

KARL JASPERS

ON PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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JASPERS AND THE AXIAL TRANSFIGURATION OF HISTORY

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In pondering the devastation wrought by the Second World War, Jaspers attempted to rethink the concepts of history, revelation, and reason in the light of what he came to call the “axial” or “pivotal” period of history. This primal transformation of the essence of the human process took place in the period between 800 and 200 B.C., manifesting itself with particular intensity around 500 B.C. The axial period was a global event, not confined to the Mediterranean basin, but manifest in China, India, the Near East, and Greece. What is especially striking is Jaspers’s refusal to privilege the uniqueness of Jesus in this rewriting of history, reducing Jesus, in the eyes of many, to the status of a prophet, specifically, the last in a long line that was epitomized in and by Jeremiah. Jesus is thus linked to the prophetic movement in Israel and we are further led to believe that he is not pre-eminent among the Jewish prophets.

Right away we see how radical and daring Jaspers is in his decentering of certain cherished notions regarding the inner telos of history. He moves away from eschatological language and any sense of a unique sacred history. God’s self-disclosure, a concept that still appears in Jaspers in a muted form, must take place through fragmented and non-linear structures that have as their primary purpose the illumination of *Existenz*. Thus there is neither a sacred history (*Heilsgeschichte*), nor anything akin to Heidegger’s *Seinsgeschichte*. History is confined to the continuing availability of unique and powerful *Existenzen* as they address us in the immediate flow of our own historicity.

In negative terms we can say what the axial period is not. It is not a place-specific and unique divine-human encounter that concretes itself in a text and founder. It is not the beginning of a determined telic unfolding in which absolute self-knowing grows through dying and resurrected shapes. Nor is it a progressivist unfolding of universal human reason manifest in the outer forms of objective spirit. Finally, it is not a nihilistic plunge into nothingness in which all horizons collapse just this side of the loving support of the Encompassing.

Jaspers is very clear that the Axial Age was a cataclysmic event that broke open the human process in a new way, and that made it possible to negotiate the difficult terrain from the unconscious and mythical age, an age that he calls "pre-historical," to the conscious, indeed, self-conscious age attuned to the liberating and generic power of logos to bring the newly aware self to the edge of its former horizons of meaning. At the heart of this transformation is the power of experience to move toward the ground of history in the Encompassing, or, put differently, to find the nexus where temporality encounters the infinite in Transcendence.

Revelation gives way to a deepened concept of experience. For Jaspers, revelation is a privatistic or local encounter with the divine that refuses to probe into its own symbolic encrustation and thereby transform all symbols into empty ciphers. This applies with particular force to the so-called unique revelation in Jesus. In the words of Pannenberg, one of Jaspers's most astute and sensitive critics:

In distinction from Nietzsche and many of his followers, Jaspers takes a positive position toward what he calls "Biblical religion." With this concept he designates especially the prophetic movement in Israel whose high point he sees in the figure of Jeremiah. For him, Jesus is "historically the last of the prophets." In the Bible, Jaspers does not find witnesses of a binding divine revelation, but the historical foundation of our cultural existence and of Western civilization generally. Because that implies a certain affinity to Jesus and especially to the Old Testament, his criticism of Jesus is all the more serious.¹

Jaspers sees Jesus as one-sidedly pointing to the Kingdom of God, thereby cutting himself off from effective action in this world. Thus the last of the great prophets made such an extreme claim for the Kingdom that he in effect ended his line and rendered any positive use of his ministry impossible for us. However, if we rethink Jesus along the lines of the other paradigmatic figures who emerged in the Axial Age, especially insofar as we deflate his otherworldly metaphysics and transform it into an ethical framework, something can be salvaged of his unique message. Of course, this message must devolve into the special transparency of the cipher script so that its absurd and non-worldly dimensions can be purged away in the fire of Transcendence.

We are, of course, reminded of Tillich's Protestant principle that insists that all symbols are what they are by effacing themselves in the light of that in which they

participate: namely, the ground of being. It is as if the ground of being grasps symbols and, from its side, breaks them open to their translucent depths. Jaspers's own conception is not alien to Tillich's formulation even if it rejects Tillich's concept that revelation is ecstatically transfigured reason. For Jaspers, reason, as the erotic bond for the modes of the Encompassing, does not need anything outside itself for its fulfillment.

More specifically, what happened to the human process during this transformative period in global history, and in what respect is the period normative for us as we enter into what Jaspers saw as a new worldwide community? While Jaspers details the social and political aspects of the Axial Age, our focus will be on the changes wrought in the individual and paradigmatic selves that stand before us as the primary exemplars of this cataclysm. Jaspers specifically lists the following figures (among others): Confucius; Lao Tzu; the Buddha; Zarathustra; the Jewish prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; the Greek thinkers Homer, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, and Archimedes; and the Greek tragedians. These various thinkers and writers were all participants in a movement that emerged from the heart of the Encompassing to open history to its depths. There is a double movement invoked here. Initially there is the transition from mythos to logos, that is, from the prehistorical to the historical. At the same "time" there is the movement from the historical per se to its own depth in the unconditional.

Jaspers summarizes what he sees as the key transforming events of the Axial Age:

What is new about this age, in all three of these worlds [i.e., China, India, and the Occident], is that man becomes aware of being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terrible nature of the world and his own impotence. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences unconditionality in the depth of selfhood and in the clarity of transcendence.²

We note in passing that the "he" referred to here belongs to a social and cultural elite, an elite propped up by patriarchal structures of power. However, the royal "he" is not as sinister as it may sound to some, precisely because Jaspers is very much aware that the paradigmatic individuals, with the possible exception of Confucius, struggled to break the powers of the world and to bring about a true depth-transformation of *Existenz* on the other side of all forms of social empowerment and disempowerment.

Of note in the above passage is the clear statement of the rich dialectic obtaining between an enhanced sense of the utter scope of worldhood, and the corollary finitization of the self. Once the individual leaves behind the domain of what Levy-Bruhl called "participation mystique," the scope of the self actually shrinks. Prior forms of participation, which gave the self an artificially enhanced

infinite, a form of psychic inflation, collapsed in the face of the rise of autonomous reason. Both worldhood and reason burst forth as actual infinities that seemed to mock or even crush the newly emergent and fragile self. As the self became finite, it also became open to its own ground, a ground that was not so much a first principle as it was an ever-receding mystery.

It must be stressed that this unconditional depth is not a repository of divine teleology or the locus of a providential plan. Jaspers is unrelenting in attacking any sense of history that sees it as having an esoteric teleology that is manifest to a special few. Even God seems to be active in overcoming our exclusive historical myths, "It is as though the deity were issuing a warning, through the language of universal history, against the claim to exclusiveness in the possession of truth."³ Whatever history means, it must be available to each *Existenz* as it uses its finite human experience to move over and through the encrusted shells of its life. Any theology or philosophy that wishes to leap outside of history to see it as a totality, with a beginning, middle, and end, is a form of thinly veiled totalitarianism that would foreclose the possibilities of endless communication that come to us from within the stream of history. Jaspers makes his rejection of historical supernaturalism clear:

But for us there can never be a known Archimedean point outside history. We are always within history. In penetrating through to that which lies before, or athwart, or after all history, into the Encompassing of everything, into being itself, we are seeking in our *Existenz* and in transcendence, what this Archimedean point would be if it were capable of assuming the configuration of objective knowledge.⁴

It must be remembered that when *Existenz* encounters the Encompassing in its various modes, it does not, unless it is being inauthentic, convert this encounter into objective knowledge. Revelation attempts to compress this mobile encounter into a specific field of stable meanings that can be rendered into objective knowledge. The minute this takes place, the fluidity and transparency of our encounter with past *Existenzen* become frozen into the shells that can enslave a community.

The paradigmatic selves that emerged in the Axial Age moved away from particularity into a universal understanding of personality and reason. Self-consciousness emerged for the first time as the depth dimension of the self found its way in the clarity of Transcendence. This Transcendence was itself a universal structure or power that could no longer be confined to tribal deities with their specific spatial locations. In Tillich's language, the gods of space gave way before the God of time, thereby ensuring that *Existenz* could enter into the hidden rhythms of the Encompassing without becoming bound by a finite, and potentially demonic, container.

The Axial Age made it possible for the various modes of the Encompassing

to come into clarity for the first time. Out of the darkness and mere blind repetition of *Dasein* emerged some sense of consciousness as such, a universalizable and objective consciousness that could free *Dasein* from the myths and projections that bound it to local soil. The dawn of consciousness as such quickly became reflexive so that self-consciousness could gather up and correlate *Dasein* with general consciousness. From this dawning, fitfully present and always threatened with a collapse back into dreaming innocence, the spirit emerged to give shape to objective symbolic forms. Finally, with the full awakening of the self, especially acute in the Buddha, *Existenz* could emerge into its possibility as it encountered Transcendence, however defined. By the same token, the world assumed its shape as a totality over and against the self, an act made possible by reason as it went beyond its previous horizons. The world came to be an encompassing field of possibilities and actualities that burst beyond the given local horizons of language and custom. On the "other" side of worldhood Transcendence made its first full appearance once the gods of myth began their slow but steady descent into oblivion.

This first actualization of the fullness of the self and the world remains with us as the true seedbed of all personal and social transformation. Jaspers insists that the Axial Age remains alive for us whenever we reenact the unfolding of the modes of the Encompassing in our own historical existence. We can put it in even stronger terms and say that the Axial Age is coming to meet us out of the future. Jaspers worked especially hard to undermine Judeo-Christian eschatological language, yet, ironically, he provided a way to rethink eschatology precisely through his linking of present existential transformation, which lies in the not-yet, with the continuing power of the Axial Age, which lies, or so it would seem, in the no-longer. In what follows, I will reconstruct Jaspers's argument to show a liberating and unthought eschatological dimension that can bring about a transfiguration of the self *and* of the Axial Age.

In her beautiful essay, "Is Jaspers's Conception of Tradition Adequate to Our Times?" Jeanne Hersch warns us against the danger of naming a tradition as something over and against us:

Once labeled, objectified, surrendered to the relativity of history, tradition denies other traditions. No longer tacit, it defends itself, it attacks, it enlists force on its side, it becomes both fragile and aggressive. As it becomes more explicit, it gradually loses its *meaning*, in the vectoral, dynamic sense that indicates the very direction of time from a past to a future. Instead of remaining the welcoming simplicity of the present-past for the future, a way of change and of inventing the newness of the future, tradition then bends back upon itself, takes itself for its object, rejects all else. Tradition dies, a mere flower of rhetoric in speeches and ideologies. It no longer serves life, but keeps others from living.⁵

If we are to enter into the moving infinity that is history, how are we to avoid a demonic inversion in which given and named traditions turn their back on the

Encompassing and assume self-validation over and against other possibilities? Put in more positive terms, how are we to find what Hersch calls a "welcoming saturation" that remains "infinitely open to infinitely inaccessible truth"? In the tension between an open or even opening saturation on one side, and the bending back of tradition upon itself in closure and the will to power on the other, can we find a way to bring the Axial Age forward to us out of the not yet being of an open future?

These questions all point toward the inner possibility of *Existenz* as it becomes permeable to the hidden rhythmic presence of an elusive ground of history that is incomplete yet proleptically present in its promise to our *Existenz*. Were the Axial Age a mere historical artifact, locked in the domain of the merely factual, there would be no sense in raising the question of the depth prospect within history. As we move in an unrelenting fashion into the period of global history, we become especially anxious to probe into the inner prospects of the Axial Age, the period that launched us on the road to our full humanity against the closure of the mythological and the local.

In what sense, then, is the Axial Age a possibility in the not-yet? For Jaspers, the Axial Age is not so much the repository of world horizons, although these are certainly present, as it is the breakthrough into the Encompassing by finite beings who suddenly are broken open by the richness and terror of the modes of the Encompassing. There is nothing romantic about this thundering birthing process. Shipwreck and foundering run right through the Axial Age as old horizons are shattered by the brilliant, if ambiguous, birth of new more capacious horizons. On a deeper level, the very concept of horizon, as the total field of awareness that is not itself an intentional object, is shattered by that which lies beyond all horizons, even while living as their birthing ground. The Encompassing, never a horizon itself, is not only the not yet of given horizons, but moves like Plato's *chora* to generate and sustain the horizons that surround and empower finite selves. The inner heart of the historical is not a self-giving history of being, or the unique self-disclosure of the Christian God, but the eternal self-othering of the Encompassing as it silently shatters and births the shells and horizons of *Existenz*.

In what sense is the Encompassing related to the Axial Age? It makes no sense to see the Encompassing as an intentional agent, as this can only be a magical conception at best. But it does make sense to see the Encompassing as a nurturing source that honors the foundlings that enter into history and its forward momentum. During the Axial Age the Encompassing appeared in its full glory for the first time. The veil was rent and the birthing ground of history and historical horizons emerged into view, in however ambiguous and tentative a fashion. Jaspers often paints the Encompassing in passive terms, as the ultimate vista reached by *Existenz* through a profound use of *via negativa*. Thus he can say: "'Transcendence, the Encompassing of all Encompassing, is that which, as the absolutely Encompassing, implacably is,' even as it is not seen, vanishes as it is thought, and hides

behind any image or configuration."⁶ It is as if we only encounter the Encompassing through its back draft in which all signs, symbols, and ciphers empty themselves of any historical or particular content so that they do not stain the elusive presence/absence of Transcendence. Jaspers deepens this anti-incarnational understanding by his sense that my encounter with Transcendence "... loosens the adherence to embodiment"⁷ while still finding its manifestation in symbols. The resistance of the Encompassing to embodiment, especially in its "highest" form of Transcendence, is uncanny and represents a form of abjection that finds the orders of creation to be unworthy of incarnational presence.

Perhaps we can open up another door on the Encompassing that shows its deeper love for *Existenzen*. This further prospect moves Jaspers's conception closer to that of Christianity, with *its* insistence that the self-disclosure of that which is ultimate is grace-filled and manifests both eros and agape. Put in more technical terms, Jaspers's periechontology, that is, an ontology that explores the how of the Encompassing rather than the what of being, is actually an erotics that participates in the self-giving of love through the Encompassing.

Erotic reason is the "total will to communication." Yet what is communicated? Can reason open up the cipher script to another and deeper possibility in which the no-longer bursts forth in the present as the loving embrace of possibility in the future? Here we must go beyond Jaspers's text and probe into this final prospect for history, reason, and a suppressed revelation of the self-giving God. The Axial Age returns to us as a gift of Transcendence when our historical and finite *Existenz* participates in the rhythms of an erotic presence that overwhelms the empty ciphers by which we often seek to sanitize Transcendence and deny incarnational presence. Jaspers was no friend of the incarnation, whether in the particular Christian sense, or in a more generic sensibility tied to the history of religions. His ciphers remain cold and bereft of erotic transforming power. Consequently his sense of history, as devoid of incarnational meaning, remains one-dimensional. The Axial Age can goad us toward our own prospects of deepened *Existenz*, but it cannot be transfigured in our present as a real historical and kairotic power without the inner transfiguration of the Encompassing from a negative presence/absence to a positive giving of love.

The fulfillment of time is not possible for cipher-script or for an Encompassing that is only approached through the negative road of denial. The only way toward a true erotics of the Encompassing is through the depth rhythms of history as they surge forward into the not-yet being of an eschatology that is fully incarnational. All primal meanings are incarnational, and combine power and mystery on the edges of our historical horizons. The transfiguration of the Axial Age can only come about when periechontology becomes open to the incarnation where all meaning will come to reside in a tradition that refuses to become a mere tradition by bursting open and providing a locus for all traditions that honor the Encompassing. In this sense, then, Jaspers's Encompassing is both a *no* and a pro-

found, erotic *yes* that enters into our *Existenz* from a point that is even now coming to meet us.

NOTES

1. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1964), p. 236. Quote is from the English translation of second edition, *Jesus-God and Man*, trans. Wilkins and Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).
2. VUZG 383. Quotes are from BPW.
3. VUZG 388.
4. *Ibid.* p. 392.
5. Jeanne Hersch, "Is Jaspers' Conception of Tradition Adequate to Our Times?" in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (New York: Tudor, 1959), pp. 594-95.
6. VdW 175.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 178.