

Karl Jaspers and a Politics of Authenticity

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THE WORLD OF TODAY seems to be laden with contradiction, paradox and ambiguity. Feelings of despair and alienation are on the rise.¹ Human existence is threatened with depersonalization as a consequence of our lives being heavily dominated by a matrix of technological, bureaucratic apparatus governed by "rational efficiency." These conditions consolidate to form what Jaspers calls the "titanic apparatus of the mass order." Not only does the mass order force the individual into a posture of service to the titanic apparatus, negating "the" individual on the one hand and society on the other, but mass man is attracted to the possibilities of escaping the historicity of the human condition without ever having grappled with the complexities of its existence.

In his major works, Karl Jaspers provides a counterattack against the titanic apparatus of the mass order. He articulates the inherent dangers of the atomization of society and the pervasive influence of technology and rational-efficiency upon socio-political life. Consider, for example, the discrepancy to be discovered between the plentitude of scientific knowledge on the one hand and the apparent helplessness with which governments and bureaucracies attempt to confront the moral and intellectual problems not only of individuals but of the nation-state as well. In individual and social life, in politics and economics, people are confronted with a complexity of facts and events which defies resolution.² These conditions suggest a most serious and historically significant question: How does one deal with contradiction and paradox, and still articulate and participate in a meaningful relation with others and with society, without becoming

subordinated to social conventions and institutions?

For Jaspers the answers to the problems of existence are not to be found in soothing opiates. When existence is paralyzed by overwhelming organizational structures and/or social conventions, the dread of life cannot fail to exacerbate. It must be confronted and transcended by the actual exercise of a politics of authenticity which presupposes personal freedom and choice.

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THE NECESSARY OR SATISFACTORY response to the crises of the twentieth century, according to Jaspers, presupposes that the average person is capable of accepting his share of responsibility as a citizen equally aware with all others of what he is doing, and ready, as a part of his daily life, to take his share in deciding fundamental political issues, as well as the direction which his own life is to take. This assumption of responsibility, however, requires a mental effort which the average individual finds difficult to accept. "Since our age has not yet discovered a style for itself or become fully aware of what it really wants," argues Jaspers, "the utilitarianism of purpose is dominant."³

From Jaspers' perspective, the notions of "possessive individualism," "material group pluralism," and "technical efficiency" have prevailed in our age by default. What is needed is a political-philosophical response in which the individual must find reality in the primal sources; to apprehend reality in his inner acts; to attempt communication of every aspect of truth from man which is capable of transcending the present. For Jaspers, the politics of authenticity is the boundless openness to com-

munication and "the decision to follow a human road."⁴

The politics of authenticity of which Jaspers speaks assumes a rather unique status by beginning where *reason* has suffered "shipwreck." "To see rationally what is counter-rational shows us not only the possibility of a positive side in the negative, but also the ground on which we ourselves stand."⁵

The reality of *Existenz*, the authentic self, presupposes that reason, with respect to existential communication, penetrates everything. Reason not only brings into question every piece of fixity, but it permits universal communion. Reason arises from the authentic communication of one *Existenz* with another *Existenz*.

Reason, for Jaspers, is not a permanent thing. It is a "medium," not an end in itself (Hegel). "It is that through which everything else preserves its nature, is clarified, corroborated, and recognized."⁶ Thus, a politics of authenticity presupposes the communication to another the nature of one's *Existenz*.

The attempt to communicate to another the nature of one's *Existenz* tends to go far beyond Descartes in emphasizing the epistemological primacy of subjectivity. As a consequence, *Existenz* is nonobjective and unique. It is infinitely open to new possibilities and inaccessible to traditional philosophical investigation. Although *Existenz* is that crucial aspect of human existence that cannot be conceptually delimited, it is nonetheless clearly experienced. It can be lived, it is illuminated through philosophical reflection, it can be communicated. *Existenz* is the experience of the total freedom that defines man. Yet, whereas *Existenz* is the authentic in man, man cannot be man and endure as a sheer existent. To be authentic is to consciously transcend the modes of the *Encompassing*.⁷

Jaspers uses the term *Encompassing* to designate the ultimate and indefinite limits of being as we experience it in all its fullness; limits which surround, envelop, and suffuse all there is. The essence of the *Encompassing* escapes us. We can, how-

ever, say of the *Encompassing* that it is. In it, the severance between subject and object disappears, since both are manifestations of the same *Encompassing*.

For Jaspers, although there is no certainty either in philosophy or in science, "reason" remains essential to the realization of *Existenz*. One is then forced to depend ultimately on the intuitions and decisions of one's own ego in the sense that the truly rational person will see what is counter-rational, and as a consequence, the possibility of a positive side in the negative, as well as the ground on which one stands.

The ultimate dependence on one's intuitions and decisions of the ego suggests there are as many senses of truth as there are modes of communication. The *Encompassing*, within which communication takes place, determines what truth is. Therefore, the *Encompassing* can never be viewed as one object among many. It is all of being as well as the differentiations within being. It is also beyond metaphysics since all metaphysical positions are events within the *Encompassing* but do not in any way delimit it.

To argue that all metaphysical positions are events within the *Encompassing* but do not in any way delimit it is to argue that "we only grasp truth if we experience it in every horizon and omit none of its modes."⁸ It is through the binding which grows out of what is common to all truth in all modes of the *Encompassing* that permits that which is genuinely true to be communicable. Truth to be genuine must be communicable.

Communication then applies to one's very being, to one's authenticity, to one's grasp of the truth. It also permits one to become for oneself through the emergence of being, of one's being with others. The nature of the "self" then is discovered through illumination of existence (*Existenzerhellung*), which discloses the possibilities of man. That is, the possibilities of an entity seeking understanding of "self" and "being" become an actuality. Existence then yields access to the questioner himself. One is no longer

bound by the titanic apparatus of the mass order.

For Jaspers, to be bound by the titanic apparatus of the mass order is when mass production, technology and bureaucracy seduce the individual vis-à-vis rational efficiency into a posture of social atomism and utilitarian living. Social atomism and utilitarian living rob the individual of his subject existence by molding him into an object which not only expects to be manipulated but must be manipulated. Man's "selfhood" is surrendered because selfhood demands the utilization of reason and communication. Utilitarianism demands the presence of reason only when the individual is confronted with an immediate problem of self-interest which must be solved. Authenticity or selfhood involves the will to know, not the impulse to maximize immediate desire. Authentic life is the openness to communicate. It is the search of men of mutual communication which reaches no termination and accepts the indeterminateness of knowledge. Openness is the reasoned search for everything that can be encountered in the world.

Man, for Jaspers, is not human and not authentic if he is to live for himself isolated as "a mere individual," community is "the condition for the actualization of Existence." Existence is not a self-enclosed monad but opens itself to the world. The openness of existence presupposes not only a principle of equality as a necessary step for communication, but a relationship of enrichment, expansion of information, and the possibility of transformation into a better self. Even though knowledge about existence is incomplete, the possibilities to transcend our present condition are manifest.

Transcendence, within the dynamics of a politics of authenticity, suggests that "being" becomes being for the "individual" on the one hand, and being for "us" on the other. Individual "self-possession" (being for the individual), for example, is the result of an existential choice. As a consequence, being for the individual is a type of freedom; freedom being identified with choice, awareness and self-consciousness.

This notion of freedom is an act of choice in the sense that we are, at the same time, thrust into a particular human condition and choose ourselves into a particular human condition. Because we are partially responsible for our condition, freedom vis-à-vis choice is central to man. To choose not only means to be free, it also becomes the problem of moral and ethical responsibility. To this extent, *Existenz* is grounded in choice, and a politics of authenticity presupposes the consciousness of choice.

According to Jaspers, choice is to be found within the tension between the substantive content of the historicity of the human condition and personal human existence. Although our choices are, in one sense, conditioned by the web of historicity, within these conditions man's freedom is total. Human existence cannot be properly divorced from the substantive content of the historicity of its own condition. To argue otherwise is to promote Herbert Marcuse's one-dimensional man. Neither can the human condition be purely subjectively determined, self-defined (Sartre) without running the risk of vulgar relativism. For Jaspers, to know and use my freedom is the *raison d'être* of *Existenzerhellung*. Through action and being conscious of my action with respect to the implications, values and chances involved, existence becomes a unity of the historical fact and the recognition of a transcendence of concrete socio-political conditions.

In conclusion, the reality of *Existenz* vis-à-vis a politics of authenticity is, in part, the responsibility of the political state. Jaspers argues that the legitimacy of a "state-will" is to be found in its promotion and establishment of the "common good" (Plato) and the creation of conditions for creativity and the realization of possibilities (Kropotkin).

Man's "power," his ability to act and make distinctions in the world based upon reason and awareness, has traditionally found political definition and meaning in the body politic. The basis of this political definition of power is education.⁹ Thus, the political state is to harmonize the ac-

tivities of individuals who have been educated so that they can participate in their historical condition. The state can exercise power in order to provide human beings with opportunities for the free fulfillment of their occupational ideals in all their multiplicity—ideals which cannot be fulfilled “so long as individuals are viewed as functionaries rather than persons.”¹⁰

Finally, the political state assumes the posture of a “collective-will” manifesting the character of individual will with the

possibility of achieving *Existenz*. The state can never in itself give meaning and value to personal existence but only stimulus and opportunity. The individual needs the state for realizing oneself, and the state derives its legitimacy by providing the milieu for realizing *Existenz*. As a consequence, the individual must come to terms with the political state with respect to finding one's place within it, and to find in oneself the source of criticism of its aims and ideals and its actual policies.¹¹

¹Robert Gilmour and Robert Lamb, *Political Alienation in Contemporary America* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975). Also, A. Etzioni and T. A. Diprete, “Decline in Confidence in America: The Prime Factor” in *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, vol. 15, no. 4 (1979) pp. 520-526. B. S. Reiner, “Feelings of Irrelevance: The Effects of a Nonsupportive Society” in *Social Casework* (January, 1979). Finally, M. Bronfenbrenner, “Poverty-Exploitation-Alienation” in *American Behavioral Science* (January, 1980). ²For an interesting analysis of this theme, see Dante Germino, “Political Philosophy and the ‘Mortgage of the Polis’” in *Modern Age* (Fall, 1980). ³Karl Jaspers, *Man in the*

Modern Age (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., Inc., Anchor Books, 1957), p. 65. ⁴Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). ⁵Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 129. ⁶*Ibid.*, p. 131. ⁷For an interesting interpretation along these lines, see Gerhart Niemeyer, “Conservatism and the New Political Theory” in *Modern Age* (Spring, 1979). ⁸*Reason and Existenz*, *op. cit.*, p. 77. ⁹*Man in the Modern Age*, *op. cit.*, p. 89. ¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 91. ¹¹For an interesting analysis along these lines, see James V. Schall, “Rethinking the Nature of Government,” *Modern Age* (Spring, 1979).