

Einführung in die Philosophie

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June 20-22, 2008

Jaspers studied law and medicine, then ended up as a professor of psychiatry, only a few years later to give it up for philosophy. He is associated with Heidegger, of whom he was critical on moral grounds. Hence he is brought up in a different philosophical tradition than the Anglo-Saxon so called analytic. Yet, any western philosopher has at least something in common. Namely Plato. This is at least something, in fact more than something, and hence for most serious philosophers, the reasons to do philosophy are rather similar.

First and maybe foremost, philosophy is not the same as science, although the same impulse might be behind both. In science there are indisputable facts and hence there is in science advancement. This cannot be said about philosophy. In no way do contemporary philosophers rise above Plato the same way modern medicine makes the medicine of antiquity quaint and obsolete. In philosophy it is less a question of truth or false, more a question of lucidity and relevance. The chains of arguments in philosophy cannot compare with those in the natural sciences let alone mathematics, because in philosophy you always start afresh in a sense, and do not build on your predecessors. Those might provide inspiration, but their inspiration is less in their results, which are always tentative, but in their methods, which can be criticized and varied. On the other hand, philosophy aims at a complete picture, and unlike science, most of whose results are unknown outside inner circles of concerned specialists, the classical problems of philosophy concern everyone, and not surprisingly are often raised spontaneously by children (and madmen). Now to Jaspers the complete picture concerns basically what it means to be a human being, and thus he claims *Wer die Philosophie ablehnt, vollzieht selber eine Philosophie, ohne sich dessen bewußt zu sein* which can be compared with Collingwoods quip that those who reject metaphysics are thereby taking a metaphysical stand.

Thus philosophy is unavoidable. Science, e.g. cannot be treated scientifically. Thinking about science is a metaphysical exercise. The effectiveness and validity of science cannot be proven scientifically. Thus the trust in reason is in fact a kind of transcendental faith. Thus philosophy goes beyond what can be reached by ordinary argument. Thinking goes beyond reason, Jaspers points out, and he does not mean this sarcastically. Thus at the very limits of the reaches of thought and language lies the proper domain of philosophy. Russell famously explained the lack of progress in philosophy by the fact that once there is progress in some branch of philosophy, that very branch ceases to be part of philosophy but is cut off and reared as a sapling of a new science. A similar attitude is taken by Popper, who sees non-scientific philosophy as meta-physics, and as such a proto-science. A natural question to ask is whether philosophy in the end can be shown to be superfluous and be replaced by a more extensive and developed science. The logical positivists thought so, their program being to rid philosophy of anything not clear and precise and demand that everything should be ultimately empirically verifiable. Popper pointed out that this

would also make them reject the very basis of their program as it was not empirically verifiable. Science cannot be treated scientifically. Similar limits to the formal method in mathematics once and for ever discredited positivism as naive.

To explain philosophy it is helpful to delineate its origins, i.e. its motivations. The first is, in the words of Plato, wonder. The desire to find out what is. This is of course the same drive that engenders the curiosity that drives science. Not surprisingly there was initially no real difference between science and philosophy, both being concerned with finding out what the world really is and what makes it tick. The simple love of learning and wisdom. Concomitant with the curiosity and the need to explain and make up is the phenomenon of doubt. Doubt is the engine of criticism. And also here there is no difference between science and philosophy, without being subject to criticism and rejection, there is no development. To Popper this process is the same as in natural selection, where on one hand there is a generation of variety, on the other hand a culling by selection, only letting through a minority. True creativity only makes sense in tandem. Thirdly Jaspers refers to the passionate obsession that the quest for knowledge and enlightenment engenders. But once again here we see no difference between science and philosophy. Both disciplines when seriously pursued demand total concentration, or maybe more precisely, entice such. Where is the real difference? Philosophers are usually scientifically interested, and scientists cannot help running into philosophical questions. Maybe after all, in spite of what has been written above, there really is no essential difference. Professional philosophers being a marginalized group of people, scientists who has been left over so to speak. Unemployed and in many cases maybe even unemployable, but who can be given some potentially useful task of cleaning people, set to criticize the assumptions and methods of science; maybe in exalted cases pointing out new avenues of research and sketching strategies of the same.

There is one other source for philosophy and that is religion. Religion not in the metaphysical sense, because that is part of the scientific tradition, but religion as a guide to how to live and by implication how to die. This is also an aspect of philosophy which has a wider popular appeal. Philosophy as a source of guidance and consolation. Here the motivation is different from that of science, driven not by curiosity and adventure but by the need for comfort and security. A classical example of this being stoicism.

As to the systematic scientific method in philosophy Jaspers delineate its limits. In any scientific inquiry there is a split up between subject and object. In the words of Collingwood, the study of natural science is that of a spectacle not part of who is doing the studying. Thus we cannot in science study everything there is, which make up the world, the universe. We can only study details not the whole context in which something is thrown. In particular we cannot study science scientifically, nor can we prove or disprove God by science or reason, if we could, Jaspers reminds us, God would just be one thing among other things in the world. In philosophy there can be no closure, as Jaspers puts it

Wer meint, alles zu durchschauen, philosophiert nicht mehr. Wer das Bescheidwissen durch Wissenschaften für Erkenntnis des Seins selbst und im Ganzen nimmt, ist einem Wissenschaftsaberglauben heimgefallen. Wer nicht mehr staunt, fragt nicht mehr. Wer kein Geheimnis mehr kennt, sucht nicht mehr. Philosophieren kennt mit der Grundbescheidung an den Grenzen der Wissenmglichkeiten die volle Offenheit für das an den Grenzen des Wissens sich unwißbar Zeigende.

Jaspers believes in God. Of course any sophisticated belief in God stays well above mere superstition. Jaspers reminds the reader that the most important message of the Bible is not to make an idol of God, in other words not to expect that we can perceive him with our senses. This ties up with Platonism, in which forms cannot be directly perceived, only the material shadows they cast. Now that the Bible actually is an idolization of God, by endowing him with exaggerated human attributes is of course an irony that Jaspers does not overlook. Now in what sense does he have a sense of God? To Jaspers the free will of an individual is inseparable from the existence of God. It is God that gives man his free will, without which he would not become a man. Thus the notion of being human is in the mind of Jaspers meaningless without a God. God is in other words the goal and meaning of humanhood. This is hardly a scientific attitude and shows that Jaspers is more concerned with the second source of philosophy. This means that his writing is bound to be rather opaque, not so much concerned with argument as evocation. To him Nietzsche and Kierkegaard are crucial and original philosophers, to a scientist, *qua* scientist, they are of course dispensable.

From Jaspers point of view a central part of being a human is being confronted with *Unbedingte Forderungen*, i.e. unconditional demands. In life one is at times challenge to act and make choices. Those have to be made in accordance with one true self as defined and developed by God. It is in such a faith in a personal God that a fragile human may be strong enough to do the right thing. Furthermore philosophy makes demands on the whole life of an individual. It demands that he conducts his life with a purpose and not waste it on mere diversion. That he daily inspects and examines what he has done during the day, and to what extent he has been true to himself and to his life's purpose. Life should be serious, because there is death. And learning how to die is the same thing as learning how to live. An unexamined life is not worth living. All of this is of course very reminiscent of Socrates. Socrates along with Christ being a formative influence on Western thought.

The independence of a philosopher is important. Philosophizing is after all a matter of thinking independently. But there is a limit to independence, just as there is a limit to doubt. Go beyond certain limits (set by God?) and you land yourself in pointlessness. And also of paramount importance in all philosophizing is communication. Philosophy, as little as science, can be done in isolation. The need and the ability to communicate of course sets limits.

There are three independent philosophical traditions. In addition to the Western also the Indian and Chinese¹. There are some striking similarities between the traditions, but of course the sources for the non-Western are far fewer and less accessible, making it unfeasible for a Westerner to delve into an alien tradition. In the end of the book Jaspers provide some guidance for the prospective student. Various comprehensive lexica are being recommended. And the Germans have a good reputation for such things.² More

¹ It is not clear where he places the Islamic? Islam having of course the same origin as Christianity, namely the Hebrew monotheism. Furthermore Islam was very much influenced by Greek and Hellenistic thought during the European Dark Ages; yet the Islamic world is normally not thought part of the West. Probably Jaspers simply was not interested, thinking that philosophy in Islam was derived and hence there really not being any independent indigenous.

² It is to be remarked that there are not only references to German and English books but also French

interestingly Jaspers recommends that one has a *Hauptphilosoph*. It is preferable if it is a great one, such as Plato or Kant, but even a second or third rate philosopher will do, provided he has made a deep impact. Through the lens of a single philosopher, the whole of philosophy is somehow is refracted, and he can be used as a point of departure.

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and Italian as a matter of course.