the Encompassing that I am but is never locked within them; rather, it “carries the meaning of every mode of the Encompassing”. It can be thought of as a way of being in which we turn our attention to the Encompassing as a whole to transcend any one single mode and become ourselves.

Jaspers contrasts Existenz to consciousness as such. “The Encompassing which we are only exists in relation to something other than itself. Thus, as I am conscious only insofar as I have something else as an objective being before me by which I then am determined and with which I am concerned, so also I am Existenz only as I know Transcendence as the power through which I genuinely am myself.” Jaspers calls the opposite pole in these relations, the *Other*.

He also contrasts it to spirit. “Spirit is the will to become *whole*; potential Existenz is the will to be authentic.” Spirit, being an immanent mode of the Encompassing, is intelligible whereas Existenz is unintelligible “breaking up every whole and never reaching any real totality.”

Jaspers gives an interesting analogy of Existenz saying it is like the difference between the love of another and my own love. I understand the former but can never totally *understand* it, whereas I completely understand the latter because I *am* that love.

*Reason* is the “*bond* which unites all modes of the Encompassing”. If reason just meant clear, objective thinking, it would be no more than the Encompassing of consciousness as such and we would be better off calling it *understanding*. If it meant “the way to *totalities*, the life of the Idea, then it is the Encompassing of *spirit*.”

Rather, reason is inextricably bound to Existenz and brings “all the modes of the Encompassing to light by continually transcending limits, without itself being an Encompassing like them.” Jaspers talks of reason using expressions like, “a source in which all sources first come to light”, “the unrest which permits acquiescence in nothing”, “the inextinguishable impulse to philosophize”, and “It appears in all forms of the modes of the Encompassing yet it seems to be nothing itself”.

Jaspers talks of *reason* and *Existenz* as the “great poles of our being, which encounter one another in every mode of the Encompassing”. He describes their interrelation thus: “Existenz only becomes clear through reason; reason only has content through Existenz.” Without reason, Existenz is inactive and, lacking the “needling questioning of reason” which draws it out into its own authentic existence, it never experiences the unrest which opens it to its Other, Transcendence. Without Existenz, reason is hollow and devolves into mere understanding.

“Reason without Existenz… passes into an indifferent thinking, a merely intellectual movement of consciousness as such, or into a dialectic of the spirit… Irrational Existenz which rests upon feeling, experiencing, unquestioned impulse, instinct, or whim, ends up as blind violence…”

Jaspers finishes this lecture by offering some reflections on what he has outlined.

The modes of the Encompassing cannot be derived from any particular which appears within them; “our being can never be derived from anything which appears to us; I myself can never be understood through anything which I encounter.” In addition, Being in itself can also never be derived from any being which we know. “If we call it Being, it can never be derived from the multiplicity of beings. If it is Being in itself, it can never be derived from appearance. If it is Transcendence, we find we can never derive the absolute from the objective, actual, or empirically existent.” Finally, because we can’t ever know the Encompassing as a particular object, particular things we objectively know can never be deduced from Being as such. This is important because Jaspers notes that there has been a tendency in philosophy to do just this.

Empirical existence, consciousness as such and spirit become apparent objects for specific sciences; Jaspers specifically mentions anthropology, psychology, sociology and the humanistic sciences. Naturally, while worthwhile in their own way, “the encompassing which they have before their eyes is no longer the Encompassing.”

The idea of the Encompassing “removes from us all the natural objectivity of our usual thought”, driving us to look beyond the things in the world and give up the usual cognition of objects. This means that “I am not authentically myself if I am merely what I know myself to be (in all modes of the schemata of the Ego and their determinations). Whenever I objectify myself, I am myself more than this object, namely, I am that being which can thus objectify itself.” It also means that the Other (all being) that I know, just as with myself, I only know as it “appears to me and not as it is in itself. No known being is Being itself.”

What we are ultimately aiming for with all of the preceding is “not the cognition of an object, but rather an alteration of our consciousness of Being and of our inner attitude toward things.”

Lecture 3 – Truth as Communicability

The emphasis in this lecture is communication, a central pillar in Jaspers’ philosophy. It is so important in fact, that Jaspers says communication is “the universal condition of man’s being… what man is and what is for him are in some sense bound up with communication.” Unlike animals, humans don’t live by instinct, merely enacting successful methods of survival. Rather, we become what we are only “through a relation to common conscious purposes in the world, through a relation to truth, and through relation to God.” These relations are, not just mediated by, but constituted of communication.

The Encompassing is divided into various modes, each an incomplete part of the whole, so communication, which always takes place from, and to, a particular mode, is also limited and incomplete in itself. Jaspers goes so far as to say the Encompassing which we are (existence, consciousness as such and spirit) *is* communication, but the Encompassing which is Being itself also “exits for us only insofar as it achieves communicability by becoming speech or becoming utterable.”

Since each mode of the Encompassing also has a different notion of truth, “Truth therefore cannot be separated from communicability” and can only appear historically through communication. (I look more closely at the kind of communication and truth particular to each mode in my summary of Jaspers’ *Philosophy of Existence*)

Thus far, we have only really looked at the immanent modes of the Encompassing. Existenz is also communication but, being the transcendent mode of the Encompassing that we are, happens not just through each of the three immanent modes but also goes beyond them. In contrast to the communication of identical replaceable points of consciousness as such, communication is between irreplaceable individuals. In contrast to a communication which takes place within a struggle for existence (power, superiority, etc.), it occurs within a struggle where my progress is the progress of others too. In contrast to communication in the spiritual community where security comes from the comprehensive Idea, it is aware of a crack in Being and is open for Transcendence.

Jaspers underlines the importance of communication once more when he says that, “To be self and to be true are nothing else than to be in communication unconditionally” and Existenz can only become real “if it comes to itself through, and at the same time with, another Existenz”. He also notes a curious feature of communication in that it seems to “produce for the first time that which is communicating: independent natures which come to consciousness of themselves…”

In addition, since reason has its substance in Existenz, it too “arises from the authentic communication of one nature with another”. Indeed, the immanent modes of the Encompassing are, in fact, “the body of its [reason’s] appearance.” However, the relation between reason and communication seems to be somewhat symbiotic in that while reason arises from authentic communication, communication can only be original and unrestricted where reason, as “truth itself, the total will-to-communicate”, is also present.

Connecting communication, truth and historicity, Jaspers notes that since truth is bound up with communication and since communication can only take place through historicity within the three modes of the Encompassing, “truth itself can only *become*… in its depths, it is not dogmatic but communicative.” Since truth is essentially historical in this way, it also has no meaning except in a historical moment and therefore becomes incommunicable outside that moment.

This all means that truth doesn’t exist independently of us as some doctrine or law, fixed for eternity, but rather only arises within a lived situation as a meaningful aspect of that reality. This ties into the last major point for Jaspers in this lecture. Truth is not out there permanent and independent of communication but only arises, “for the first time in communication… [and] could not be valid without communication.” If truth was permanent and outside us then we would only need to discover it, i.e. not produce it through, and by transcending, the modes of the Encompassing. This would then mean that “either there would be a single world-order of a purely immanent sort and our problem would be to set it up, or there would be a Beyond which is only like another world in safer prospect.” The “Beyond” here seems to refer to something like an afterlife which is nevertheless similar to our physical lives in that truth remains discoverable and still external to ourselves.

If, however, truth “remains a limit in the realization of communication, then the insurmountable incompleteness of the world and all worldly, knowable truth is final for immanence. Every form of truth must be shipwrecked in the world, and none can substitute itself absolutely for the truth.” This is Jaspers’ proof for the Transcendence; something “like a proof of God.” “If, therefore there is truth in this last way, then it can only be in the Transcendence which is not some Beyond as a mere second world…” and “from the unfulfillment of every sense of truth and under the assumption that truth must be, thought touches upon Transcendence.”

Basically, Jaspers argues here that if truth existed external to us, then it would be discoverable and we would need to look no further than the world (or the “Beyond”) to find it. If, however, truth is more than this, as Jaspers has claimed it to be; i.e. a meaningful, historical form of *lived* communication limited by the specific mode of the Encompassing it arises from, then the external, immanent world will never be sufficient to uncover it as a whole. Therefore, if truth exists in this way, transcendence must also exist.

Lecture 4 – The Priority and Limits of Rational Thought

First of all, when talking about thought, Jaspers is not talking about what he calls consciousness as such. This latter is just one mode of the Encompassing which we are and therefore only represents part of who we are. Thought, as Jaspers uses the term, he defines as “consciousness as such transcending itself… [and it arises] from the totality of the modes of the Encompassing which we are.”

He notes that thought has a “formal priority, not a priority in being or value” over individual modes of the Encompassing because no mode of the Encompassing can become apparent to us except as thought. Thought penetrates everywhere revealing all modes of the Encompassing; it is universal and positive, opening up possibilities for Existenz.

The danger with this is that “through the formal priority of thought, everything can become evacuated into the mere form of the thinkable and humanity can be dissolved into the empty play which universally touches upon everything without penetrating into anything, or becoming anybody.” If thought takes this path it destroys everything including itself. Jaspers summarises this by saying, “The formal priority of thought is destroyed in its formalization but is real in the priority of rational thought.”

When thought is affected by reason it becomes “being-for-us”. The addition of reason makes thought meaningful for us. It does this because reason is the drive for unity among the different modes of the Encompassing. Combining this with thought gives us an appreciation of ourselves as a totality. Bringing together a few strands of his thought, Jaspers says that while we are existence, consciousness as such, and spirit, we are also “beyond ourselves” as reason, or transcending thought. At this moment, we become aware of ourselves as Transcendence.

This transcending thought “should have an influence upon inner life” because “it aims at making communicable the non-objective”. Consciousness as such deals directly with concepts and things but *thought* aims at a deeper, transcendent unity which is only comprehensible “through an encounter in real experience of that Encompassing about which one is talking.”

Given that what we are aiming at with this transcendent thought is not objective, “[t]hrough reason, I catch sight of something which is only communicable in the form of contradiction and paradox.” Nothing can appear to us that is not rational – this is a precondition of our comprehending anything – but since transcending the Encompassing requires grasping a transcendent truth that cannot appear to us as an object, it necessarily appears as paradox and contradiction, that is, as irrational. This rational irrational Jaspers calls, “a rational a-logic”. Engaging in such thought has “a power which can silently bring forth a revelation and transformation in the most interior being of man.”

Jaspers characterises two directions thought can take here which he expounds on in the following way:

* Rational a-logic (the positive, transcending direction of thought)
  + The circle – Kant said all objectivity was impressed on the world of matter by a consciousness (the “unity of transcendental apperception”) but this consciousness itself cannot fall under the categories by which it orders and arranges the world. Here we have a vicious circle. This is usually pointed at by critics as a reason why the philosophy is a failure but Jaspers claims in “all genuine philosophies we find such circles and contradictions at the decisive point”.

He goes on to give more examples (the Cretan liar, the crocodile, etc.) and notes that they are all contradictory because they all feature self-reflexivity. So, in each case we are dealing with two things which are actually the same thing but “we can only think meaningfully and unambiguously if in the content of our thought we have two terms to be related; thus, in the relation of condition, the conditioning and the conditioned must be distinct, and in the relation of object, the thing and its properties must be distinct.”

However, in philosophy, which searches for the core, one always encounters such a thing which, “since it is the fundamental origin”, has a relation to itself, e.g. Being, or the condition of all objectivity, or Existenz. “We always have something which the understanding can not grasp but which is decisive for our uncertainty of being, which is less before us than present in our thought. The difficulties of formal logic with respect to self-reflexivity must arise.”

The result of this is that “philosophizing is no statable ultimate insight but rather an accomplishment of thought in which our total consciousness, the way in which Being is present to us, is changed.” If philosophy tries to eliminate these circles, it then becomes empty. The task of philosophy is therefore “the bringing of them [circles] to light in order to see whether they are significant or merely empty circles.”

* + Regarding Existenz – The same contradictions and paradoxes can be seen when we consider Existenz. For example, potential Existenz can be universal only out of historical grounds as a concrete existent. The same is true for the ability of Existenz to be alone before Transcendence, which is, paradoxically, the “origin of true communication”.

Again, the goal of philosophy is not the removal of these paradoxes but the embracing of them to “bring forth a revelation and transformation in the most interior being of man.”

* False logicizing (the inhibiting, destructive direction of thought)
  + Taking the truths of Existenz and making of them something known or devising some purposeful end or goal destroys them. Jaspers calls this the “misuse of existential concepts” and it represents a turning away from one of the central aspects of his thought; namely that, “…the truth of existential thought never lies in its content as such, but rather in what happens to me in the thinking of it”. “The concepts of existential philosophy are such that I can not think them without being in them”. If I do merely think them, “assertions pass from a rational a-logic to a false logicizing.” The Enlightenment was precisely an example of this false rationalisation of the irrational.

Regarding human action, one must consider what can be planned as an end and what cannot. For example, if one plans to become an independent and distinctive personality, one would end up merely becoming an “artificial construct of pure masks lacking in reality down to the core, and thus, precisely no personality at all, but instead an anxiously cultivated appearance.” It is the same with all substantial values. “One can will out of them… but one can not will them.”

In general, objectification creates the problem that “what I know, insofar as it is known, actually becomes relativized for me since it changes into a possibility, into something questionable. Thus it seems that I can not both unconditionally be and, at the same time, know it.”

* + Jaspers highlights two misunderstandings that have arisen from reducing the priority of thought to an objectification, that is, to a “knowledge of knowledge”. The first is *empty logic*. This refers to the “vacuity of a logic which is empty because it has no relation to Being.” The second is *absolute knowledge*. This refers to idealism where a consciousness of Being is displaced in favour of a “determinate knowledge of everything.”

These errors cannot be overcome by merely deliberately *willing* oneself to be rational; rather one must *be* rational. It is an internal change one apprehends obliquely, as it were, not something one can will.

Lecture 5 – Possibilities for Contemporary Philosophizing

After Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Jaspers rejects *systems*. Thought can no longer be arranged in a system and delivered as a presentation built on principles.

Philosophy is grounded in Transcendence (or potential Existenz), not reason as is commonly thought; nevertheless Existenz can only unfold in reason; reason is the condition of all truth. “Philosophy does not live by reason alone, yet it can take no step without it.” Reason is not real in itself or productive; instead “I must always encounter in it that other through which it itself is.” Because of its non-particular nature and universal applicability, Jaspers calls it *universal rationality*.

1. Reason and Philosophical Logic:
   1. Universal rationality is developed in philosophical logic. Philosophical logic breaks from other forms of logic which are too constraining. It resists being bound to the rationally objective, remaining open to the modes of the Encompassing and taking its cues from Existenz. Existenz-philosophy goes into the possibilities of the self but philosophical logic is “a path to the self-awareness of reason in the universality of thought.”
2. The Appropriation of the Philosophical Tradition:
   1. We must apprehend past thought in light of our present situations for it to be authentic. In addition, philosophizing is a “union with the One” which must be pursued by oneself. We can’t merely take what others have said and lean on this.
3. Philosophy Between Revealed Faith and Atheism:
   1. Philosophy maintains a balance between religion and atheism. It cannot become either but it also cannot ignore them. The philosopher bases his thought on historicity and in this, maintains a positive relation to “his own religious origins as well as to the universally penetrating fluid of atheism.”
4. Philosophic Faith:
   1. The faith of philosophy is not related to a chain of “witnesses to the Truth” (religion) nor to the material world (atheism), but to the “chain of private men who openly search in freedom.”
   2. Philosophy is the “continual self-education of man as an individual” but being an individual does not mean differentiating oneself from others, it means standing outside comparison; “he does not compare himself with anything except with Ideas, as standards which are above him… The individual compares himself only in those aspects where he is not properly himself.”
   3. Jaspers talks about philosophizing as bringing about “an experience which is not the cognition of anything in particular but which brings an experience of Being through the very act of thinking. It is like a working of thought which transforms the man but brings forth no object.”