German philosopher and psychopathologist. Jaspers was professor of psychology (1921-48) at the University of Heidelberg. His major work, *Philosophy* (1932), presents an individual interpretation of existentialism. Jaspers argued that the deepest insights into human nature are revealed in 'limit situations', such as death.

Born in Oldenburg, Jaspers was raised by parents who generally ignored the ecclesiastical world. His father had serious misgivings about the integrity of institutionalized religion and abandoned it altogether in his latter years. But he also saw religion as one of the regulative forces that forestalls unforeseeable evil, and on that account thought it important to go along with his fellow men and have his son enrolled at a school where he received religious instruction in biblical history, catechism, and church history. Although this instruction planted ideas in Jaspers' mind that he would never forget, it had little momentary effect. He considered his confirmation a mere exercise in societal mores—an occasion to receive worldly presents, but without any religious emphasis—and the instruction prior to it, a mere joke, filled as it was with literalist biblical interpretations and antipapal diatribe. During his last year in the Gymnasium, he felt that to be true to himself he would have to leave the church. His father encouraged him to wait before making such a move until he was closer to death and no longer active in the world.

Already during his teen years he had become fascinated by his reading of Spinoza, but stayed with his study first of law and then medicine. He eventually earned his M.D. at the University of Heidelberg, where also he would later teach psychiatry and chair the department of Philosophy. In 1910 he married Gertrude Mayer and was greatly affected by her Jewish faith and deep respect for everything religious. It was another twenty years, however, before he developed any real interest in theology.

His intense study of Kierkegaard during the First World War had not only spawned his concept of *Existenz*, but also contributed to the realization he would achieve after World War II through dialogue with Protestant theologians that although philosophical faith, as the primal source of religious meaning, must have its own independent base, genuine philosophizing cannot neglect the factuality of the church and of theology. He also admitted that university life could be enhanced by having separate departments for the teaching of biblical (Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish) and Buddhist forms of faith. But while acknowledging the social and historical significance of various religious traditions, and eschewing the kind of hostility toward religion displayed by some Existentialists like Sartre, he did, like the latter, reject any intrusion of a personal, triune and incarnate God as a threat to human freedom, and to that extent remained quasi-atheistic throughout his life.

Jaspers on Religion. The depersonalization and alienation of the human situation in the modern age has resulted largely from scientistic and rationalistic attempts to reduce man to one or another kind of empirical being. But far from being a completely determined psycho-physical phenomenon, man is radically free, and to that extent can best be described as *Existenz*, or as a creature, in other words.

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whose very being it is to be open to Transcendence, that totality of Being that encompasses every horizon of human experience. Popular religion has named this Transcendence "God," and so long as it expresses itself in the symbolic language of mythology and leaves individuals free to try deciphering for themselves traces of the hidden God in every word, action, thing, or person around them, it remains true and a helpful stimulus to philosophical reflection.

But when religion claims a special revelation on the basis of some otherworldly, mystical experience, and uses its authority and cultic practice to impose a dogmatic, exclusive conception of God such as would convert Transcendence into a real, objective presence, it must then be opposed as a threat to the philosophical faith from which the religious attitude emerged in the first place. Prompted negatively by the limits of the human situation (e.g., finiteness) and, more positively, by a precognitive reading of the ciphers that both reveal and conceal the transcendent dimensions of reality, such faith is the fundamental awareness experienced by the individual self as it discovers its own freedom. Resisting nihilistic and mystical temptations to deny the ultimate meaning of its own existence and of the world around it, the self affirms, without any proof or objective knowledge to go by, an existential relationship with Transcendence, surrenders prayerfully to the will of God, and like Jeremiah, Job, or Jesus, actively suffers, without any hope of personal immortality, the human foundering that comes to a climax in the experience of death.

Sources

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