



Commentary on *Eternity is not Another World*

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Abstract: This commentary on Stefano Blasi's *Eternity is not Another World* was presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Boston, 2010.

Philosophical reflection about foundational concepts of language by necessity will soon divert to questions about underlying axiomatic systems that allow for complete and independent verification of propositions. While this can be entertained to some degree of accuracy in the context of natural numbers and logic (think about Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, or Giuseppe Peano's Axioms, or the contributions by Frege, Russell, or Whitehead) the claim for consistent semantic designation of a term's connotation and denotation is usually bound to fail when thought directs attention to itself. In fact, one of the central themes throughout the history of philosophy as we know it is devoted in some form or other to identify the limits of knowledge.

In this spirit, it is understandable that Stefano Blasi directs our attention to Parmenides and Anaximander for a taste of what started philosophical discussions about Being, *periechos* and *elenchos*. He does this to navigate the Jaspersian concept of the Encompassing, and he offers precise definitions and methodological rigor, perhaps in recognition of Immanuel Kant who

certainly has influenced Jaspers. With equal emphasis, Blasi also addresses the existential dimension of living in the world as a sentient creature, fully aware of the limits of knowledge—and here we find perhaps the existential sensitivity that exemplified Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy, certainly of similar relevance for influencing Jaspers. Perhaps a sort of phenomenological ontology is needed to navigate Jaspers—though different from Jean Paul Sartre, even if it is just for the perception and value of the other or, more importantly, their differences in viewing a human need for transcendence.

Blasi's semantic landscape demonstrates forcefulness and rigor—reminiscent of the vitality of Aiolos, the keeper of winds in Greek mythology—ready to face the ontological reality of nouns and suggesting preparedness to join Jaspers in overcoming nihilism. Comprehending a non-dual harmony of existence was also a challenge for Jaspers who did write exemplary accounts of Asian thought, and yet Jaspers, too, had to surrender to his own historicity that did not grant him full comprehension of a Buddhist

metaphysics that claims to transcend the world.¹ Such an example demonstrates the difference between a successful epistemological staging of a concept and its corresponding ontological comprehension.

Thought and being are not easily defined, let alone in an existentialist environment where philosophizing is seen as an activity that is not reduced to pure intellect. To make matters even more complex, we need to add the challenge of translation. Here in particular it is the translation of the *Umgreifende* (encompassing) and also of *Erscheinung* (appearance) that complicates possible interpretations of Jaspers' thought. Literal translations of words often omit the cultural dimension, the realm of meaning that comes with language usage when properly embedded in the associative cultural domain of a given time period, in other words, the becoming of meaning due to shared historicity. In this context, the Encompassing does not "grab" nor "restrict," as Blasi suggests, but it is simply present "in existence, in consciousness-as-such, in *Existenz*, in the spirit, in the world—and all these ways finally point to one, the Encompassing of everything Encompassing, which nowhere is definitively understood or possessed, and which yet leads everywhere where our path reaches its essential possibility."² Jaspers is fully aware of the conceptual difficulty to abstain from understanding the Encompassing as an object. He refers to Kant's transcendental deduction as the key to speak of the Encompassing and the appropriate method of thinking the Encompassing. Jaspers' brilliant one-sentence summary of Kant's complex argument is as follows: "By the guiding thread of psychological, methodological, and metaphysical objectifications he thinks that which itself is none of these objectifications, although being the necessary condition of all of them, that which itself is neither subject nor object" (RC 792). Here, Jaspers overlooks the palindromic quality of the mind/matter relationship by leaving out the intrinsic singularity of each and every mind and its cadacualtic features. The neurobiologist Mario Crocco describes cadacualtez as "the intrinsic unbarterability, unrepeatability, incommunicability, and singularity of

every existential being"³ and uses the concept to address the relationship between causation and individuation. The etymological origin of the word relates to the Spanish *cada cual*, meaning "each one."

When the physicist Max Planck corrected David Hume's error about causation by discovering that physical causation comes in packets, "so that in producing effects action packets annihilate and one could only see the effects—never acquiring any impression from the (exhausted) causative action by observing the extramental changes it had already produced" (AP 378), this made room for recognizing that also some revision of Kant's position is needed who views minds as ineffectual (epiphenomenal) and views being as predicative (analytic). Kant places emphasis on human processing of sensorial information and minimizes the constraints that nature imposes on the noumenal. It is precisely this extramental quality of the world that we also face in attempting to comprehend the Encompassing. A dialectical approach is certainly tempting and has a long historical tradition, yet the positioning of conceptual opposites in the hope of some sort of synthesis cannot address the dynamic of mind and matter to comprehend its mutual interactivity. For example, Hans Saner uses the dialectic between communication and solitude to discuss the experience of boundary situations by means of existential communication. Jaspers sees this tension between reason and possible *Existenz* as a finite transcendence and he introduces ciphers to demarcate the boundary situations toward such transcendence; a process that he calls *Periechontology*. Its etymological root includes the Greek *peri* (around) and *echó* (to hold), roughly translated as "to encompass," and it symbolizes philosophical activity leading to the knowledge of the Encompassing by means of *periechon*, a principle that holds the world together.

Blasi does receptively refer to Jaspers' conception of being by quoting from *Von der Wahrheit: omne ens est verum, omne ens est unum, omne ens est bonum*. Here, Jaspers evokes an ancient Greek perception that the True is identical with the One is identical with the Good. We must bear in mind that Jaspers objects to

¹ See Indu Sarin, "Karl Jaspers and Asian Thought," in *Karl Jaspers's Philosophy: Expositions & Interpretations*, eds. Kurt Salamun and Gregory J. Walters, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2008, pp. 291-312.

² Karl Jaspers, "Reply to my Critics," in *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp, La Salle, IL: Open Court 1981, pp. 747-869, here p. 792. [Henceforth cited as RC]

³ Mario Crocco, "A Palindrome: Conscious Living Creatures as Instruments of Nature; Nature as an Instrument of Conscious Living Creatures," in *Ontology of Consciousness: Percipient Action*, ed. Helmut Wautischer, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2008, pp. 359-393, here p. 375. [Henceforth cited as AP]

formulate a system of being, he refuses any kind of ontology. Instead, unity and truth of all being is found in the transcendent source of all objective being. Transcendence has no locality, it is better perceived as boundary. In this context, a dialectical interpretation of Jaspers must not be confused with the antinomial structure of all being, which is a central metaphysical presupposition of Jaspers in relation to the perpetual foundering of human beings. Engaging with this aspect of reality and staying one's course constitutes what Jaspers call a "formal transcending" to transcendence. At the level of personhood the highest mode of self-realization has no duration in time and as such constitutes a meta-empirical quality. Here, a person has surpassed mere existence (*bloßes Dasein*), consciousness in general (*Bewußtsein überhaupt*), and mind/spirit/reason (*Geist*). To transcend means that one surpasses these three stages of one's empirical self.

Blasi has briefly touched upon Jaspers' conception of truth and differentiates between a formal and a concrete definition of truth. In this context it is perhaps a good idea to remember that Jaspers has a pretty liberal understanding of truth. An absolute unary form of truth is for Jaspers not achievable. Instead, there are various manifestations of truth in accordance with the various manifestations of encompassing being. Humans might strive toward a unary conception of truth, but its realization will necessarily founder. It is, indeed, the task of philosophy to relativize all claims of absolute truth.

Let me close with a few remarks about Blasi's closing section, "Eternity and Man." In light of humankind's realization of the absurdity of existence, the reality of unavoidable suffering, the fulfilled or denied longing for joy and happiness, and the realization that no philosophy could possibly console us with accounts of temporal eternity that is some time other than the immediacy of the here and now; in light of all these potential obstacles to embrace life as it happens, Jaspers did maintain a life-affirming perception on reality. On 3 July 1961, his final lecture at the University of Basel closes with the words, "When exuberance and joy are more than just the temporary and vanishing frolicking of life due to vital strength, but rather dwells in the certainty of eternal origin; then it manifests in fulfilled presence for as long as we are here, still ongoing and always possible again."⁴ In this

final semester, Jaspers quoted twice—in the first and last lecture of the semester—his rendition of a well-known medieval priamel that can be traced to the eleventh century poet Ibn Gabriol⁵ and continued to receive much attention from numerous writers including Martin Luther, Heinrich von Kleist, or Berthold Brecht. Here I translate without rhyme but emphasizing its literal focus (CT 12, 108):

I arrive, not knowing whence
I am, not knowing who
I die, not knowing when
I leave, not knowing whereto
It amazes me that I rejoice.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *Chiffren der Transzendenz*, R. Piper & Co., Munich 1970, p. 109, my translation. Henceforth cited as CT.

⁵ Reinhold Köhler, "Mich wundert, dass ich fröhlich bin," in *Germania. Vierteljahresschrift für Alterthumskunde*, Verlag von Carl Gerold's Sohn, Wien 1888, Vol. 33/3, pp. 313-332, here p. 332.