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Karl Jaspers and Alain Badiou on the Destiny of Philosophy

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Abstract: The essay investigates Jaspers' vision of the future of philosophy in light of Alain Badiou's critique of postmodern thought from the perspective of his notion of philosophy as a seizure of eventual and void truths. For both Jaspers and Badiou the future of philosophy depends entirely on the destiny of truth as the outcome of the hermeneutic battle between philosophy and sophistry-dogmatism, between philosophy and anti-philosophy. Truth is singular universality, co-eval with the subject, real though elusive, an event breaking into the eventual situation, or made possible by the limit of Existenz, a rupture of the void in the texture of being or an encounter with Transcendence. World Philosophy can be a fulfillment of the *figura* of the Axial Age *philosophia perennis* only to the extent to which philosophy is able to remain courageous in its faithfulness, discerning, and in reserve toward the fourfold truth operations.

The idea of world philosophy has been the ground of Jaspers' thought and his testament to the future with which he concludes his own obituary:

He devoted all the powers of these years to the continuation of his philosophical work, which by its nature cannot be brought to a conclusion, a labor through which – anticipating rather than knowing, attempting rather than attaining – he wished to participate in the task of the times, i.e., to find the way from the end of European philosophy to a world-philosophy to come.¹

In the following reflections I will investigate the fate of Jaspers' vision of world philosophy as "the task of the times" in late modernity. I distinguish three principal events that have marked the postmodern understanding

of world philosophy. Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God has been fulfilled by Thomas Altizer's theological apocalypticism.² The death of God is, according to Altizer, the divine kenotic emptying into the world, the end of transcendence and the reign of an immanent *coincidentia oppositorum*. Although this immanence is contrary to Jaspers' fundamental ciphers, i.e., Transcendence and the Encompassing, there is a dialectical relation between the cipher of immanence and the concept of World Philosophy. If Transcendence is understood as a cipher adequate to European philosophy, then the demise of the latter and the advent of World Philosophy qua immanence coincide.

The second event is the fact of World Philosophies in the second half of the twentieth century, when the

¹ "Obituary by Karl Jaspers himself," in *Karl Jaspers. Philosophy on the Way to "World Philosophy,"* eds. Leonard H. Ehrlich and Richard Wisser (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), p. 6.

² Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Self-Embodiment of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); *History and Apocalypse* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985).

paradigm of European hegemony has been replaced by one of cultural pluralism.

The third event is the late modernity questioning of the nature and future of philosophy as well as of World Philosophy(ies). Jean Baudrillard and Alain Badiou maintain opposing attitudes toward and propose opposing interpretations of the present state of the world. While Baudrillard notes the postmodern "melancholy of systems" caused by the technological actualization of our poetic and theological metaphors,³ Badiou sees the dawn of universal consciousness, one that has emerged with Saint Paul. He is thus in agreement with David Leahy, the thinker of the *novitas mundi*, of "thinking now occurring."⁴

I will engage in the investigation of the fate of Jaspers' "task of the time" in light of Alain Badiou's critique of postmodern thought from the perspective of his notion of philosophy as "a seizure of eventual and void truths."

Karl Jaspers – Philosophy in the Aftermath of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche

In order to embark on the present task, one needs to assess Jaspers' view of contemporary philosophy and his diagnosis of the contemporary situation. Jaspers considers that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche have created the new conditions for philosophizing.⁵ Questions such as "what is philosophy?" "what will become of philosophy?" suggest that philosophy is at an end. Jaspers maintains that Hegel was the end of Western philosophy, as "objective, confident, absolute rationality" (RE 128); while Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, by questioning in endless reflection, exhausted the possibility of the single, complete system. The difficulty of our situation resides in our awareness of the negative counter-rational ground on which we stand and philosophize, i.e., for the first time, philosophy is aware that it must ground itself in potential Existenz rather than Reason.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1995); *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. by James Benedict (New York: Verso, 1993).

⁴ David G. Leahy, *Novitas Mundi* (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Reason and Existenz*, transl. William Earle (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997), p. 127 [henceforth cited as RE].

What is our Existential Situation? The question is whether today we are involved in a profound revolutionary transition, either a spiritual revolution or an external process arising from technology; a world of catastrophe and an immense, though yet unclear, possibility. The facts defining the new era: modern technology, the unity of the globe created by modern communications, the increased population transformed from nations into masses, seemingly enabled to understand and participate in the process but actually transformed into slaves, the breakdown of past ideals of order and the need to find a new human order capable to save us from chaos, the questionableness of all traditional values in the political situation of the cold war—all these factors are part of the transition from bourgeois contentment, progress, education, and a sense of security to an age of war, mass murder, most terrible sense of menace and chaotic disintegration, in which humanity is being extinguished.⁶

Jaspers called attention to the apocalyptic nature of the times, the *coincidentia oppositorum* of the brave new world that affects the whole of mankind "drawn into one common stream of destruction or renewal."⁷ What is radically new about the present crisis is the fact that it involves the entire world, the whole of mankind, and not only a limited portion of it. Jaspers insists that "today for the first time there is a real unity of mankind which consists in the fact that nothing essential can happen anywhere that does not concern us all" (OGH 139). The European scientific and technological revolution is the material basis and cause of the spiritual catastrophe—our historical situation is seen as the turning point of the ages, one whose magnitude only the Axial Period can match. Jaspers questions the relation between the contemporary age of radical metamorphosis of humanity and the Axial Period. He notes the major differences between the two. Thus, the contemporary situation is absolutely universal, since planetary, whereas the Axial Age was only relatively universal since circumscribed by Europe, China and India; the phenomenon is occurring with consciousness of its own universality; it is one of technological breakthrough and

⁶ Karl Jaspers, *The Perennial Scope of Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Manheim (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), pp. 158-159 [henceforth cited as PSP].

⁷ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), p. 138 [henceforth cited as OGH].

political remolding rather than of spiritual creation. Our Technological Age is more similar to the epoch of the invention of tools and weapons, than to the Axial Age of Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates. The Age of Technology is characterized by emptiness in contrast to the plenitude of the Axial Age.⁸

Confronted with contemporary emptiness, Jaspers asks, what should philosophy do in the present world situation? He sketches the inward portrait of the present: a de facto nihilism, a lack of inwardness, and the loss of the sense of value, existential indifference for life and death alike, epidermal, violent but short-lived affect (*PSP* 160). The prophetic visions of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are thus being actualized: the individual is caught between forms of dull indifference and nihilistic despair (*PSP* 162). Philosophy's enduring task is to achieve the independence of man as an individual by establishing a relation to authentic being by the depth of his attachment to Transcendence. This independence can be achieved either in renunciation to the world or through participation in the world. The ultimate goal of philosophy, according to Jaspers, is communication, a form of the Kantian kingdom of ends, i.e., one in which independent and authentic individuals who can prove themselves in solitude as Pascal demanded are the only ones capable to enter into communication (*PSP* 166-167). Given this enduring task of philosophy, Jaspers intends to define its present mission. Since faith in reason is at an end, and together with it, the idea of world order or harmony and our reliance on the law are lost, the forgotten primal source is laid bare: thus there is scope for a radical philosophy, i.e., a philosophy of the root or radix, of the primal source which is Existenz (*PSP* 168). Jaspers concludes:

⁸ "First of all outwardly. Our Age of Technology is not merely relatively universal like the events in those three mutually independent worlds of the Axial Period, but absolutely universal because it is planetary. It is not a process that is mutually related in meaning yet separate in fact; it is a single whole in continual mutual intercourse. Today it is taking place with consciousness of universality. What is happening now is absolutely decisive. There is no longer anything outside it. Inwardly, however, something manifestly quite different from the Axial Period is involved. Then the plenitude, now the emptiness. The present age is one of real technological and political remolding not yet of eternal spiritual creations. We may liken ourselves...to the epoch of the invention of tools and weapons, of the first use of domestic animals and horses, than with the age of Confucius, Buddha and Socrates" (*OGH* 139-140).

Today our task is to find in existence itself a new foundation for reason. That is the urgent task in the spiritual situation defined by Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Pascal and Dostoevsky. (*PSP* 168)

Thus, for Jaspers, philosophy always strives to apprehend the truth. The truth is present in history at all times and never, always in movement, perhaps most profoundly manifested in a violent movement, in upheaval (*PSP* 157-158). The most significant question in this context: Does that mean that our contemporary situation can make truth emerge and thus give an exceptional scope to philosophy itself in spite of the increasing number of its pallbearers and mourners? It is the rational will for the universal that questions the absolute end of philosophy and may even find new insights into its own history and fundamental origin.

Alain Badiou - Possibility, Necessity, and Desire of Philosophy

In *Manifesto for Philosophy* Badiou affirms his belief not only in the possibility of contemporary philosophy, but also in the fact that philosophy is not in a final state but rather "taking one more step within the modern configuration" established with Descartes that binds the concepts of being, truth, and the subject to the conditions of philosophy.⁹ Philosophy, he maintains, requires certain conditions for its possibility, conditions that are not external, or objective—social, ideological, religious, mythological—but rather transversal, i.e., invariant, generic truth procedures of science (the matheme), the political (political invention), love, and art (the poem). He adduces Plato as the first philosophical configuration that showed that these truth procedures are compossible in thought. Philosophy does not itself produce truths but requires there to be truths within each of the orders in which they may be invoked. What is the relation between philosophy, cognition, and truth? The truth, he writes, stands out by its eventual origin; while cognition, correct statements, accumulated knowledge do not require the Event, the new; but the latter is a condition sine qua non for the truth to happen: "The origin of a truth is of the order of the Event...In the beginning in the situation if no (pure) Event, supplements it, there is no truth,

⁹ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, transl. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999) 32 [henceforth cited as *MP*].

only veridicality.¹⁰ According to this hermeneutics of truth as Evental (the nature of Truth is heterogeneous: truth is not knowledge, rather "truth creates a hole in knowledge," *MP* 37), Badiou gradually develops the thought and definition of philosophy.

To do that, Badiou develops a number of theses that endeavor to respond to the objections raised against philosophy and the possibility of philosophy in postmodernity.

Thesis 1. Its relation to its own history today paralyzes philosophy. Indeed, the malaise in philosophy is paralyzing philosophy between historiography and relocalization. Badiou's intention is to break with this diagnosis and urge philosophy to go back to its roots (radicalize itself) but in a different way.

Thesis 2. Badiou defends rupture, and tearing philosophy away from the genealogical imperative, as philosophy must break from within itself with historicism. Against Heidegger, he calls forth a "violent forgetting of the history of philosophy and of the whole montage of the oblivion of being" (*MP* 115). Instead, he intends to initiate, like Descartes or Spinoza, an autonomous legitimating of discourse and to define philosophy in the absence of references to its history, its destiny, or by decline of Western metaphysics.

Thesis 3. A definition of Philosophy exists and is a historic invariant that distinguishes philosophy from sophistry, i.e., what is not philosophy but resembles it. Modern sophists, following Wittgenstein, maintain that the fundamental opposition and alternative for thought is that between speech and silence, not truth and error. That is why Badiou views contemporary or postmodern philosophy as sophistry. The most significant gesture of contemporary sophistry is the compromise of the idea of truth in the demise of the great historic narratives, of progressive discourse of the Redemption theme, and its replacement with the idea of rule or the linguistic authority of the Law, of Jewish wandering under the law (*MP* 118).

Thesis 4. Thus, every definition of philosophy must distinguish itself from sophistry. Since the sophist—ancient or postmodern—claims that there is no truth, that the concept of truth is useless and uncertain, that there are only conventions, rules, types

of discourse, language games, a definition of philosophy requires taking a stand in relation to the concept of truth. Thus, Badiou affirms, "the category of truth is the central category of any possible philosophizing" (*MP* 119).

During the twentieth century in its decline there have been three dispositions of history—Stalinism, Fascism, and Western parliamentarianism; three loci—Russia, Germany, and US; and three ideological complexes of philosophy—Marxist-dialectical materialism, Heideggerian thinking in its militant NS dimension, and logical positivism of the Vienna Circle; all of which shared a common feature, namely, a violent opposition to the Platonic foundations of metaphysics. Contemporary statements agree that what was historically initiated by Plato has entered into the final moments (*MP* 121). Badiou declares the end of this End and the re-opening of the Plato question to examine whether it is not by an other Platonic gesture that our future thinking must be supported (*MP* 122), i.e., by the Plato of *The Apology* and the aporetic dialogues rather than the Plato of the "repressive apparatus" set up for disaster of *The Laws*, Book X.

Badiou grapples with the task of defining this category of truth, a strictly philosophical category, in relation to classical philosophy. His first thesis: the pre-reflexive conditions of philosophy are constituted by the truths emerging in four possible registers, i.e., mathematics, art, the political, the amorous encounter, that proceed within the real independently of philosophy (*MP* 123). Philosophy is not a production of truth but an operation from truths, since the category of truth must remain a void, an operational and logical void. Badiou's phrase for the philosophical operation of the category of truth, "pinching and seizing": "Philosophy, because its central category is void, is essentially subtractive, must subtract Truth from the maze of sense" (*MP* 126).

Thus, philosophy within whose heart there is a lack, a hole, is an operation of seizing the truth subtracted from presence, an operation that seizes truths from the sequence, the narrative of history and sense. But philosophy is always tempted to mistake its own operation of the empty category of truth with the production of truth: succumbing to this temptation exposes philosophy to what Badiou calls "disaster." The first victim was Plato's thought itself that renounced the *aporia* of the void of truth of the early dialogues for the criminal prescriptions of the Laws. On this model, the history of Western philosophy has been the locus of

¹⁰ "As long as nothing happens, there can be cognition, correct statements, accumulated knowledge [but] there cannot be truth...Out of the veridical statements there is a chance that a truth befall from the moment that an Event encountered its name" (*MP* 36-37).

repeated and deepening disaster that culminated with the twentieth century's political terror regimes. Once philosophy presents itself as a truth procedure or a situation of truth, indeed, the plenitude of truth, instead of an empty operation of seizing the truths, disaster sets in. Philosophy's disaster means the declaration of the ecstasy of place, the sacrality of name, and terror. Thus, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of truths is reduced to one single locus of truth indicated metaphorically—in Plato's case, the unique locus of truth is the intelligible place, *topos noetos*. The multiplicity of the names of truth—*theorems, principles, declarations, imperatives, beauty, and laws*—becomes restricted to one single eternal, genuine name, i.e., the sacralization of the name, a substantialization of the category of truth. For Plato, this sacralization over-determines the idea of the Good. When the void of truth becomes presence, and therefore what is outside the presence of truth must be annihilated, then terror and its law of death is the outcome. Badiou points to Stalinism, National Socialism and Imperial parliamentary democracy as the twentieth century's prototypes of real, historical "disaster" that always contains a philosopheme bringing together ecstasy, the sacred and terror: terror toward the Westerner, the Jew, the Communist or after the cold was the non-Westerner, the immigrant, the distant rebel (MP 131-132).

Thus, philosophy must steer its course between sophistry and dogmatism. Confronted with the terror of the twentieth century philosophemes produced by the dogmatic disaster of the concentration and Stalinist camps, the sophist denies the existence of truths and the accessibility of being qua being. The philosopher must respond to the sophist's denial of truth while avoiding the temptation of dogmatism's "disaster" of excess. The dogmatist confuses the operational void of truth with the donation of being, transforms philosophy from a rational operation into initiation, fills out the void of the operation of seizing with the ecstasy of a unique place of truth, declares one name of truth, proposes the terroristic imperative of being true as such (MP 133-134). The history of philosophy is the history of dogmatic failure of thought and abandonment of the ethics of philosophy that culminated with the terror regimes of the twentieth century that compromised philosophy, thus causing and justifying the Sophist's objection, i.e., the postmodern. (Sophistic and postmodern, contemporary philosophy endorses language games, deconstruction, feeble thinking, irremediable heterogeneity, different and differences,

the ruin of reason, the fragment or discourse in shreds, thus placing philosophy in an impasse, MP 135.) Badiou believes in the possibility and future of philosophy, of a philosophy whose central category according to his definition is the void of truth and one that was alive in the Platonic *aporetic* dialogues. This attitude is counter-sophistic as well as anti-dogmatic. Badiou maintains the possibility, necessity and desire of philosophy: "philosophy must reappear as what it is: a bright opening of eternity without God and soul, a duty for thought" (MP 137).

Alain Badiou – Truth as Event

To understand Badiou's difficult notions of truth as void and of philosophy as "pinching and seizing of truths," I will refer to his more accessible exploration of Saint Paul. In *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou presents the paradigmatic case of the event of truth introduced for the first time through the medium of the new discourse of universal singularity by Saint Paul. Here Badiou makes visible more clearly via the Pauline gesture the essence of evental truth as constitutive of the human subject and human subjectivity. According to Badiou, Paul reduces Christianity to a single statement and fabulous element, Jesus' Resurrection. The phenomenology of truth as event emerges. Truth erupts as a singularity immediately universalizable, interrupts repetition, and the logic of history. According to Paul's economy of the good news, truth is evental, thus singular, neither structural, nor axiomatic, nor legal; no generality can account for it or structure the subject who claims to follow in its wake; there cannot be a law of truth; and truth is inscribed on the basis of a declaration that is subjective in its essence.¹¹ Truth as universal singularity is offered and addressed to all without condition.

According to the paradigm of Paul's truth operation, philosophy and truth are intrinsically bound together and coeval with the birth of the human subject in and through the latter's decision. Badiou insists that Paul's institution of universal singularity through individual decision and faithful continuity is a secular and philosophical gesture par excellence. Truth emerges as a matter of universal singularity, thus transcending both Greek cosmic discourse of totality—

¹¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, transl. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 14 [henceforth cited as *SP*].

contemporary abstract globalism—and Jewish discourse of exception—contemporary provincialism of restricted identity. Truth cannot begin either with abstract totality or with the exception to totality: truth necessarily proceeds from the event that is acosmic and illegal (*SP* 42). Moreover, Badiou observes, the Christ event presented by Paul witnesses to a God that is not God the Father, the God of Being whose attributes are wisdom and power; it testifies instead to a God that is not Being, thus anticipating Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. Badiou ratifies Paul's radicalism in which non-being is the only legitimization of being and in which the naked event is pure beginning, does not prove or fulfill anything, is no concession to Jewish or Greek discourse and disposition, cannot be proven, and is not dialectical relation to any prior occurring. The fundamental significance of the Pauline institution of truth as event is the genesis of the human subject, i.e., the Immortal. Badiou distinguishes: "It is not the singularity of the subject that validates what the subject says: it is what he says that founds the singularity of the subject" (*SP* 53).

Badiou's fundamental notion is the meontological nature of truth—fourfold truth of love, art, science, and politics—as event that is only seized but not possessed by philosophy. On the model of Paul's witnessing and continuing fidelity to the Resurrection, the event of truth constitutes the witnessing and faithful subject qua subject, i.e., an immortal, and no longer a human animal. The contingency and subjectivity of truth point to its radical nature: in itself and objectively, it is void, i.e., unrepresented and unrepresentable. It only emerges in subjective witnessing of love, art, science, politics. Philosophy is the seizure of the compossibility of the four truth operations. The temptations that it must resist are those of substantialization of truth that would turn philosophy into dogmatism and terror, and of sophistry or truth-denial.

Karl Jaspers, Alain Badiou, and the Destiny of Philosophy

In order to understand the present and future of philosophy, Jaspers and Badiou follow trajectories indicating surprisingly similar concerns and often-similar answers.

Jaspers probed the significance of the Axial Period, while Badiou revisited early Plato and Saint Paul. The Axial Period provides the prototype of the *philosophia perennis* that may be fulfilled only now as World Philosophy. Since the present crisis is viewed by both

as the consequence of the cultivation of a defective philosophical attitude, the solution must be a radical transformation through the retrieval of the root, a forgotten dimension, i.e., for Jaspers, the integration of Existenz as ground of unreason into Reason, and making the threefold truth of the Encompassing that is ourselves—that of empirical existence, consciousness and spiritual existence—universally communicable through philosophical logic; for Badiou, it is the retrieval of the philosophical attitude of Plato's *aporetic* dialogues and the understanding of the void of truth as event exemplified by Paul's witnessing to the Resurrection. It is interesting to note that Badiou's notion of evental situation resembles Jaspers' notion of limit or boundary situation. Both the evental and the limit situation represent the necessary but not sufficient condition for the possibility of the event of truth; the subject emerges as subject in the declaration or witnessing of the truth event; Paul and Hölderlin are the exceptional case-illustrations proposed by both. Certainly, for Jaspers, the limit situation is the situation in which Existenz faces Transcendence; while Badiou never leaves immanence, and its polarities ontology-meontology, mathematics-philosophy, nature-history, and knowledge-truth.

For Badiou postmodern philosophy is truth-denying sophistry as a counter-reaction to philosophical dogmatism or the substantialization of truth; while Jaspers places such anti-philosophical attitudes under the signs of demonology and nihilism (*PSP* "Philosophy and Anti-Philosophy"). "Demonology," he explains, is a substitute for faith or inverted faith, it misses transcendence; it denies freedom, and unified experience, thus promoting fragmentation, dissolution in the indeterminate and relativism; it denies human distinction from nature; it endorses the Kierkegaardian aesthetic category characterized by irresponsibility of thought; it hovers in an intermediary form of being that is neither empirical reality nor transcendent actuality, but rather deception and illusion. Demonology includes the deification of man, i.e., of great men, tyrants, and charlatans. Nihilism as open unbelief is a radicalized and aggressive demonology: it denies being, truth, and God. Both Jaspers and Badiou qualify the response that philosophy is called to enact in the face of its others, sophistry and anti-philosophy. According to Jaspers, philosophy must identify the truth that its others contain though in distorted form and acknowledge the connection between itself and these others. Jaspers

warns against viewing anti-philosophy as "something superfluous, accidental, negligible" (PSP 146). He writes:

There is truth on the roads of anti-philosophy, yet each of them leads to a special fallacy: demonology to the fallacy of superstition and aestheticism; deification of man to the fallacy of confusing God and man; nihilism to the despairing, hating emptiness of a contingency dissolving in chaos. All three can as transition, as language, or as a spur, perform a function of truth, but in becoming definitive and fixed, they turn to fallacy. (PSP 147)

For Jaspers as for Badiou, truth is reversed when it is declared definitive and fixed or as he qualifies further "the fanaticism for truth becomes untrue," "absolutization," or "dogmatic professions of faith." That is rephrased by Badiou's notion of disaster for thought as the fallacy of dogmatism. A philosophy that rejects the truth and value of its others is on the way to its own annihilation.

It appears that both for Jaspers and for Badiou the future of philosophy depends entirely on the destiny of truth as the outcome of this hermeneutic battle, i.e., between philosophy and sophistry-dogmatism, between philosophy and anti-philosophy. Truth is singular universality, co-eval with the subject, real though elusive, an event breaking into the eventual situation, or made possible by the limit of Existenz, a rupture of the void in the texture of being or an encounter with Transcendence. World Philosophy may be a fulfillment of the figura of the Axial Age *philosophia perennis* only to the extent to which philosophy is able to remain courageous in its faithfulness, discerning, and in reserve toward the fourfold truth operations.