

Jaspers on Tragedy

Abstract: Karl Jaspers, the 20th century German psychiatrist and philosopher, wrote a small book of existential analysis on 'tragedy,' encouragingly named *Tragedy is Not Enough* (1952).¹ Jaspers is known primarily for his famous *The Question of German Guilt* (1947)² in which he acknowledges the German peoples culpability in the rise of National Socialism. On his view, tragedy plays a vital role in philosophical development by forcing us to face a "boundary situation" (*Grenzsituationen*), namely "that I cannot live without struggling and suffering."³ "Tragedy," according to Jaspers, "views in tremendous perspectives all that actually exists and occurs; and in its climax of silence, tragedy suggests and brings to realization the highest possibilities of man."⁴ In this sense, tragedy is a blessing. It awakens us, revitalizes us, and moves us. Tragedy is a threshold. On the other hand, tragedy may actually be a lifelong corridor.

Tragedy in Jaspers

Pre-tragic and Tragic Knowledge

In *Tragedy is Not Enough*, Jaspers distinguishes between pre-tragic and tragic knowledge: "Pre-tragic knowledge is rounded out, complete, and self-contained... Sorrow becomes accepted as part of the eternal cycle of living and dying, death and

¹ Jaspers, Karl, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, translated by Harald A. T. Reiche, Harry T. Moore, and Karl W. Deutsch, Archon Books, 1969

² Jaspers, Karl, *The Question of German Guilt*, translated by E.B. Ashton, New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1947

³ Jaspers, Karl, *Philosophy vol. II*, translated by E.B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 178

⁴ *Tragedy*, 27

resurrection, and everlasting change.”⁵ Whereas, tragic knowledge “contains an element of history. Cyclical patterns are merely its background. The crucial events are unique and are always moving on. They are shaped by irrevocable decisions, and they never recur.”⁶ This distinction proves useful by revealing two modes of orientation: in pre-tragic knowledge “man is not torn in desperation: he suffers and even dies with composure...there is no struggle, no defiance.”⁷ In tragic knowledge there is inner torment, frustration, restlessness about the nature of existence. There is something wrong with everything. You may find each of these currents throughout religion and philosophy. Pre-tragic knowledge may be found in certain forms of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Leibniz’s *Best of all possible Worlds*; tragic knowledge is common in Greek mythology, French existentialism, and contemporary postmodernism.

Prima facie this distinction reveals a value judgment of sorts: the ideal existential movement is from pre-tragic to tragic knowledge, then from tragic knowledge to what Jaspers calls “transcendence.” Jaspers notes that “it may be possible for pre-tragic knowledge to preserve its own truth intact alongside the tragic outlook of other [Western] civilizations,” but this requires that “man succeeds both in achieving a harmonious interpretation of the universe and in actually living in accord with it.”⁸ Some may be able to accomplish this, but if accomplished one will not arrive at what Jaspers calls “the first phase of that historical movement...which takes place in the depths of man,” namely, “tragic knowledge.”⁹ If one stays in the pre-tragic then one never needs

⁵ *Tragedy*, 31

⁶ *Ibid*, 32

⁷ *Ibid*, 33

⁸ *Ibid*, 32

⁹ *Ibid*, 31

to face, and in turn, transcend, the tragic.

Tragedy and Religious Faith

All of this has an impact upon the ways in which we view religion. If religion is seen in contrast to tragic knowledge, or as an answer to it, then religion does not acknowledge the *truly* tragic, or what Jaspers calls “absolute and radical tragedy.”¹⁰ Religious beliefs in immortality, salvation, and providence are contrary to tragic knowledge because “the chance of being saved destroys the tragic sense of being trapped without chance of escape.” This means “Christian salvation opposes tragic knowledge.”¹¹ But this critique of religion is actually a critique of religion traditionally understood. Some postmodern and existential theology can allow for both radical tragedy and religious faith. Yet, for Jaspers, religious faith, though insightful and robust, cannot accept tragic knowledge and so cannot acknowledge that which “brings to realization the highest possibilities of man.”

Historically, religious faith was referential by having its terminus in God, Jesus Christ, or some other religious figure and/or concept. Faith was faith *in* something as well as *that* something would eventually occur. In the Christian tradition men like St. Paul, Augustine, and Luther, considered *pisteo* (Gk. for faith) something more than a mere subjective inclination. Faith was on the firm ground of the character of God, as opposed to a wish, futile hope, or the proverbial “chasing after the wind.” Ideas considering the *probability* or even *possibility* of radical tragedy in human existence were not considered viable options. Absolute tragedy was seen (rightly) as contrary to a

¹⁰ Ibid, 30

¹¹ Ibid, 38

benevolent Creator, and faith was the motor through which one conquered whatever tragedy there was (i.e. sin, hell, demons, etc).

This view of faith has been criticized largely on the grounds of its apparent naivety.¹² To consider faith as a disposition consonant with reason, or as the fulfillment of reason, or as anything other than a leap *against* the odds, is to conflate faith with knowledge and certitude. It was Kierkegaard who reminded us that faith involves paradox, absurdity, as well as the subjective element of the believer. He praises Abraham's faith because "he believed on the strength of the absurd."¹³ Jaspers, who was influenced by Kierkegaard (from whom he takes his notorious phrase *Existenz*), would say of faith that "it is no possession. It confers no secure knowledge."¹⁴ "Faith is a different thing from knowledge."¹⁵ Yet Jaspers does not want to do away with faith *per se*, but would rather posit what he calls a "philosophical faith," a faith that "is allied with knowledge" that "wants to know what is knowable, and to be conscious of its own premises."¹⁶ This faith lies tentatively between irrationality and the dogmatism associated with revealed religion. It acknowledges the reality of tragedy and uses it as a

¹² Some consider Simone Weil's *Supernaturalist* interpretation of tragedy to be on this naïve side. See Brueck, Katherine T., *The Redemption of Tragedy: The Literary Vision of Simeon Weil*, New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1995.

¹³ Kierkegaard, Soren, *Fear and Trembling*, translated by Alastair Hannay, New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985, 65

¹⁴ Jaspers, Karl, *Way To Wisdom*, translated by Ralph Manheim, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954, 51

¹⁵ Jaspers, Karl, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, translated by Ralph Manheim, London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, 1950, 9

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12. Jaspers expounds upon what exactly he means by "philosophical faith" throughout *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, ultimately summing it up in three propositions: 1) God is, 2) There is an absolute imperative, and 3) The world is an ephemeral stage between God and existence (34). Each of these propositions are susceptible to a whole host of interpretations, but suffice it to say that what Jaspers means by these statements is nothing like what others have meant by them. Interestingly enough, any kind of "philosophical faith" is thoroughly unlike Kierkegaard, at least as he presents himself in *Fear and Trembling*. Unlike Jaspers, Kierkegaard says, "philosophy cannot and should not give us an account of faith" (63).

launching pad for authentic faith.

Tragedy and Transcendence

Transcendence has typically meant, “that which is above, over, or beyond” the physical, concrete world we experience. Since Plato, theology has thought of transcendence as a place, or location of the extra-mundane, of which the world is a fallen copy. The Christian tradition spent much of the 20th century arguing over what it means for God to be transcendent. It was always wondered how a transcendent God could relate, or interact with the immanent, finite, temporal world of history. The typical answer involved Jesus as the mediator, the theo-anthropos, “Light of Light, true God of true God” who bridged the transcendent with the immanent in the kenotic process of the incarnation. But this rational “answer” to the problem was actually paradoxical. This is because the transcendent is no longer transcendent if it can be bridged. Transcendence, in this case, loses its proper quality, and becomes something graspable, reachable, and conquerable.

Jaspers, on the other hand, tries his best to keep transcendence, transcendent. For even though “all philosophy is directed toward the goal of achieving certainty of Transcendence” it is “as if it were not there.”¹⁷ For Jaspers, even though we can catch glimpses of transcendence that we interpret through ciphers and symbols, we can never comprehend or grasp it as we do objects of experience. It is not some “thing” or “object” or “being-out-there” to be cognized. Instead, it is, as one Jaspers commentator has said, “the reality which presents itself as the boundary of all empirical reality.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Jaspers, Karl, *On My Philosophy*, in *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, translated by Felix Kaufmann, New York, NY: The World Publishing Company, 1956, 152

¹⁸ Schrag, Oswald, *Existence, Existenz, and Transcendence: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Karl*

This is the boundary at which we stare into the abyss of the strange, the other, that which transcends the subject-object dichotomy. The notion that the white background of a piece of paper is as important as the black letters on it, may form a rough physical analogy between transcendence and the concrete world we inhabit. Derrida calls this the “space of play or the play of space.”¹⁹ Transcendence is the background of backgrounds, the context of contexts, or in Kantian terminology a “necessary condition for experience.” In attempting to categorize it one soon realizes that it escapes as something forever elusive. As it reveals it conceals itself. Yet, for Jaspers, it is necessary for existence, faith, and freedom: “only transcendence can make this questionable life good, the world beautiful, and existence itself a fulfillment.”²⁰

Because of the elusive nature of transcendence, what knowledge one may glimpse is always indirect. It has an existential starting point within the broken character of humanity:

The question “What is Transcendence?” is not answered . . . by a knowledge of Transcendence. The answer comes indirectly by a clarification of the incompleteness of the world, the imperfectability of man, the impossibility of a permanently valid world order, the universal failure bearing in mind at the same time that there is not nothing, but that in nature, history, and human existence, the magnificent is as real as the terrible.²¹

Jaspers, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1971, 191

¹⁹ Derrida, Jacques, *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, Chicago: IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 345

²⁰ *Way To Wisdom*, 126

²¹ *On My Philosophy*, 153

Since human brokenness, or what Jaspers calls *failing* (*Scheitern*), goes hand and hand with transcendence it is easy to see how tragedy works within his philosophical system. Tragedy makes us yearn for deliverance, redemption, salvation, and pushes us to the transcendent; the transcendent, in turn, eludes us and we find ourselves having to cope with indirect knowledge. It is here when we “endure ambiguity...and...make light shine through it.”²² The tension and angst involved in wanting-to-know and not-being-able-to-know is existentially fruitful and requires us to do the best with what is given, no matter how ambiguous it is.

²² *Tragedy*, 105