



Axial Period and Criticism of Eurocentrism in the Philosophy of K. Jaspers

Ludmila E. Kryshtop^(✉)

History of Philosophy Department, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN
University), Moscow, Russia
kryshtop-le@rudn.ru

Abstract. The article concerns the Axial Period conception of Karl Jaspers. The author states that this conception had a great influence on further development of European philosophy to even greater pluralization and played a great role in the fight with Eurocentrism in different fields – in philosophy as well as in religious consciousness. The author analyzes Jaspers' critic of claim to the absolute truth which he supposed to be inherent in monotheistic religions and especially in Christianity. It is shown that Jaspers accuses this claim to truth of being the cause of religious conflicts and intolerance. The author analyses the way out proposed by Jaspers and argues this position could be regarded as inconsistent and contradictory. In order to understand better Jaspers' solution and to estimate it, the wider the wider context of Jaspers' philosophical writings is researched. It is shown the connection and interaction of the Axial Period conception and the views of Jaspers on religious pluralism and possibility to reach it.

Keywords: Jaspers · Axial Period · Religion · Pluralism · Existence · Transcendence · Mythization

1 Introduction

Karl Jaspers is one of the most famous German philosophers of the 20th century. Starting as a psychologist, he quickly came to realize his vocation to be a philosopher. In his writings we find a discussion of the most varied subjects. These are both highly theoretical reflections on existence and transcendence as well as questions which are close to everyone and has not lost its relevance to this day. So, we find in Jaspers' writings warnings against a spiritual crisis and criticism of nihilism and mass consciousness. What are particularly famous are his condemnations of German fascism and the admission of the fault of philosophers for not recognizing this impending threat in time (*Die Schuldfrage*, 1946). He also addressed the danger of the development of nuclear weapons and the changes resulting from this for the world order (*Die Atombombe und die Zukunft des Menschen*, 1957). Jaspers paid great attention to the consideration of

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the nature of philosophy and philosophizing, the features made it different from other areas of the spiritual culture of the individual and society, primarily science, art, and to an even greater extent - religion. But the most famous invention of Jaspers, perhaps, can be considered his concept of *Axial Age*. This concept was introduced by Jaspers in his work *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949). This concept has absorbed the main statements of Jaspers' philosophy, which is why, in order to better understand it, we are forced to turn to the broader context of Jaspers' philosophical views. At the same time, the concept proposed by Jaspers became an important step in the fight against Eurocentrism and strengthening the positions of cultural pluralism. It had a tremendous impact not only on the subsequent philosophical tradition of the dialogue of cultures, but also on theology and philosophy of religion, although this latter is often overlooked today.

2 The Axial Age Conception of Karl Jaspers

The concept of Axial Age (or Axial Period) is developed by Jaspers in his work *The Origin and Goal of History* (1949). Let us briefly present the main statements of this conception. According to Jaspers, we can talk about a key moment in historical development. In this time human consciousness undergoes a fundamental change which is associated with a person's awareness of his finiteness, and at the same time, with the discovery of the transcendent (exceeding the boundaries of person, of human existence). A completely new worldview and approach to the world and society was a result of awareness of one's finiteness and the associated instability, temporality of human existence. That led to the development of rationality (in the sense of the word close to us today), and critical thinking (as opposed to the mythological worldview). This also resulted in changes in the social and political structure. Ultimately, it is precisely this moment that Jaspers considers the key to the emergence of both philosophy and science (better to say, pro-science) and world religions. All this is directly or indirectly connected with the transition from myth to logos, since only logos, ratio is able to generate universal concepts that will be significant not only for one individual (or a group of people, for example, a tribe or ethnic group), but for all mankind. It is this universality that is a prerequisite for both philosophy and science and world religions. The changes occurred in this period were very important and meaningful since "*until today* mankind has lived by what happened during the Axial Period, by what was thought and created during that period' [1].

Jaspers defines the time framework for this crucial period in two ways, but in both cases, it is extremely broad and vague. In one case, the period is indicated about 500 BC, in the other case, an extended period from the 8th to the 2nd centuries BC. Anyway, both of these definitions are only approximate. Jaspers himself insisted that his main task was not the exact establishment of time frameworks as such, but rather an indication of the parallel processes taking place during this period in different parts of the world. As a result, Jaspers identifies three centers of the Axial Period - China, India and the Mediterranean region (primarily, Greece). In all these realms, in his opinion, there are generally similar processes of transition from a mythological worldview to a more rational one (from *mythos* to *logos*). At the same time, Jaspers does not talk about the identity of these processes, but rather about their similarity, about their similar general direction, which

makes it possible to talk about certain specific (national and cultural) features of the development of these realms [2].

It is important to emphasize that this concept was initially considered by Jaspers himself as directed against Eurocentric tendencies. It is for this reason that it was so important for Jaspers to emphasize the existing similarities in the processes occurring in parallel in the three realms, rather than the differences, since focusing on the differences would again open the way to single out one of the realms (predictably, Greece) as exceptional, special, cradles of civilization, etc., what Jaspers was trying to avoid. That is why the basis of the methodology he chooses is the analysis of the empirical world, i.e. actual events, and not abstract theoretical speculation, divorced from the events actually taking place in the world. Speculative constructions are fraught with fitting facts and reality to developed concepts. In addition, they are always closely related and turn out to be derived from certain worldview premises, beliefs, and for this reason cannot be universal, common to all mankind. It is to this type that, according to Jaspers, belong the traditional European views on history - be it Christian, be it Hegelian. They are based on a specific perception of time and the historical process as linear, striving towards its ultimate goal. For Christianity, this goal was the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment. The Hegelian concept was essentially the same Christian view of history, expressed in some different terms. Such a view turns out to be private, incomprehensible to people, not involved in the Christian tradition [3]. And if we are honest with ourselves, we have no reason (other than, again, our own beliefs) to consider our understanding of history to be more true and to impose it on others. Empirical world, according to Jaspers, is precisely the world we all share, in which we all live and is common for all of us. So, Jaspers tries to create his new concept of Axial Period basing on empirical experiences [4].

Of course, today this approach can be considered outdated. Epistemologists, philosophers of science, and even scientists themselves have long since departed from the belief in the existence of some kind of empirical world independent of the researcher, which could guarantee us certainty of our knowledge. Such an approach today is more likely to be associated with the modern approach of the classical paradigm of rationality [5]. It has long been superseded by the prevailing ideas about theory-loading of facts. Ultimately, the concept proposed by Jaspers now is regarded as no less philosophical and speculative than the views criticized by Jaspers himself. At the same time, the positive changes in people's views on other cultures that began to occur in the second half of the 20th century are undeniable, not least due to the Jaspers' conception of Axial Period.

One can only regret that the concept of Axial Period today attracts the attention mainly of philosophers, who, for obvious reasons, pay attention primarily to what directly relates to Jaspers' views on genesis of philosophy as such. Of course, today Jaspers can be in great demand in the contemporary pluralistic context of talking not about one philosophy, but about philosophies, taking into account their national characteristics. It is in this direction that Jaspers highlights not only Greece as the cradle of the birth of philosophy, but also India and China. Although Jaspers himself deals in fact only with these three realms, something else is important - we are moving away from a stable view of philosophy as a product of the "Greek miracle" and opening up the possibility of talking about other, non-Greek (and, consequently, non-European) philosophies as a

true philosophy. Only such a change of emphasis was able to lead us to the present state of affairs, when we are rightfully talking not only about Western European philosophy, and even not only Indian and Chinese one, but also Latin American, Australian, African philosophies, etc.

However, no matter how important Jaspers' reflections on the genesis and nature of philosophical knowledge were, the consequences that are derived from his concept regarding religious consciousness seem to us to be no less important, but they are often forgotten. It is this side of the writings of K. Jaspers that we would like now to turn to.

3 Jaspers on Religions

The fight against Eurocentrism is also manifested in Jaspers' assessments of the religious sphere of society. It is here that we observe an even greater desire of Jaspers to decentralize humanity and to pluralize it. However, it is here that the concept of Axial Period is superimposed and closely intertwined with the general context of Jaspers' philosophical views. This makes it necessary for us to touch briefly on some other aspects of his philosophical system, including referring to his other writings.

In his work *Philosophical Faith* (1948), Jaspers clearly opposes the monotheistic religions' claim to absolute truth. This phenomenon itself was not first noticed by Jaspers. It goes back to German Idealism. Initially, it was used only in relation to Christianity [6]. Jaspers can be considered a fairly consistent critic of this phenomenon. At the same time, he makes the main emphasis, first of all, on Judaism and Christianity, and it is Christianity that is distinguished with the most severe manifestation of this vicious tendency that kills very genuine religious faith. In the Jewish tradition of turning to the Sacred Scriptures as a foundation, Jaspers, oddly enough, sees the potential for greater freedom, less dogmatization (following from confidence in the knowledge of absolute truth). He is inclined to see the possibility of reviving Christianity in the return to the Jewish origins of understanding the Sacred Scripture and working with it. An even greater critique of claims on truth can be seen in another of his works, *Philosophical Faith and Revelation* (1962).

The presented view, on the one hand, shows us the grounds for Jaspers' criticism of the claim on truth, on the other hand, we still remain in the dark, but how Jaspers himself saw the possibility of some other Christianity and, in general, some other religious consciousness, which would not have been inherent in this claim. This seems so strange also because to this day it is more common for us to consider the claim to truth as the main characteristic of religious consciousness in general as such, although it is unlikely that anyone would argue that it is in monotheistic religions that it reaches its highest point [7]. For a better understanding of Jaspers' position, one should refer to his main work, *Philosophy* (1932).

In the third volume of his fundamental writing *Philosophy*, Jaspers turns to the consideration of transcendence and the communication of existence with it, the ways of grasping transcendence available to existence. The notion of *the cipher of transcendence* is of great importance in this regard. Transcendence itself remains for existence always incomprehensible in its entirety. Transcendence itself is an unreported reality. But it becomes communicated in a kind of metaphysical objectivity, which in itself is no

longer transcendence, but is a kind of language of transcendence. In this regard, Jaspers distinguishes three different ways how transcendence can be communicated. These are three languages of transcendence. One of these languages (the second language) is the message in myths. The other two are the immediate language of transcendence (the first language) and the proper speculative language (the third one) [8].

The most interesting in the context of research of religious traditions is the mythical language, which occupies an intermediate position between the first and the third languages. To understand its specifics, it is worth taking a brief look at all three languages. The immediate language of transcendence is accessible only to the existence itself at the moment of direct contact between existence and transcendence. By its very nature, it turns out to be non-objectivable, and as a result - incommunicable, non-communicative. Transcendence appears in this language as accessible only to the very existence that comes into contact with it in direct experience and is given only in its inner world [9]. The third language is the language of speculation. At this level, transcendence appears as conceivable and as such, according to Jaspers, always turns out to be only a symbol of itself [10]. The peculiarity of the second language is that in this language the transcendence appears in an objectified form, as a result this cognition of the transcendence becomes communicative. It contains the potential to become collaborative for a certain group of people, which is basically impossible at the level of the first language. At the same time, it is important that this is precisely a visual, figurative representation of the transcendence, which will fundamentally distinguish the second language from the third one. Thus, in the second language, cognition of transcendence, on the one hand, unlike the direct language of the transcendence, becomes communicative and universalizable, on the other hand, in this case the transcendence, unlike the third language, is given visually, as a kind of reality, and not as only a symbol of this certain reality [11].

The second language itself, in turn, is subdivided by Jaspers into three species: specially designed myth, revelation of the other world, and mythical reality [12]. In a specially designed myth, a person seeks to fill in the missing reality. Here she or he perceives her/himself and her/his being. The person finds answers to fundamental existential questions, but in an implicit form, since they do not yet reach the level of reflection. This kind of mythical language of the transcendence is valuable for its elusiveness, its fluidity, and its elusive form. As soon as we try to understand it, explain it to ourselves, take up its interpretation, it becomes simpler, poorer, loses most of its facets and, as a result, ceases to be itself [13].

In the case of a revelation about the other world, empirical reality is devalued, presenting only as a set of sensory perceptions, illusory in themselves and, as it were, inauthentic, and in fact as a not really existing one [14]. These two kinds of the second language of the transcendence represent the certain extremes removed in the third one. This version of the mythical language is the golden mean, combining and leveling the extremes of the two previous species. In this case, we do not seek to replenish empirical reality, but in the same way we do not devalue it, escaping into a transcendent otherworld. We are looking for the transcendence, however, only in the way how it is given here and now [15]. Thus, we reach the point when and where our reality is sanctified by the transcendence, appears in its light. It is easy to see that it is this type of mythical language that Jaspers gives preferences.

4 Jaspers and Religious Pluralism

It is also important to consider how Jaspers' views on mythization as the basis of religious traditions affect his assessment of the relationship between different religions. It can be stated that Jaspers ultimately come to relativization of the claims of individual religions to absolute truth and, as a consequence, to pluralism. At this point we can say that Jaspers' thinking is fundamentally anti-dogmatic. However, not only the result is interesting, but also the path to this result. Also, we can see here that Jaspers' position in some aspects is not entirely consistent and could be considered in some regards as contradictory in itself.

So, on the one hand, Jaspers emphasizes the presence of many different myths. On the other hand, he considers the relationship of various myths to each other in terms of constant struggle and attempts to defend their truth [16]. This is manifested in the case of the myths of polytheistic religions (for example, the myths of ancient Greece that are well known to us today). However, in the same terms, Jaspers also considers monotheistic religions, in which he also identifies various myths inherent in them, for example, the myth of the fall or the creation of Adam and Eve [17]. And the most distinct claims to absolute truth are characteristic of monotheistic religions, the religions of Revelation, which is why they are the first to be criticized by Jaspers [18]. Ultimately, Jaspers hopes for a radical transformation of these religions in such a way that they will no longer claim absolute and exclusive truth [19]. At the same time, the very presence of a variety of myths (and religious traditions) is perceived by Jaspers as a factor relativizing the claims to the truth of each of them. It can be said that Jaspers rather takes a position external to each religious tradition, stating from the outside a certain state of affairs in which it is obvious that none of the religious traditions has knowledge of the truth that it claims. However, Jaspers is not interested in the perception of these religious traditions from within, which is why he does not ask about the analysis of existential structures that underlie the claims to truth that are characteristic of religious traditions to a greater or lesser extent.

5 Conclusion

Thus, the concept of Axial Period has many dimensions. One of them is the fight against Eurocentrism, which also has certain consequences for religious consciousness. In the philosophy of Jaspers, we see a distinct desire for the pluralization of religious consciousness, attempting to overcome the claims of religions to own the truth. The latter was criticized by Jaspers. At the same time, Jaspers tried to uncover the mechanisms that lead to the formation of religious traditions as such, which, in his opinion, would, on the one hand, be capable of explaining the reasons for the building of these claims to truth inherent in religions, on the other hand, could help to show their inconsistency and unfoundedness. Jaspers' position clearly led to the pluralization of religious consciousness, which was reflected (albeit indirectly) in changes, including the dogmatic teaching of the Catholic Church in the second half of the 20th century. It can be stated that Jaspers' views regarding the diversity of religious traditions and the conditions for their harmonious coexistence have not lost their relevance to this day and still contain a

great transformative potential for the further development of the religious consciousness of human societies.

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