

The Hope that Grows Out of Despair

The Future of Mankind by Karl Jaspers. University of Chicago Press. 342 pp. \$5.95.

by **Bernard Murchland**

At the dawn of the modern age Goethe wrote: "Mankind will grow more astute and more perceptive, but not better, happier, or more vigorous . . . I see a time coming when God will not enjoy it any more, when he will have to smash everything once again, to rejuvenate his creation."

This sombre prophecy, argues Karl Jaspers in his impressive book, may well find fulfillment in our times. The "new fact" which dominates his argument is this: the possibility *and* probability of nuclear warfare could result in the destruction of mankind! In the past the worst catastrophes could not kill all men. However many perished, some survived. Now war implies the consequence of universal doom. This, says Jaspers, "is an idea so novel, as a real probability, that we hesitate to think it through."

But the noted German philosopher, in what might be called a prolegomena to survival, does considerable thinking on the question. Of the several writings I have read on this subject, *The Future of Mankind* is without question the most thorough, the most alarming, and the most hopeful. I say hopeful because the frequent dark and urgent tones of the book might give an initial impression of despair. But this is not the case. Jaspers reduces his discussion to an extreme thesis: either mankind will physically perish or there will be a change in the moral-political condition of mankind. He first attempts to "take

Father Murchland, the former editor of *Perspectives*, is now pursuing special studies in philosophy at the University of Buffalo.

note of the facts, to visualize the world situation, to test all viewpoints, one by one, and to get our bearings in the entirety of realities and possibilities." This effort leads him to consider, knowledgeably and with a great wealth of detail and practical suggestions, such matters as the military situation, freedom, totalitarianism, the United Nations, scientific thinking, religion, the changing political situation, and neutrality.

In our world situation as it is, to be sure, Jaspers finds few grounds for hope. The possibility of neutrality is compromised by power struggles and stock-piling; democracy is corrupted by unworthy officials entangled in a net of deceptions; the United Nations is a "ghostly sight . . . operating on the brink of doom with fictions that everyone sees through and yet goes along with"; scientific thinking has led us into an abyss.

But Jaspers does not see this as a world with no exit. By far the most substantial part of his work is given over to a positive critique. He is not so much concerned with the fact that man *is* not changed as the fact that he *can* change. Jaspers makes his position clear: "We are not on the road to salvation until war itself becomes impossible and total disarmament takes place under total control. But the only way to achieve this is a transformation of the human way of life . . ." He suggests three avenues of transformation: sacrifice, reason and communication.

The pivotal ethical reality in extreme situations is that of sacrifice. The harsh exigencies of *realpolitik* flounder when survival is at stake. As Kant saw, the suprapolitical source of revolution is the ethical self-sacrifice of man. Sacrifice may take a non-violent form as in the case of Gandhi; or it may take a violent form as in

the case of the American and French revolutions. In either case it is premised upon the rights of man, upon freedom and justice. "Without sacrifice there is a rift in our existence," writes Jaspers. "It dims itself in self-delusion. . . . Sacrifice would not only make peace possible; it would fulfill it."

Secondly, a new way of thinking is necessary. This is what Jaspers calls reason or philosophy. What he has in mind here is the kind of existential thinking he has promoted for many years. In its broad outlines this kind of philosophy is not excessively complicated. In the Socratic tradition, "it confirms the human content which everyone harbors within himself" and arouses the inner dispositions from which tangible reality derives its guidance. It is the kind of thinking which prescribes a "luminous, encompassing" domain of transcendence in the light of which political and technological realities take manageable proportions and man emerges from democratic freedom to existential freedom, that is to say, the personal freedom of being oneself. A simpler way of putting this would be to say the turning point here is "from outwardly productive to inwardly active thinking."

Underlying Jaspers' argument here is the awareness that political, religious and scientific thinking, taken in themselves, are of limited value when taken in isolation from the broader kind of thinking that animates the whole. Says Jaspers: "Philosophy and politics should get together." And: "Science and technology must become parts of the encompassing whole."

This kind of thinking establishes (and here is Jaspers' third suggestion) authentic grounds for communication. In another place this philosopher has written:

"Communication is the aim of philosophy, and in communication all its other aims are ultimately rooted." The lie is the real rotten spot in human nature. What prevents peace and rational discourse on the crucial issues facing us today is an inability to communicate. And here we come, I think, to the heart of Jaspers' position.

Jaspers is one of the few contemporary thinkers who sees that the modern dilemma must ultimately be saved in light of a philosophy of communication, a philosophy rooted in the very roots of man's nature. As Nietzsche said: "Truth begins where there are two." Although he does not expressly formulate it as such, what Jaspers is urging is a renewal of that power which all great spiritual traditions have called *love* and which Christians call *caritas*. He adduces a striking simile: we are like sparks, now scintillating more brightly, now vanishing to the point of invisibility, constantly changing in the flux of life. The sparks see each other, and each flares up to a brighter glow for seeing others. The love of reason joins all that is aglow, without prearrangement or representation, and where we see a glow decline, the pain simultaneously reduces our own luminosity.

It would be a mistake to read this book as a political tract, although it is partly that. More fundamentally, it is an expression of Jaspers' philosophy of *Existenz*. The author himself warns the reader that this is not merely an effort to assess the facts of the contemporary scene. His book, he says, "approaches every idea from a point of view which is subsequently transcended." Here we have shades of the situation-transcendence dialectic that occupies a central place in Jaspers' philosophical outlook. Making the jump—an athletic term that has taken on great dignity in existential thinking—from one pole of the dialectic to the other can be a hazardous endeavor; but not to

be aware of where Jaspers is trying to lead us would be almost certainly to miss the point.

The work of reason—or philosophizing—begins by recognizing man's empirical situation. It must scrutinize the structures of society, the conditioning power of science and technology, the situations generated by relationships between nations, the claims of religion, and so forth. From an awareness of our present horizon we can advance to a further one; but we can never reach a unifying perspective that will give us a satisfying view of the whole. The scope of reality is not bounded by any particular situation or situations. Rather, Jaspers says, it must be characterized as the embracing, the enveloping, the encompassing. This is, so to speak, the pervading atmosphere in which particular things exist yet which transcends them all. All points of view and given situations derive from the higher, enveloping reality and are therefore partial and obscure. They are harbingers of a full state of things, of transcendence. It is the work of reason to direct us toward that plenitude.

In technical language, Jaspers argues that the work of philosophy is to make the "transition from purely empirical being to being - as - existence - directed-to-transcendence." Dr. James Collins describes Jaspers' effort, rather happily I think, as an attempt to chart the course of Kantian reason in the encircling sea of Kierkegaardian existence. At every point along the course reason is brought up short by the tragic element of life—suffering, death, guilt—but even such crises are intimations of man's need for transcendence. The effect of the antinomies and limits which plague human existence is that of a goad, forcing man, usually out of sheer desperation, to seek the encompassing.

It is this philosophical ideal which subtends *The Future of Mankind*. From one point of view

it is regrettable that this is the case. Not only does it place a heavy burden upon the reader; it is also something of a large task for the author. Jaspers' philosophy of transcendence is by no means a clear or complete one. Some critics contend that it is not even a possible one. But it does have two undeniable consequences. It permits Jaspers to give a singularly penetrating analysis of man's predicament in the world today—an analysis he also gave in *Man in the Modern World*—with special emphasis here on the predicament created by the possibility of total destruction. Secondly, it permits him to hold forth the hope of overcoming this situation, however vague the specifics of realizing such a hope may be. This is already sufficient to set man on the way to a more intelligent manner of coping with his problems.

It is altogether admirable that a thinker of Jaspers' stature should bring his wide experience and considerable insights to bear on the practical order. Not many philosophers accept this challenge. Jaspers counsels neither flight from the social scene nor crass acceptance of the existing order of things, especially current political programs. I see his philosophy as an effort toward redefining the ideas of classical humanism, not the least of which was the affirmation of man's creative power, his ability to redeem himself from situations. This is far from a complete line of action; but neither is it an ineffective one. When we are told that the tragic conflicts of our age are due to its excessive dedication to the ends of merely empirical being without regard for the ultimate problems of human existence, we cannot pay the observation too much heed. We are in no position to denigrate the power of reason.

Can we in these perilous times expect a rational rebirth of man? Jasper will bode no negative answer. Yes, he says, for reason is the essence of true humanity.

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