

THE RECENT WORK OF KARL JASPERS

The thought of Karl Jaspers does not reveal an evolution in the sense of an intellectual pilgrimage whose stages and whose course could be precisely defined. In a certain sense, as he says himself, his philosophy was already immanent in him by the time he was seventeen. He is not one of those who wait for problems to run up against them from the outside. Events in the world, hypotheses and ideas are indeed the object and the matter of his reflection, but they are summoned from within to serve as props for a different kind of confrontation, at once more essential and more mysterious, whose mystery must be illuminated without being dispelled. His attitude is meditative. His thought digs deep, but digs on the spot; its end is an experience always the same yet inexhaustible, alongside which every sort of diversity appears monotonous. That is why vertical images bulk so large in his vocabulary, the vocabulary of a diviner: sources, gushing forth, the abyss, the ground that one loses or recovers, and a complete ambiguity about depth and height which imposes and refuses transcendence.

But if certain features in his thinking have become accentuated in these

latter years, it has not been simply on account of an inner necessity of his meditation but under the profound influence of the historical events we have just lived through. Jaspers' thought sets theories exploding, and these explosions bear a convergent meaning, or rather imperative: when learning explodes, a free man can only answer: 'Adsum!' Expelled from the anonymous generality of an apodictic science, he finds himself, as it were, with his back to the wall of a practical presence, faced with a responsible decision, with a concrete moment in history. Alone and without an alibi, he has no choice, then, but to strike such vigorous roots into the concrete historical circumstances as will traverse them and fasten upon that absolute, rationally at once irreducible and inevitable, which is the object of faith.

Philosophy, consequently, ceases to be science or ethics or, strictly speaking, metaphysics. Like religion, it commands, supports, inspires. Like religion, it is animated by faith. Only, that faith withholds the certainties that religion offers. Its object remains, on the theoretical plane, undefinable. On this very absence of certainties, philosophy bases its appeal to liberty. Faced with the chaos of crime and misfortune unleashed in our history, it draws nourishment from the original point where man becomes man by accepting himself as free. Without superstitious certainties, bound to a transcendence, the Being itself, which remains for man evanescent and unknown, it is capable of taking the whole weight of life on its shoulders.

This is the theme developed by Karl Jaspers in his work *Der philosophische Glaube*.¹

However, the eternity of transcendence only lets itself be divined through the acuteness of the historical present, in its concrete urgency. This is what we have to face. Nothing is further removed from Jaspers' attitude than a contemplative withdrawal from the contemporary events or than the armour of stoicism. Attached to the traditional German culture, loving with a lucid love his country, its language, and the great men who have shed their lustre on it, he was stricken to the depth of his being by the horror of National-Socialism. I can still hear him at a lecture delivered after Hitler's accession to power and just before his own retirement, giving his students a bibliographical reference in these terms: 'With regard to races, since unfortunately people are talking so much about them these days, I recommend you the book of Herr X. on "Races

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Der philosophische Glaube*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1938.

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among Herrings''; you will see there what can really be known today about races when human passions don't get mixed up with the business.'

When, after the German defeat, the first faculty was reopened at the University of Heidelberg, Jaspers gave the inaugural lecture. For the whole of the first semester his lectures were devoted to the *Schuldfrage*, to the problem of German guilt: this series of lectures has been published since.² If its historically unique tone is to be appreciated, one must put oneself back in the circumstances in which Jaspers then found himself. After many years of retirement and silence, here he was again in the familiar *aula* of the university. It was just after the defeat. A regime which was to have lasted a thousand years had crumbled with the bombed out cities. The philosopher was face to face with a youth whose intellectual training was almost nil, for all it had known had been Nazi propaganda with its improvised and mendacious schemas, its factitious excitement, its unbounded certainties; all it had lived was the war with its victories and the collapse with its ruins. On the other side of his lectern was the evidence: Here are the crimes we have committed. It must have been an eerie silence in that lecture room, heavy with an aggressive and desperate expectation. Could one at such a moment pronounce any word that was not ritual, make any gesture that was not hieratic?

And then the philosopher begins to speak. He talks quite simply, basing himself on nothing but the truth. He tries to see clearly and to speak truthfully, as if at the moment of the worst danger and the blackest destitution there were no higher urgency, no surer salvation than the struggle towards truth. Not towards a general truth, but towards *our* truth, that of today, that which is harrying us, that which is being changed already by the triumphant indignation of the universe; the truth that burns us like a brand and that we should prefer to forget. To see clearly and to speak truthfully: philosophy is here translated into action. It is not concerned with bringing us consolation or reassurance. We are men. Only the truth is worthy of us. We must make ourselves worthy of it.

Whatever the enormity of our guilt, the conditions under which we became guilty are those of human culpability in general. If we are to steer clear of complacency and masochism alike, we must sharply distinguish its different aspects: there is juridical, political, moral, and metaphysical guilt. Thus, as the lecturer goes on, there arises a schema whose implications extend far beyond the question of German guilt under the Hitler

²Jaspers, *Die Schuldfrage*: Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1946.

regime, a general scheme which might serve for *any* collective examination of conscience, whatever its circumstances. Jaspers' lectures on German guilt seem to me to have, in the exceptional circumstances in which they were delivered and in their permanent philosophical value, two opposite yet interdependent reasons for going down among the classic works of our era.

But it is impossible to take one's proper place in contemporary reality without recovering within oneself, actualising, as it were, by one's own presence, the whole historical past. Jaspers has therefore restated the diagnosis of the contemporary world which he made in 1931 in his little work *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*,³ with the emphasis, this time, on the historical perspective in which the present moment is to be seen. This restatement takes the form of an important book.⁴ We are witnessing, according to Jaspers, the beginning of universal history. It is no longer the fate of this or that country or continent which is at stake but that of the whole human race. Alongside this history, which will embrace all the civilisations, the various national histories will soon look like local chronicles. Now that these universal perspectives are opening before us, the past as a whole takes on a new aspect. Jaspers attaches decisive importance to what he calls the 'axial period' (*Achsenzeit*), i.e., the centuries from 800 to 200 B. C. Almost simultaneously, in the three great cultural systems which then existed, in China, India, and Greece, we see the emergence of ideas, values, and principles which are profoundly similar despite their diversity and through which man reaches awareness of the constants of his condition and of the variables of his free possibilities.

Simultaneously with history, philosophy, too, in the twilight of European hegemony, is becoming universal. It demands free trade between minds, across all barriers of time and space. Hence the eagerness with which Jaspers has flung himself into the study of Chinese and Indian thought.

The universalisation of thought is leaping today not only across continents but across social classes as well. More and more men, living in ever widening circles, are destined to become conscious of themselves and to play their part in forging the future. Jaspers has therefore

³ Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*. Berlin: Verlag W. de Gruyter, 1931.

⁴ Jaspers, *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1949.

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attempted, in a series of radio talks, later collected in book form,⁵ to provide an introduction to philosophy by imparting to a wide public, in a simple form which, however, does not sacrifice any complexity in essentials, the guiding lines of his thought and the meaning that his message may have for all men.

The philosopher of today must therefore play his part in the discussion of his contemporaries and bring them back tirelessly to the essential question of human nature and of the exigencies and possibilities without which it loses itself. Jaspers has had occasion more than once to take up a position in his talks or his articles on this or that problem, and these occasional writings have been collected in a book.⁶ A few chapter headings will give an idea of the themes discussed: 'Our Future and Goethe' (1947), 'Fundamental Evil in Kant' (1935), 'Kierkegaard' (1951), 'On the Living Spirit of the University' (1946), 'A Criticism of Psycho-analysis' (1950), 'Science in the Hitlerian State' (1946), 'The People and the University' (1947), 'On the European Spirit' (1946), and 'Conditions and Prospects of a New Humanism' (1949). There is also a brief analysis of the author's philosophical development and of his attitude with regard to tradition. It is indeed no longer possible today for a system of thought to isolate itself from the conditions which gave rise to it. The thinker must appear in person. Jaspers declares that his own intellectual attitude has in fact scarcely changed since he left school, despite the fact that he has gone from medicine, through psychiatry, to philosophy. From the moment of his first book, in which the essence of his thought is outlined (*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*, 1919) he has recognised the importance of Marx, studied him, and fought him. And he has upheld against him the two figures who in his eyes are the decisive 'exceptions', those figures who have left an indelible impression on contemporary thought, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.⁷

Irreplaceable though the experience of a confrontation with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard may be for us to-day, an influence that remains ever deeper and more essential is the ever-living presence of the great philosophical tradition of the West, that of Plato and Kant. Jaspers never

⁵ Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie*. Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1949.

⁶ Jaspers, *Rechenschaft und Ausblick*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1951.

⁷ Jaspers, *Nietzsche*. Berlin: Verlag W. de Gruyter, 1936.

Jaspers, *Nietzsche und das Christentum*. Hameln: Verlag der Bücherstube Fritz Seifert, 1949.

claims to have founded at last the true philosophy, or even a new philosophy. Quite deliberately, he inserts himself in the traditional 'lineage'. In fact, however, there is no 'lineage' for him, for he belongs to a company of minds between whom goes on, across the centuries, without reserve and without end, the difficult debate which he calls 'communication' and whose stake is at once the existence of man and of truth.

To *Truth* Jaspers has devoted a huge volume of more than a thousand pages.⁸ He distinguishes its manifold perspectives which, though none of them can be reduced to any other, constitute nevertheless an impregnable whole. He extricates the specific exigencies of each of them. He denounces the counterfeit truths of laziness or superstition. He defends truth against those who would despotically close their hand on it, who claim to possess it in its entirety and to legitimatise by its possession a totalitarian system in which man, losing the dimension of liberty, is reduced to the status of a wheelwork, a mere object. Thus Marxism, psycho-analysis, and the racial theory, each in its own way, deform the real nature of man. Under the pretext of a scientific approach, they betray both truth and man. Jaspers is remote, however, from disparaging reason—as results clearly from his Heidelberg lectures on Reason and Unreason.⁹ On the contrary, it is reason itself which forbids us to let ourselves be imprisoned within narrow schemas, which compels us to go beyond, where knowledge can be set in the true light of transcendence. Jaspers combats the discredit in which some would like to see it founder, but he defends it equally against the shallow certainties of mere intelligence. Reason appears in his thought at once transparent and mysterious, born to overstep its own bounds through the precise exigencies which it imposes and whose strictness—not relaxation—constantly implies the transcendence which it will never attain and which yet, through it, conditions all truth.

⁸ Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1947.

⁹ Jaspers, *Vernunft und Widervernunft in unserer Zeit*. Munich: Piper Verlag, 1950.