KARL JASPERS: A HUMANISTIC CRITIQUE
OF A COMPUTERIZED MENTALITY

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Two biographical factors are crucial to an understanding of the thought of Karl Jaspers: one concerns his professional and the other his private life. As to the first, he moved during his career from medicine, through psychology and psychiatry, and to philosophy. For the second, as Charles Wallraff notes, Jaspers was a:

> semi-invalid who escaped death from illness in his thirties, to be rejected as incompetent and ostracized by his colleagues in his forties, condemned to oblivion by the Nazis in his fifties, and with his [Jewish] wife, selected for routine extermination in his sixties.[1]

The first determined his view of science and its relation to philosophy, while the second influenced his attitude toward existenz, ultimate situations, and transcendence.

As an existentialist, Jaspers was strongly affected by Soren Kierkegaard's concern for the individual and his distrust of purely intellectual knowledge. But partly in reaction against the excesses of irrationality that he experienced in Nazi Germany before and during World War II and partly because of his scientific background, he became more and more concerned about reconciling the demands of reason with his desire for authentic human individuality in such works as *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* and *The Way to Wisdom*.

Thus, Jaspers presented a better-organized, more systematic corpus of philosophical writings than most of the other existentialists, although he avoided a technical vocabulary. His style was always clear, usually fresh, and often biting. He once noted parenthetically that he tried to maintain a rational facade lest he stain the pages of his writing with his own tears.

More than most of the classic existentialists, he emphasized the need for a knowledge of the history of philosophy in particular—and the history of humankind in general. Regarding the latter, it:

> brings us the contents of tradition upon which our life is built, shows us standards by which to measure the present, frees us from unconscious bondage to our own age, teaches us to see man in his highest potentialities and his imperishable creations.[2]

Finally, of all the existentialists Jaspers has presented the most extensive and penetrating analyses of the relations between science and philosophy. Partly because of the ever more significant role that science is playing in all our lives, he affirmed that the philosopher cannot remain ignorant of its method and meaning. In *Man in the Modern Age*, he noted that scientists concentrate on special features of particular objects, while philosophers are concerned with reality as a whole; yet this philosophical concern grows out of one's historical, spatio-temporal situation; and, since ours is preeminently a science and technology-oriented society, philosophers cannot neglect their role.

In *Reason and Existenz* Jaspers vigorously opposed all forms of "anti-science superstition." He noted that the philosopher needs training in scientific disciplines as a check on his potentially irrational approaches to reality.

> Unless an idea is submitted to the coldly dispassionate test of scientific inquiry, it is rapidly consumed in the fire of emotions and passions, or else it withers into a dry and narrow fanaticism.[3]

Yet, at the same time, the scientist needs to be attuned to and understanding of philosophy as a source of inward truth, appealing to freedom and summoning one to transcendence of the

material world that is known objectively by science. Only if philosophy and science are clearly distinguished can their necessary connection be understood. James Collins comments in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* that science and philosophy are involved in a friendly struggle between distinct but interwoven ways of thinking.[5]

While Jaspers avoided anti-scientism he opposes, with even greater vigor, any form of scientism (which he termed "scientific superstition"). He deprecated the simplistic assumption that the scientific method is the only means for the discovery of truth and so must be employed to solve problems in all areas, moral, social, and political, as well as those traditionally considered to be in the realm of science.

For the German philosopher there were two extremes to be avoided: on the one hand, a denial of any limits to scientific thought and, on the other, a rejection of scientific objectivity by an irrational philosophy of pure feeling. The philosopher must go beyond science, Jaspers averred, but not at the price of abandoning reason.

Thus, while he could write in *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* of science as "an indispensable constituent of Reason" and as "the condition of all true philosophy," Jaspers would also emphasize in *The Future of Mankind* that the only hope for mankind lay in the realization that scientific and technical "know-how" and achievements must be understood as parts of an encompassing whole. As he put it in the latter work:

> Science is objectively compelling intellectual cognition; philosophy is rational self-enlightenment. Both are distinct and inseparable. Science becomes bottomless without philosophy; philosophy can take us no step without the intellect, that is, without science.[6]

Now, concerning computers, we humans have invented machines to do our moving, our seeing, our hearing, our talking, our writing, and our fighting. The final mechanical-technological achievement is the computer—which

can do our thinking. This invention has inspired such enthusiastic proclamations as those by Herbert Muller in *The Children of Frankenstein* that "the computer 'has a more beneficial potential for the human race than any other invention in history'"[7] and by George Nikolaieff that humanity because of the computer "now has the potential, for the first time in his long history, of being able to control his destiny."[8]

It is true, of course, that computer applications have transformed business education, government, law enforcement, defense, medicine, engineering, and the diverse fields of science. The value of computers is due to their speed, accuracy, and versatility. In an article titled "The Boundless Potential," Gilbert Burck expresses delight that computers are able "to reason without being corrupted by emotion."[9]

In contrast, H. J. Muller reminds us sharply:

> They [computers] cannot go on to make up questions on their own, talk back independently, imagine, dream, aspire, create, or conspire to becomes Frankensteins. . . . They can process only quantitative or factual information, not qualitative judgments or social values.[10]

As might be expected from what I've already recounted, Jaspers could not and did not oppose such developments as computers, recognizing that "technicisation" is not to be denied; we simply have no choice about the matter. However, he does insist that:

> . . . to render the world of technique absolute would be destructive of selfhood, and therefore our sense of the value of technical achievement must be permeated with a new significance.[11]

To see what this "new significance" is and why this is true, let us now turn to a a brief look at Jaspers on knowledge, on Existenz, on ultimate situations, and on transcendence. Here advance apologies are surely in order, for any attempt to

present these complex notions succinctly is bound to involve oversimplification, although I hope not too much distortion.

Concerning knowledge, one basic distinction that he makes is between intellectual thought and reason. The former is an abstract, logical devising of the mechanics of things; it is a limited, partial, though necessary, point of view possessing a sort of clarity applicable as an ideal to science—but not to philosophy.

In contrast, for Jaspers, reason requires a wholeness resulting from a combination of diverse perspectives (including the emotions as cognitive). Reason is original, not mechanical, involving decision, resolve, and self-willed performance. As he summarizes this distinction in *The Future of Mankind:*

> The self-awareness of man is founded in the inner change that is is incomprehensible, unreal even, to the intellect. If I base my awareness of existence on the mental attitude of the intellect, on its know-all and know-how, I sink into nothingness. Searching for myself along this road is futile; I shall have forgotten myself in mere intellectual thought. Reason brings me back to myself.
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> After the inner change, intellect and reason remain linked. Whatever is objectively, intellectually thinkable must be thought through to its limits, to be retained, conversely, in the realm of reason. The bounds of cognition are met and surpassed at the same time. . . . Our aim is to make sure, within the scope of data and conceivabilities, of the ultimate motives from which our judgments and trends of action spring.[12]

Through a philosophy of reason in Jasper's sense, the "I" throws off its artificial masks, its shells, which are untrue, in order to achieve a deeper, authentic awareness of self. This authentic selfhood, termed *Existenz*, cannot be conceived in abstract, universal terms; it is anything *but* a Cartesian clear

and distinct idea. It is also not an object of investigation, not an empirical datum. As R. F. Grabau explains:

> For the illumination of Existenz thus conceived there can be no objective criterion of truth. . . . Each Existenz is unique, unrepeatable, irreplaceable, consequently, there is no guarantee that even at the level of Existenz the conceptual clarification which will prove for one Existenz will also hold for another.[13]

Existenz is the "dark ground of selfhood" that I encounter behind all appearances and roles and activities. Existenz is our unique possibility of self-determination and freedom. It has its very being in freedom. Existenz is what Jaspers in *Reason and Existenz* calls "the Encompassing" in the sense that it is "a fundamental origin, the condition of selfhood without which all the vastness of Being becomes a desert."[14] Existenz is, then, the focal point of genuine meaning for each person. Without Existenz everything seems phony, empty, unreal, without foundation, because "everything has turned into endless masks, mere possibilities, or mere empirical existence."[15]

In becoming what one is not yet, the person follows that path of Transcendence; in being Existenz, one becomes aware of that which is something more than oneself. Jaspers noted that neither do I exist without the world nor am I myself without Transcendence. The self is sure of its reality only in relation to Transcendence, without which it glides into the abyss of nothingness.

Transcendence is a total view of the world, not *sub specie aeternitatis*, but through participation in personal existence. The person as Existenz bears witness to Transcendence. Thus, on the one hand Transcendence is the source through which the person is genuinely Existenz and on the other, without Existenz, Transcendence has no meaning.

In a brilliant summary of his view concerning the relation between Existenz and Transcendence Jaspers wrote:

> When Existenz understands itself, it is not like my understanding of another, nor the sort of understanding whose contents can be abstracted from the person understanding, nor a sort of looking at; rather it is an origin which itself first arises in its own self-clarification. It is not like sharing in something else, but is at once the understanding and the being of what is understood. It is not understanding through universals, but moves above such understanding in the medium of spirit to become an understanding without any generalization in the absolute present, in deed, in love, and in every form of absolute consciousness. It is the difference between the love of another, which I understand but yet never really understand, and my own love, which I understand because I am that love. Or, in other words, the difference between understanding other things by empathy as process or experience, and understanding myself as unique since I know myself before Transcendence.[16]

Now, awareness of *Existenz* is stimulated by what Jaspers termed "ultimate situations" that cannot be ignored and cannot be eliminated. These include the facts of historical determinacy (I live at this time, in this place, under these conditions), of death, of conflict, of suffering, and of guilt.[17] There is also the fact that human life and thought in the practical sphere are replete with contradictions or antinomies that act as goals or stimuli for the growth of a consciousness of their complexity.

Now, with these distinctions in mind concerning Intellectual Knowledge and Reason, Existenz and Transcendence, it seems to be unquestionable that for Jaspers the kinds of truths resulting from computer operations would be very attenuated intellectual truths at best, although at the same time seductively attractive because clear, concise, and highly practical.

The problem is that they would of necessity fall outside the sphere of Reason, Existenz, and Transcendence, as Jaspers employs these terms. In *Way to Wisdom* he insisted that "communication then is the aim of philosophy, and in all its other aims are ultimately rooted: Awareness of being, illumination through love, attainment of peace."[18] This communication is, clearly for Jaspers, the work of Reason—not of Intellectual Knowledge.

For Jaspers, philosophy is an adventure, a search more than a discovery; it is a matter of the original, the heroic, even the extravagant. He wrote in *The Future of Mankind* of the need to move "from mere intellectual thinking to encompassing rational thinking that transforms man in his entirety" and, together with the knowledge of things, of the need to "evoke an inner attitude of vision, discrimination, of judgment."[19] Furthermore, these needs are not just theoretical; they are deeply practical. In fact, Jaspers insists that a return to Reason (involving both practical insight and transcendent thinking) is the change in a person on which the future depends. This is the essential truth for this philosopher for, as Jaspers puts it:

> Reason lies in the apperception of our environment, in constructive work, in earning for time and posterity, in peaceful competition, in the vision of beauty, in the contemplation of truth, in the fulfillment of one's destiny. Reason trusts in man and in his will to freedom, which receives intangible and incalcuable aid from Transcendence.[20]

Jaspers continually extolled, not professionalism and expertise, but greatness, and commended not the latest but the best. He rebelled against sterile philosophies that are unconcerned about the affairs of life.

Thus, in *Man in the Modern Age* Jaspers bemoaned the fact that humanity's being is menaced by a world in which scientific and technical means have becomes ends in

themselves, a world that humanity has established in which the danger of losing sight of oneself or even of surrendering individual existence is ever growing. He further insisted that no one of us can avoid facing up to this danger, for our being consists primarily of our existence in economic, sociological and political situations.

One fearsome temptation for modern persons is that one will attempt to lose oneself, to forfeit independent existence in a productive, often technical, function or simply as a nameless element in a mass society.

Consequently the dilemma emerges: on the one hand, each of us is unavoidably caught up in our circumstances, our contemporary, science-oriented, computer-directed, industrial society, which we cannot escape, nor should we want to; and, on the other, certain apparently essential components of this society (mass production, over-specialization of labor, a near-idolization of science) tend to dehumanize or debase the person, who, Jaspers insisted, must unceasingly strive to be an authentic, responsible, properly *human* reality.

The options before us today seem to be: the continuance and expansion of a dehumanizing, amoral technology; an attempted retreat to a romanticized, pretechnological world; or the creation of a rehumanized technology. Jaspers saw these choices clearly, opted for the third, and suggested cogently how we might initiate this creation.

The only hope, he felt, lies in a return to Reason:

> [Reason] . . . belongs to all men but it belongs to their whole being and is not merely a special field of comprehension. It links men who may differ completely in all other respects, in their ways of life, their feelings, their desires; it links them more strongly than they are divided by all their diversities.[21]

NOTES

[1] Charles F. Wallraff, *Karl Jaspers: An Introduction to His Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970) 9.

[2] Karl Jaspers, *The Way to Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale UP) 96.

[3] Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz* (New York: Noonday, 1955) 47.

[4] Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Anti-Reason in Our Time* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1952) 8.

[5] James Collins, "Jaspers on Science and Philosophy," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlip (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1957) 115-16.

[6] Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 9.

[7] Herbert J. Muller, *The Children of Frankenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970) 90.

[8] George A. Nikolaieff, Introduction, in *Computers and Society*, ed. George A. Nikolaieff (New York: Wilson, 1970) 3.

[9] Gilbert Burck, "The Boundless Potential," in Nikolaieff 22.

[10] Muller 91-92.

[11] Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 181.

[12] Jaspers, *Future of Mankind* 8.

[13] "Karl Jaspers: Communication Through Transcen-

dence," in *Existential Philosophers: Kierkegaard to Merleau-Ponty*, ed. George A. Schrader, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 129.

[14] Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz* 60.

[15] Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz* 63.

[16] Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz* 62-63.

[17] A moving treatment of the character and consequences of the last of these can be found in Jasper's *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Noonday, 1947).

[18] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* 27.

[19] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* 204.

[20] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* 218.

[21] Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom* 229.