

# **The Theme of Existence in the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers.**

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## **Introduction**

Out of the numerous species of life in the universe, humans are the only species that ask pertinent questions bothering on the meaning, value and goal of life. Why do we live? What do we live for? What is the ultimate sense in continuing to exist on earth? Even when philosophy analyses statements, questions knowledge and seeks ontology of being, it makes no sense if it does not add value to life by providing answers to these and other existential questions. Thus over the centuries, philosophers from Socrates to contemporary thinkers have tried to give voice to this cry of uncertainty, paradox, and inescapable incongruity enveloping human existence.

In the nineteenth century, a philosophical school emerged, like others before it, to settle man's anxiety about life. Existentialism, as it is called, is a philosophical movement that recognises the ineptitudes of life and attempts to solve it by encouraging a deep reflection upon human existence in order to create an authentic individual in a hollow and absurd life. In this work, we shall focus on the theme of existence in the works of one of the foremost, yet unfamiliar existentialists- Karl Jasper. We shall begin with a brief survey of his life history and a general overview of the existentialist themes. Next we shall look at his analysis of what existence is, and the relevance of philosophy to it. Finally we shall end with a succinct conclusion.

## **Karl Jasper, the Existentialist.**

Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) was born in the East Frisian city of Oldenburg. He started out as a psychiatrist in Heiderberg, Germany, after which he switched to writing philosophy. Although both epochs cannot be finely severed, yet his intellectual career can be periodised into the medical-psychological period (1910–1919) and the philosophical period (1932–1947) during which his main philosophical works were written.<sup>1</sup> Like most existentialist who got inspired by their socio-cultural milieu, three events are key to Jasper's formation as an existentialist. First,

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<sup>1</sup> Ronny Miron, *Karl Jaspers, From Selfhood to Being*. (New York: Amsterdam Press, 2012), p. 4

early in his childhood, Japer was diagnosed with a lung disease-bronchiectasis- a chronic illness that would impede his physical ability to function throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> Due to the primitive nature of medicine, there was an anxiety, in him and others, that he would live a life of pain and suffering, and eventually die at an early stage. According to Salamun,

*The permanent confrontation with the imminence of his own death because of his disease had a great influence upon one of the main thesis of Jaspers' existential philosophy, namely, that the experience of boundary situations like death, suffering, struggling, or guilt, is an unavoidable condition of human existence. Experiencing and overcoming those situations in the right way provides a basic opportunity to realize the meaning of life.*<sup>3</sup>

Second, is the deep personal relationship he had with his Jewish wife, Getrude. Before this union, both of their parents disagreed because of the conservative nature of both races. Jasper and his wife used to philosophise. The extent of their intimacy was most clearly expressed during the Nazi years. During most of that time, she was exempt from being arrested due to her marriage to Jasper, a German. Jaspers, on the other hand, was demoted in the university and eventually dismissed in 1937 due to the same fact. From 1937 to 1945 Jaspers' career was over. In their bathroom cabinet, they had a bottle of poison, and they had agreed to commit suicide together if she was ever arrested.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazi regime over the Jewish race and the agonizing effect of this experience made a lasting impression on him. The first event entrenched the existential themes of absurdity, death, meaningless of life and a need for the struggle for authenticity and individuality. The second event shaped his conception of interpersonal existential communication that became a second aspect for the meaning of life in Jaspers' existentialism. The Nazi take-over which also saw Heidegger becoming a pro-Nazi almost pushed him to despair and constituted a crucial motivation for developing a third conception of the meaning of life, namely, that every human being is to be governed by reason.

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<sup>2</sup> Peach Filiz, *Death, Deathlessness and Existenz in Karl Jasper's Philosophy*. (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2008), p. 30

<sup>3</sup> Salamun Kurt. *Karl Jaspers' Conception of the Meaning of Life. International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics and Arts*. Vol. 1, No. 1-2, (Fall, 2006), p. 2

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Peter, Koestenbaum, Karl Jaspers." *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol 4, 2nd Ed. 2006, p. 800

Jaspers was also influenced especially by Immanuel Kant, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, whom he admired because they were, to him, prophets who articulated the structure of their existence. Irrespective of them not being academic philosophers, their thinking welled up directly from their personal existence, and they illustrated the axiom that philosophic thinking begins in the attempt to communicate to another the nature of one's *Existenz*.<sup>5</sup>

Existentialism as a philosophical school has a slippery hold. It is a highly diffuse theoretical movement in which it is almost impossible for any two philosophers connected with this movement should hold similar views in all respects. However, existentialism has certain unifying features. In the early stages of its evolution, existentialism might be described as a theoretical stance which reacted to the abstract rationalism of Hegel's philosophy, insisting on the irreducibility of the subjective, personal dimension of human life. It was also a movement away from Kantian formalism and emphasis on the belief that the content of thought must reside in particular experiences and decisions, on the "individual."

Existentialism as a philosophy is a passionate and deeply engaged activity, in which the integrity and the authenticity of the human being are decisively implicated; a seeking to overcome the antinomies (reason/experience; theory/praxis; transcendence/immanence; pure reason/practical reason) which determine the classical metaphysical tradition by incorporating all aspects (cognitive, practical and sensory) of human life in an encompassing account of rational and experiential existence.<sup>6</sup>

### **Karl Jasper's Concept of Existence.**

Existence in one sense refers to the sum total of reality, and in another sense, the elusive characteristic of being which differentiates real things from fictional ones.<sup>7</sup> For Jasper, Existence as it pertains to Being is called Encompassing. It is the form of our awareness of being which underlies all our scientific and common-sense knowledge and which is given expression in the myths and rituals of religion.<sup>8</sup> This awareness is not that of an object, but reflection on the subjective situation of being. Thus existence is about reflection upon the horizon of life,

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 799

<sup>6</sup> Steven Crowell, Existentialism. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/> (Friday, June 6, 2014)

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Baldwin, "Existentialism." *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*. Ed. by Ted Hendrick, 1995, p. 257.

<sup>8</sup> Jaspers Karl, *Philosophy of Existence*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. xv

accepting the limitless possibilities in reality and also accepting that even though we can enlarge the extent of our knowledge, we can never escape the fact that it is fragmentary and has a limit.

He says:

*By reflecting upon that course (the limitless horizon of reality) we ask about being itself, which always seems to recede from us, in the very manifestation of all the appearances we encounter. This being we call the encompassing. But the encompassing is not the horizon of our knowledge at any particular moment. Rather, it is the source from which all new horizons emerge, without itself ever being visible even as a horizon.*<sup>9</sup>

Encompassing as awareness involving a subject-object encounter, Jasper posits, is in modes. Every act of awareness is therefore analyzable according to a model in which a subject is related to an object. The modes of encompassing are immanent and transcendent modes.

### **Immanent Mode:**

Jaspers' anthropological framework consists of a dual conception of man, and bears in some basic aspects striking resemblances to Immanuel Kant's philosophical anthropology and to Soren Kierkegaard's conception of the human being. Human beings are made up of an empirical and non-empirical phenomena. While the empirical dimension of man can be researched by the sciences (e.g., biology, psychology, sociology), the non-empirical dimension cannot be described and explained in objectifying scientific terms. The immanent mode consists in the Subject-Object encounter in the empirical realm, by which it attains self realization. The three modes of immanent mode of encompassing are

1. ***Dasein* or Existence:** *Dasein*<sup>10</sup> is a mode of Being which manifests itself as one's empirical self in the world with a temporal dimension. In other words, *Dasein* is man's everyday concrete mode of being among other entities. *Dasein* is embedded in the world

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18

<sup>10</sup> Jaspers' use of *Dasein* must also be distinguished from Heidegger's. For Heidegger, *Dasein* as an empirical entity is firmly grounded in the world, and there is no transcendent experience for *Dasein*. For Jaspers, '*Dasein*' is also grounded in the world as one's empirical self. However, this empirical self can transcend the empirical realm as *Existenz*. For Jaspers, the distinction between *Dasein* and *Existenz* is crucial, whereas for Heidegger there is no differentiation in this regard.

of experience, involved in practical aspects of everyday life, and always in a situation. According to Peach, Jasper believes that:

*Man is the only entity in the world to whom Being is manifested through his empirical existence. Man as Dasein is confronted with the world and as such he has needs and wants and makes decisions accordingly. Empirical existence is involved in 'worldly' activities and constitutes man's mundane being... Empirical existence, or Dasein, represents one's self as a concrete, physical and sociological being... Dasein cannot be understood as an object in isolation, but rather as a being among other beings in the world.*

At this level, man is seen in his/her most tangible manifestation of time and space, having needs and instincts, and also trying to gratify them. Whatever man comes in contact with are objects of his/her practical concern and they constitute the world of ordinary experience.

2. **Consciousness-In-General:** This second mode of immanent mode of encompassing entail a form of consciousness in which universal truths and objective knowledge, such as logic, mathematics and scientific knowledge, can be 'cognised' and, in principle, shared by everyone who has the intellectual capacity to reflect.<sup>11</sup> This level also called the mode of abstract rational and conceptual understanding is methodologically bent towards generation and application of concepts and methods in general which are public and verifiable. The knowledge acquired here is universal and objective. *"In consciousness-in-general an interchangeable point of mere thought speaks. It is thought-in-general, not that of a particular individual or the selfhood of Existenz,"*<sup>12</sup> accounting for its universality.

In as much as truth is sought in this level of existence, Jasper is quick to warn that

*"although "consciousness in general," this realm of the sciences, is also the realm where matters become clear for us because they can be stated, yet its compelling correctness is by no means ever in itself alone the absolute truth. Rather, truth emerges from all modes of the encompassing... Truth that is*

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<sup>11</sup> Peach Filiz, *op.cit.*, p. 34

<sup>12</sup> Jaspers Karl, *op.cit.*, p. 39

*vitally important to us begins precisely where the cogency of "consciousness in general" ends.*"<sup>13</sup>

At this level, we have the capacity to engage in intellectual search for truth by formulation of concepts and application of principles which are objective knowledge, yet truth is not grasped at this level.

3. **Spirit:** This immanent mode of Being is the totality of intelligible thought, action and feeling. It is a mode formed out of a kind of synthesis of existence and abstract consciousness in general, that is why man's existence in this mode is both concrete and historical on one hand; and on the other hand, like consciousness in general, it is universal. It is a drive towards a unity or wholeness of emotions, perceptions, impulses, concepts, methods, views obtained from the lived experience of the *Dasein* and Consciousness in general to form "Ideas." These unified ideas include ideas of religion, politics, culture, tradition and organization. *Truth at the level of spirit is conviction. It proves itself in actuality through existence and thought, to the extent to which it submits to the wholeness of ideas, thereby confirming their truth.*<sup>14</sup>

Peach sums up the unity of all three modes of immanent existence or dimensions of human realisation in a mode succinct way. He says,

*According to Jaspers, then, Dasein, consciousness-as-such and Spirit are the modes of Being in which we see ourselves as rooted in the world, and we participate in the worldly events as 'possible Existenz' without any transcendent experience. At the same time, all three modes of Being are inseparably connected with Existenz, one's inner self.*<sup>15</sup>

### **Transcendent Mode**

Although we are immersed in the world of experience in which we have to apply the three modes of immanent existence in order to know and survive, however, the world is not all there is to reality, and so these immanent modes do not exhaust our encounter with reality. Man has the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Peach Filiz *op.cit.*, p. 35

ability to transcend the world of empirical experience by means of philosophical thinking. But in order to transcend, we must first have a full grasp of the immanent. There are two modes in this encompassing.

1. **Transcendent mode of *Existenz*:** The concept of *Existenz* stands for the non-empirical and non-objective actuality of selfbeing and true self-hood. It is the authentic ground of human being, exemplified by the intimate dimension of personal autonomy, existential freedom, authenticity and undetermined moral decisions.<sup>16</sup> It is the absolutely unique inner core of the individual that creates the authenticity of the person. *Existenz* lacks a definite definition partly due to limitation of language and partly to the absence of an object to refer to, since it is a possibility in all men. *Existenz* may also be described as the ultimate source or origin of all concrete being. It is in this sense the principle of freedom, creativity and pure spontaneity. It is the quality of life, a universal structure. *Existenz is the self-being that relates to itself and thereby also to transcendence from which it knows that it has been given to itself and upon which it is grounded.*<sup>17</sup>

*Existenz* appears to itself as consciousness-in-general, existence and spirit; and it can contrast itself with their modes. But it can never take a position outside itself, cannot know itself and at the same time be identical with what it knows. Thus, all knowledge and action must occur in the world in one or more of the three immanent modes. Thus, *Existenz* seems to be a principle of spontaneity or creativity within them. It is not to be mistaken for an object for it is not. Its origin issues from thinking and acting. It is man as *Existenz* who continually breaks out of established patterns to create new historical organizations at the level of existence, new knowledge and understanding at the level of consciousness in general and new ideas in the realm of the spirit, as in morals, art, and religion.<sup>18</sup> Self-realisation as *Existenz* is equivalent to realising the meaning of one's own life.

2. **Transcendence:** transcendence is an objective mirror of the *Existenz*; the being that is partly reflected by the immanent reality. Transcendence is Being in itself, that makes

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<sup>16</sup> Salamun Kurt, *op.cit.*, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Jaspers Karl, *op.cit.*, p. 21

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xx

*Existenz* aware of its (transcendence) self subsistence, and its (*Existenz*) dependence of it. "If there were no transcendence, if the world were all there were to being, *Existenz* would not be possible. Man would be a mundane being, describable in the concepts of the various immanent modes of the encompassing."<sup>19</sup> The consciousness of *Existenz* of transcendence brings awareness that within any level of the world, one never fully articulates all possibilities, and beyond objective determination is a background or horizon of being itself to which *Existenz* is related. Thus, existential self realization is not a product of the rational or managerial ability of *Existenz*, but a gift from the "unattainable and [incomprehensible] One that works through reason"<sup>20</sup>

In order to fully live out one's existence, that is, to actualize one's *Existenz* through the harmonisation of the different modes of existence, Jasper presents two intertwined possibilities.

### **Reacting to Boundary Situations**

As humans move along in life, there comes a time when each person is faced with certain tough moments, situation whose solution elude the power of rational knowledge. Jasper calls these situation *Grenzsituationen* or boundary situations. We cannot escape them nor explain them away, else we would be deceiving ourselves. Neither can they be managed else we would break down or run into despair. Resolving it requires a radical change of attitude. The proper way to handle boundary situations "is not by planning and calculating to overcome them but by the very different activity of becoming the *Existenz* we potentially are; we become ourselves by entering with open eyes into the boundary situations. We can know them only externally, and their reality can only be felt by *Existenz*. To experience boundary situations is the same as *Existenz*."<sup>21</sup>

There are four major boundaries of situation in life, suffering, struggle, guilt, and death. We are inevitably faced with our death, or the death of a child or loved one, anguish, excruciating and persistent pain, power or social struggle, sadness or guilt. On the other hand, we long for their opposites-peace, happiness, joy, riches, recognition. Faced with these antinomies of life, man has two options before him considering also, that every choice comes with consequences: either to

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>21</sup> Salamun Kurt, *op.cit.*, p. 4

resigns to fate, nihilistic despair or hopelessness; or make meaning out of life by facing the challenge squarely.

In order to make meaning out of life, we have to embark on a journey of “soul searching” by deep philosophical reflection and a radical change of attitude. For Jaspers, philosophy “*is a process of thinking, an as inner action in which the thinker comes to an authentic awareness of himself and reality by pressing beyond or transcending everything objective.*”<sup>22</sup> In the unique and historical experience of boundary situations, it is up to each individual to realise the proper moral attitudes or virtues to adopt, thereby ensuring individual authenticity; philosophy is concerned directly with a fundamental new interpretation of “life. When succeeding in the realisation of proper attitudes and virtues, one has a good chance to realise the meaning of life.”<sup>23</sup>

### **Interpersonal Communication**

There is a common maxim the “no man is an island.” This means that every man lives life to the fullest by coexisting with the other. For there to be coexistence, there must be communication. Jasper identifies four types of communications which is found in every human society. The first is communication is for existence, which is instinctual. This is in obedience to the law of self preservation. It is communication to satisfy sexual desires, power thirst etc. “*Communication at this level is either conflict prone or an expression of an identity of interests. It is not unlimited communication, but breaks off to suit its own purposes and uses cunning against the enemy and against the possible enemy in the friends.*”<sup>24</sup> The second is in consciousness in general. It proceeds by rational argument and targets universal and formal truth, such as intellectual discussion of experts in order to solve problems. At the level of the spirit or *Geist*, communication moves closer to the other person rather than being centred on ‘tangibles’ and ideas. Here the totality of the speaker and listener is put on display; there is a search for *Existenz*.<sup>25</sup> The fourth and most important is existential communication. This communication is a philosophical enquiry into one’s experiential existence, into one’s own life as presented by history or experience. It involves an intimate interpersonal relationship between two human being, like father and son. Jasper says:

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<sup>22</sup> Jaspers Karl, *op.cit.*, p. xii

<sup>23</sup> Salamun Kurt, *op.cit.*, p. 5

<sup>24</sup> Jaspers Karl, *op.cit.*, p. 39

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 39-40

*Existenz, the man who is himself present speaks. He speaks to another Existenz as one irreplaceable individual to another. Their communication takes place in a loving struggle—not for power but for openness—in which all weapons are surrendered but all modes of the encompassing appear.”<sup>26</sup> ...In Existenz there is faith and despair. Opposed to both stands the desire for the peace of eternity, where despair is impossible and faith becomes the vision, that is to say, the perfect presence of perfect reality<sup>27</sup>*

In order to optimize our existential options, we have to make a deliberated effort to change our attitude to life by cultivating certain key virtues which are- willingness to be solitude; Open-mindedness; sincere intention to accept a communication partner in his or her autonomy and individual possibility for self-realisation; intellectual integrity and truthfulness; Existential equality grounded on the conviction that irrespective the other’s ethnic, social, racial or gender differences, substantial communication can be achieved. It is a call to giving to each person his/her dues because we all partake the same historical *Existenz*.

To crown all of this, self-realisation has to do with the application of reason to the historical facticity of life. Reason is the bond that unites all the modes of encompassing to bring about wholeness of the individual. “Reason seeks unity, but not just any unity simply for the sake of unity. It seeks the One that contains all truth. It is as if reason brings the One from an unattainable distance and makes it present as an attracting force overcoming all divisions.”<sup>28</sup>

## **Conclusion.**

Karl Jaspers’ existential philosophy is about identifying our modes of immanent and transcendental ‘beingness’. No matter how much we relate with the universe, if we do not aim at transcending concrete reality towards to origin of the encompassing (God), there cannot be full actualization of our existence. We can never attain *Existenz*. While we need philosophy, religion and science in other to reach this level of self awareness and self realization, reason plays a major role in unifying these modes, by this we make radical attitudinal choices that will facilitate our living a fulfilled life in the face of despair.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55

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