

Comparative Eschatology and Philosophy of History of Karl Jaspers and Nikolai Berdyaev*

Elena N. Anikeeva

Department of History of Philosophy
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: hotkovskaya7@gmail.com

Kirill V. Taravkov

Department of History of Philosophy
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: taravkov.kirill9@gmail.com

Abstract—This article focuses on comparison of understanding the eschatology and philosophy of history in philosophical ideas and concepts of K. Jaspers and N. Berdyaev. The authors provide the analysis of similarities and differences in K. Jaspers' and N. Berdyaev's philosophy of history. Jaspers' conception of Axial Age (*Aschenzeit*) is characterized by the necessity and actuality of turning to cultural-historical heritage of the West and the East. Exit from historical process and the way to eternity, for N. Berdyaev, is a result of general comprehension of spirit. The eschatology of two philosophers is connected with their philosophy of history and derives from it. Historical process and sense of history, according to Berdyaev, can be understood only beyond the boundaries of historical time, in the area of free spirit, "new eon". Eschatological concepts of the two thinkers have common features, but they differ in understanding the end of the history: for Jaspers this end is a dramatic prognosis of our real history and is like an alarm for humanity; for Berdyaev the end of the history is a utopian idea of transcending real time and coming into some new era/eon.

Keywords—*eschatology; eschatological metaphysics; philosophy of history; Karl Jaspers; Nikolai Berdyaev; comparative analysis; the end of the history*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the face of global crisis, we are looking for philosophical-historical and eschatological conceptions that can make humanity sober. As for this the teachings of K. Jaspers and N. Berdyaev are becoming acute. We see that philosophy of history in interpretation of K. Jaspers and N. Berdyaev inevitably leads to eschatology. One of the attempts of overcoming the crisis of separation from historical heritage results in Jaspers' creating the conception of Axial Age (*Aschenzeit*). This conception is characterized by the necessity and actuality of turning to cultural-historical heritage of the West and the East. Exit from historical process and the way to eternity, for N. Berdyaev, as a comprehension of spirit and religious transfiguration of reality might lead to rejection of the material world as a result of creative affords of all people. Historical process and meaning of the history, according to Berdyaev, can be understood only beyond the boundaries of historical time, in

the area of free spirit. K. Jaspers and N. Berdyaev, as existential thinkers, acknowledge first of all in person his genuine and internal depth and freedom; they do not consider a person to be just a mechanical executor of any objective laws. Thus, we can compare the eschatological concepts of the two thinkers, their similarities and differences and extract from them some useful knowledge.

II. HISTORICAL PROCESS AS A HOLE

Jaspers as well as Berdyaev assert the principle of linear and non-cyclic historical time. The conception of historical time constitutes Christian and other monotheistic paradigm, which is different and even opposite to polytheistic paradigm of cyclic time [1]. Instead of *repeating end* of each cyclic process in ancient doctrines, modern Western eschatological thinkers hold that history comes to the *absolute end* and has a unique character.

The monotheistic paradigm of time and eternity is undoubtedly shared by both thinkers considered by us: the title of N. Berdyaev's work, "The Experience of Eschatological Metaphysics" [2] speaks for itself; and K. Jaspers tells the story of "Overcoming History" (it is the V (last) chapter of the final part of his work "The Origin and Purpose of History" [3]). P. P. Gaidenko emphasizes that Jaspers "returns from 'paganism' interpreting history as Heraclitus 'eternal fire, which flares up with measures and fades away with measures', to the Christian understanding of history as a single line that has its beginning and end, and has its meaningful conclusion" [4]. Hans Schwarz considering Christian paradigm of eschatology in his book mentions K. Jaspers as contemporary eschatological thinker who criticizes secular humanism [5]. In other words, *eschatologism* is monotheistic inherent to both thinkers, but there are significant differences between them, which will be discussed below.

Firstly, we will dwell on those phenomena and concepts that are subjected to devastating criticism by thinkers and therefore unacceptable to them. The idea of progress seems to be opposed to eschatology; it encompasses the flow of infinite time and steady improvement in this time, so that progress puts instead of *metaphysical end* a certain cult of the future that drives this very progress. That dreaming future has different pictures: either prosperity in a

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globalized/information society, or communism, or new accomplishments and victories of the scientific and technical mind, conceivable limitless in their capabilities. K. Jaspers says that, belief in progress is nothing other than cultivation, or demonism of technology, stating "detecting the demonic nature of technology" [6]. N. Berdyaev, in turn, develops the idea of a secular "religion of progress, which professed people of the XIX century, and it replaced them with the Christian religion, from which they retreated" [7]. Indeed, the myth of progress, which has already stepped over into the 21st century, substitutes the soteriological ideal by a certain man-made human model, the surrogate of the Kingdom of Heaven by some earthly paradise. Therefore, *eschatologism* transforms here to an endless improvement or a qualitative leap to a perfect way of life.

Existential metaphysics, as a rule, brings eschatological issues. If we talk about individual eschatology (man in the face of death), then in existential philosophy, including atheistic, the eschatological motive is essential: "Being to death" in M. Heidegger, "Nothing" in J.-P. Sartre, the question of suicide as the main philosophical problem in A. Camus. Besides, the threats hanging over the whole of humanity are not at all eliminated in existential metaphysics, but, on the contrary, escalate, and existential eschatology becomes in our times one of the most important appeals to humanity to "start thinking" (Heidegger), thinking with the most sober assessment concerning our future and the dismissing of all kinds of illusions such as faith in technology and progress in the face of global problems. In the "present situation" (Jaspers), eschatological thinking is to indicate for contemporaries the way out and salvation, which is possible only if they/we realize the danger of our destiny, recognize the "eschatology of being" and consequently gain hope and equip with real rather than illusory means for prevention of disastrous "abyss" (Jaspers). Eschatological thinking does not end with gloomy pessimism, but through experiencing the tragedy of the end and sober self-esteem offers the opportunity to grasp the truth, designed to awaken and heal man and humanity.

K. Jaspers talks about existential communication, designed to seek "peace through the constant awakening of our anxiety. Although Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, in horror of the fate of mankind, sought to awaken the sleeping world, but even today they have not achieved their goal — to really awaken people" [8]. K. Jaspers in his teaching on axial time, we think, sets the task not only to explain the emergence of philosophy as a philosophical faith, not only to show a world-historical breakthrough to existential communication, but also gives us, the residents of the XXI century, an example how humanity could overcome its local insularity, isolation for the sake of its survival. K. Jaspers' urgent appeal for the mind to become "an infinite will for communication" means not just a forecast for the development of philosophy, but a project for future generations not to lose themselves in self-destruction, but in the creation of a sense of history and thus be worthy heirs of past accomplishments, linking the past with the present and the future.

III. ACCOMPLISHMENT AND THE END OF HISTORY

The concepts and thoughts of K. Jaspers were actualized for the XXI century by such Russian thinkers as M. K. Mamardashvili, A. V. Semushkin, S. A. Nizhnikov. According to A. V. Semushkin, the idea of axial time was not new in the history of thought; the Biblical worldview contained a conviction in the soteriological accomplishment and meaning of history. K. Jaspers gave universal, supra-religious and philosophical character to axial time, and A.V. Semushkin emphasizes its eschatological significance: "Axial time is the result and at the same time perspective of the world historical process" [9]; previous events are summarized up by the axial time and at the same time with the subsequent history, including the modern one, begins and continues with it. A.V. Semushkin gives his own interpretation of K. Jaspers: the axial time was the outcome of humankind, which was bequeathed to subsequent generations as a code of thought, faith and morality, capable to reason humanity.

S. Nizhnikov, in turn, interpreting A. Semushkin in his assessment of Jaspers' axial time, indicates that a person is born and lives in history as if twice: the first time from his origin to axial time (traditional man), the second time from the axial time to the present (new man); and humanity, fortunately, was not able to forget this creative epoch throughout the subsequent history: "Consciously or unconsciously, modern man guesses his spiritual ancestral home in it. Returning to it ... is the first step on the path to the spiritual unity of mankind, without which the solution of the global problems of modernity is impossible" [10]. Further, S. A. Nizhnikov emphasizes on what M. Mamardashvili pays special attention to after Jaspers, highlighting such a characteristic of axial time as universalism, found in the appearance not only of philosophy, but also of world religions and science: "This time can be called universal idea of culture. But after the emergence of philosophy, we talk about world religions, about some kind of new, special universal dimension of culture." [11] This new state of humanity, according to M. Mamardashvili, stands out more vividly with the birth of science: after all, science is a kind of knowledge and activity that, by definition, is super-cultural or universally cultural; it is like mental universal crystallization. In this sense, Greek science is something independent of Greek culture. For Mamardashvili, the idea of the unity of humanity is essential as a pledge of its true purpose.

In this connection, it seems, not by chance that, S. A. Nizhnikov pays close attention to the personal position of Mamardashvili as a true philosopher, who bravely opposed Georgian chauvinism during Gamsahurdia putsch in 1990 [12]. The personal position of the philosopher is also extremely important for K. Jaspers. Essential for K. Jaspers in his eschatological-philosophical appeal is the statement about the "purity of philosophy" and science, which can be understood as an appeal to the philosophers' responsibility and "concern for the abyss of the new realities". K. Jaspers internally suffered this setting on the personality of the philosopher. Recall that Jaspers had overcoming his physical illness throughout his life; moreover, the Nazi regime caused

the philosopher a lot of suffering and anxiety for his family. After going through severe trials and grieves, such a person as K. Jaspers could rightfully appeal to humanity with warnings and call for responsible philosophizing, communication and unity: "History remains movement, under the guidance of unity, accompanied by notions and ideas of unity" [13]. This existential unity definitely directs against Nazism, chauvinism, totalitarianism and injustice. Nathan Wallas, remarking that Jaspers' book *The Origin and Goal of History* yet "could not have been conceived virtually", stresses that Jaspers fought always and strongly against totalitarianism [14]. Those philosophers who have shown and are showing their moral stature, at the level of which the sincerity of their philosophical intentions is most valuable, and we should treat them as seriously as we might.

In contrast to K. Jaspers who had undergone, but not been physically persecuted by the regime, N. Berdyaev had a fate in such a way that the first arrest was due to his student revolutionary activity, and the second arrest and interrogation of "Dzerzhinsky himself" ended for Berdyaev with the notorious "philosophers' ship" of 1922 — ordered by Lenin violent deportation of Russian intellectuals from motherland. As a philosopher, N. Berdyaev took place, first of all, during his rejection and criticism of the revolution in Russia. Nevertheless, a *revolutionary echo*, at least in anticipation of a new stage of social development and in rapture about it, left an imprint on his entire work. Despite the fact that N. Berdyaev is only 9 years older than K. Jaspers and represents the Silver Age of Russian culture, he still gravitates toward the XIX century, while Jaspers is perceived by us as a philosopher relevant for the current XXI century.

Like most of Russian philosophers, N. Berdyaev is extremely concerned about the fate of Russia, the tragedy of the revolution, but at the same time does not separate the history of his country from the world, determining its meaning. Unlike the Russian thinker, K. Jaspers does not assign Russia axial value, as well as Western Europe also does not fit in axial time, according to him. If Jaspers speaks of supra-confessional philosophical belief that forms human unity, N. Berdyaev remains within the framework of Christianity, but sees the world-historical mission of Christianity in its renewed and utopian form — the "kingdom of the Spirit", or "Paracletism" (from the word "Paraclete"/"Comforter", denoting the Holy Spirit in Christianity), the "new eon". Utopianism defines the character of the eschatology of N. Berdyaev. Like K. Jaspers, the Russian philosopher attacked progressive thinking, seeing in it the cult of one type of time — the future, which sacrifices both the present and the past. For K. Jaspers, the existing "social religions" (pacifism, social planning, Marxism) are considered from the point of view of the illusory faith of non-believers and as a surrogate for religion. N. Berdyaev too, is inclined to consider *progressism* as a secular religion of the XIX century, deeply opposed to Christian hope for universal resurrection: "progress is not eternal life, resurrection, but eternal death, eternal extermination of the past by the future, the next generation followed" [15].

The pathos of N. Berdyaev's latest work, "The Experience of Eschatological Metaphysics," essentially represents a declaration of a different, transformed person and society in the light of the new and understood by him, Berdyaev, as true Christianity. That is why there are many reasonable considerations, that philosophers of the Silver Age, including N. Berdyaev, are characterized by messianic exaltation and utopianism. The Berdyaev's eschatology carries utopian ideas at least in his conviction about the transformation of all people into creative personalities. The renewed Berdyaev's Christianity marks the metaphysical end of the obsolete and inauthentic historical and human being of which we are witnesses. According to Berdyaev, the evil does not exist in an eschatological perspective: the evil must turn into good; and not the grace of God, but the creative acts of man are the main transforming forces of the new era, so far comes the "kingdom of the Spirit" ("Paracletism"), the entry into the "new eon". The philosopher falls upon the Church teaching on the eternity of the hellish torments, calls it "terrorist", "dualistic Satanism" [16], says that hell is not *noumenal*, but phenomenal, that evil, remaining only in the phenomenal world, is transformed into good through Christian love for enemies and thus goes into a saved being.

For N. Berdyaev, salvation comes only for creative individuals and their actions, in co-creation with God. It follows from this that instead of the Church organism, where everyone is saved individually, for Berdyaev the salvation is collectively performed in a new eon for creative personalities [17]. Like a response to N. Berdyaev crossing the time distance, K. Jaspers conceives eschatological perspective not as the onset of the "new eon", but the *transcending in immanent* that can improve humanity: "Every ascent above history becomes an illusion if we abandon history. The fundamental paradox of our existence is the fact that it is only within the world that we can live above and beyond the world, is repeated in the historical consciousness that rises above history. There is no way round the world, no way round history, but only a way through history" [18]. Such a "new eon" theory led Berdyaev to a contradiction: on the one hand, criticizing *progressism* as a cult of the future, the philosopher does not notice that his hope for a "new eon", "new Christianity" is analogous to that *progressism*, because there is nothing but a cult of novelty, renewal, future that expected with necessity.

IV. CONCLUSION

The similarity of both considered thinkers is that, they think of the end of history in a metaphysical way and are directly connected with existential being as the creativity in N. Berdyaev, as the existential communication in K. Jaspers. The differences between these thinkers is that, Berdyaev conceives the overcoming of history in the form of a "new Christianity" transcendental to this empirical world; while in Jaspers, the meaning and the end of history is not connected with any religion, but it presupposes the philosophical and communicative unity of humanity as *transcending in immanent*. The eschatology of N. Berdyaev is soteriological and utopian, whereas K. Jaspers' eschatology is philosophical and realistic. K. Jaspers appeals to real humanity, facing a global "pre-abys" disaster, and, in our

opinion, soberly and more seriously than N. Berdyaev, warns mankind about the need to prevent man-made apocalypse.

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