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## **The Ultimate Situation Jaspers' Vision of Freedom**

The term situation defines various complex and profound conditions. Unlike some other existentialists, Jaspers catalogues many levels of situations. One may discern the economic and political structure of a society, the conditioning power of a scientific outlook and techniques relevant to it and the potentialities produced by the cultural relations among men.' One investigates either universal typical situations or historically determined non-recurrent ones.<sup>1</sup> A situation becomes unique and significant when it is personally embraced and accepted as the inevitable feature of the human condition.<sup>2</sup> Yet one's knowledge of the situation is always inadequate. It is only the unconcerned observer who is able to comprehend the situation though not in all its aspects. Jaspers shows man's active role in a given situation, for here he makes full use of his potentialities. He takes the situation in his hand, chooses a definite line of action and thus modifies the situation. There are, however, some situations which are more urgent and challenging than all the rest and these are termed "boundary situations." They differ from ordinary situations in the sense that they do not undergo any change. They are like a wall against which we collide and shatter. We cannot alter them but only make them passable. They are thus inevitable.<sup>3</sup> Boundary situations form an essential constituent of human existence itself. Man lives and like every other living being is subject to death. He experiences joy and sorrow.<sup>4</sup> One attempts to avoid, ignore and forget these situations even though one finds oneself constantly delivered up to them. According to Jaspers the first boundary situation places man in a concrete human situation. The fact that he exists in a certain social milieu, at a certain time in history, belongs to a particular nation, is a member of a specific family, is a man or a woman young or old in short that he is not a man in general places him in a concrete situation.

Jaspers affirms that man is a situational being. He cannot step out of one situation without entering the other. By boundary situation he means a situation which is inevitable. One cannot just ignore or avoid it. He gives boundary situations like death, suffering, struggle and guilt. Death as an objective fact is not boundary situation. It is when we anticipate death and dread its approach that it becomes a crucial boundary situation. For Jaspers suffering is also an objective fact and is inevitable. Struggle is waged at the physical level between two individual. Guilt is an inevitable feature of human existence. Every action that one performs involves us in guilt and each choice that one makes lands us into guilt.

Jaspers declares that every individual is defined by his background. Objectively speaking one's existence depends on the fact that one's parents have met, got married and this is determined by heredity, education and economic circumstances. One looks for one's origination and learns that it has followed upon a certain process of evolution-birth. One's personality make-up is the gift of one's parents' guidance and ministrations. One is linked to one's parents by the strongest and most genuine ties. This is peculiar of all forms of communication and even if the situation compels us to infringe upon it our love and our reverence for them remains the same whether we enjoy life or decry it.<sup>5</sup> This relationship to one's parents demands a sense of fidelity to it. One cannot ignore it, transgress or alter it even if it appears odd or discomfiting. It allows no substitutes. Yet it is not offered as something one has not toiled for. Jaspers asserts that one is firmly rooted in one's historic situation. Historicity in the philosophy of Jaspers signifies a certain sumptuousness of existence. It also implies a synthesis of freedom and necessity. Although man is always projecting himself in to the future, yet he is one who has stemmed from a particular situation and who is a product of a specific environment.

Historicity also refers to a union of time and eternity. The implication of it is that one stands above time though not outside it. This sense of historicity makes us cognizant of fate itself. There are seeming obstacles that stand between one's own self and one's sense of fate. The universal values and truths come into conflict in our individual case. They have to be undermined for one's own good.

However, absolute particularity stripped of the universals is a mere empty concept. Similarly, the universals entirely separated from the particulars are mere abstractions. Jaspers subsumes death under the concept of the boundary situation. To neglect it is to ignore one of the most significant aspects of life. Death is a piquant reminder that our wisdom and power are strictly limited. Death as an objective fact of existence is not a boundary situation. Man no doubt shares the fact of dying with the animals but is distinguished from them by his capacity to anticipate and dread its approach.<sup>6</sup> Although man knows about his death, yet he is unaware of its definite time. Despite the certainty of death man unconsciously seeks to avoid it. He endeavours to prolong life and struggles to maintain and extend the bounds of his existence. Time and again he is struck by the transient nature of things and each time he shies away from this thought.

Jaspers maintains that the definite boundary situation is either one's own death or of some near and dear one. The death of a loved one is a traumatic experience. It results in a total break of communication, a rupture in friendship and love. We experience a profound sense of grief, for it is an irredeemable loss. We are overwhelmed by a deep feeling of isolation after we have parted from the dead person. We meet death with an avowal of loyalty. We try to remain true to the dead person by cherishing his memory in our hearts. We would try to live up to his ideals and prize his values most. In short he is existentially present though death has severed all communicative ties with him. As Jaspers puts it, "yearning may crush me when I stay behind alone, the parting may be physically unbearable and yet these are phenomena of being sheltered"<sup>7</sup> We are mere existence when we are thus solaced. For Jaspers the crucial boundary situation is one's own death. It is only when one realizes that 'I must' die that one is able to comprehend this annulled event. It is by this unique experience that one faces the last hazard. One clings to life no matter how wretched and worth/less it be. Death, on the contrary, revokes every possibility of requital, and threatens to cast one's existence into nothingness.

In the boundary situation death remains an irrevocable fact but our attitude towards it keeps on changing as we renew it through

out our life. It is quite possible that one fails to unravel the enigma of death but also feels attracted towards it. A man may adhere to life and prefer any kind of existence to total annihilation. Such an ambivalent attitude to death is inconsistent and self contradictory. Death becomes profound when it is embraced single mindedly and also when it is not sought after as a refuge. It is then that it becomes dearer than life. The second boundary situation, according to Jaspers, is suffering. Suffering, as Jaspers understood it, is a trial which everyone is supposed to face and which shatters all human endeavour. Suffering is education, says Plato. It keeps man away from laxity and indolence. It is also in the nature of punishment and serves as a deterrent.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the suffering of others one behaves selfishly even cruelly. To quote Jaspers', "I evade suffering by keeping my distance, by withdrawing in good time if his misery becomes incurable. I grow indifferent and inconsiderate, indeed I despise and finally loath the sufferer, just as some animals are inclined to torture their sick fellows to death".<sup>9</sup> Death and suffering are boundary situations to which one is exposed inspite of oneself. Struggle and guilt, one the other hand, are situations which we ourselves contrive and bring into being. Evasion is not feasible because existence entails our participation in them.<sup>10</sup> Struggle, as political realists from Heraclitus and Callicles to Machiavelli and Nietzsche ha; recognized, is an inevitable feature of life.<sup>11</sup> Jaspers recognizes two forms of struggle. At the empirical level it is waged for physical and psychological superiority—a fight for power. In the first instance, to live at all is to occupy useful space, to eat while others remain hungry, and to hold a position that others aspire to. Hence such emotions as envy, malice, jealousy, spite will endure as long as the earth is populated.<sup>12</sup> More often than not this is the struggle which the individual wages unknowingly. It happens when the groups, social orders and states carry it out for him.

The boundary situation of struggle is explained away by an appeal to reason. One entertains the false notion that perfect reasoning can chalk out an ideal programme for human existence. Thus true justice might prevail, power will become an agency for realizing the right, righteousness would be put in/to actual practice. Furthermore, power might become an intelligent force and a

safeguard of justice. Along with death, struggle and suffering guilt stands as the fourth situation of extremity. Guilt is an inevitable feature of human existence whether one acts or does not act. Every action that one performs for one's means of livelihood, for survival, sustainment and growth results in the other's deprivation, elimination and displacement. No doubt one is guilty through the very fact of being finite. Furthermore, one's engagement and preoccupation with life's trivialities is tainted with guilt. Guilt implies authorship, not of some moral agency or invisible power, but man is his own monitor. It is a power that gets accentuated within man himself, speaks out to the moral consciousness something over which man has no control.<sup>13</sup> It weighs so heavily upon man that he bends under its strain. It can drive man to pain, misery, anguish and confession. The feeling of guilt is not something anticipated but it is very much there. "It bursts in upon a man like fate. He makes no mistake about the guilt. It is suddenly there, judging, contradicting over powering".<sup>14</sup> According to Jaspers one might reconcile oneself to conflict, pain and death if one could hope to preserve a clear conscience. But what one does not intend and can not condone are often laid at one's door.<sup>15</sup>

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