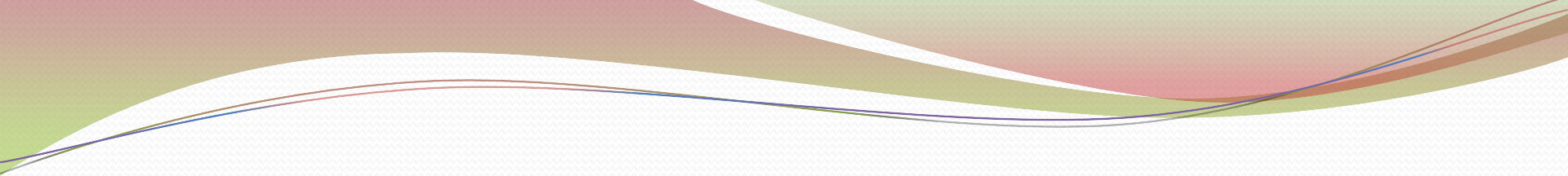


THE CONCRETE SITUATION

An understanding of the concept of boundary situations is most essential for determining the climate of Jaspers' philosophizing. The situations which are felt, experienced and conceived at the limit of one's existence are termed boundary situations. Experiences like death, suffering and guilt are discussed under the heading "boundary situations".'



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.^

A situation becomes unique and significant when it is personally embraced and accepted as the inevitable feature of the human condition.^

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.

A situation exists in terms of the law of change. One can grasp the laws which control the situation and thereby change and produce the desired situation." One can for instance, create situations in technological legal and political sphere. The same situation will assume an entirely different character when others contemplate and react to it. This is a crucial aspect of the situation.

Since existence implies the fact of being involved in situations one cannot leave one situation without entering into another. Moreover to be placed in a situation has a wider meaning than to be placed in the world, although situations cannot be separated from their worldly context. It is the particular sphere in which man's activities are displayed and his welfare enhanced or endangered. 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.'

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It is potential Existence which responds actively to the demands of the boundary situation and makes us walk open-eyed into them. A sort of tension is generated because on the one hand there are a number of possibilities at our disposal and, on the other, the situation stands as an insurmountable barrier.^ It is in this crisis that the meaning of the conflict becomes poignantly clear.

In boundary situations authentic reality is revealed as if by a leap. This is fulfilled by three stages and forms the subject of the fourth section.

In the first form of the leap one deviates from the immediate practical interests and becomes an unconcerned observer who wishes to know what has gone wrong with himself and with the world "I even face my own existence as if it were a stranger's.'

The knowledge which one acquires obviously refers to a knowledge which is purely factual and descriptive, this comes as a gift of the substantial solitude and serves as one's only safe point of anchorage 'an isle of safety in mid ocean'. One is thus on the mundane plane. The first leap is merely a preliminary step in self elucidation. One is still anchored on to existence. The germ of Existenz, however, incites existence in the furtherance of its quest. To be more explicit, it is the achievement of Existenz which spurs existence to move ahead. "My conception of the completed way prepared me rather to re-enter the world".'

The world ceases to be an indifferent object of knowledge because existence is immersed in it. One captures the knowledge about the world without which one would remain enmeshed in obscurity. Nevertheless one draws a sharp line of demarcation between the being of the world and Existenz. The former can be glossed over as a specific dimension of being but one cannot do away with the latter.

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It is the third and decisive leap that leads from potential to real Existenz. Unlike finite situations which are piecemeal and fragmentary like keeping promises, loyalty to an oath, fidelity to truth, boundary situations are infinite and involve Existenz as a whole. The leap from mere existence to genuine Existenz means a real transformation of being. One is able to say 'I myself in a new sense.^ There is however no mechanical growth of existence. It is a deliberate, conscious effort and decision that leads from 'heretofore' to a 'hereafter'. Existenz is defined as supratemporal in the sense that it stands for all such values as honesty, justice, truth, generosity and these values being valid for all times make Existenz eternally valid too.

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.

This way of conceiving the situation determines how one stands in relation to a particular situation. What is general about the situation depends on the bearings one takes from the physical world. One is not finally dissolved into the universal but remains perched on the concrete situation. It is this insoluble remainder that makes existence profound. Intellectually speaking, one cannot construe this as a boundary situation because intellectual knowledge is discursive, relative and inaccurate. Hence the boundary situation remains concealed.

A situation, Jaspers proclaims, is barred by 'resistance' and confinement and binds us to mere possibilities. Jaspers has imagined two ideal cases of freedom. In one we achieve absolute control over all opposition. For instance, the material coerces us when we sit down to make use of it; We overcome our sense of repulsion. Hence living organisms and plants are used as nutriment and individuals are treated as mere automata.

Existenz becomes profound when the situation is elucidated by a break-through. This certainly does not imply that one has spurned the resistance and achieved accord and harmony. The only import of it is that ample choice is available and one is able to sift the truth which lies in this situation alone. One's choice is guided by a definite line of action and one is confronted with a concrete situation. In this choice one either freely accepts or rejects one's definite existence as one's own. But one cannot provide plausible reasons for one's choice.

The random coincidences of life also encroach upon us in the form of the boundary situation of chance. What vocation one chooses, what goal one pursues, what religion and ideology one believes in depends to a large extent on the social and economic set-up in which one finds oneself placed. One's love for the partner of one's life depends on a fortuitous meeting.

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.'

Although man knows about his death, yet he is unaware of its definitive 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. 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.

Jaspers maintains taciturnity as to the question of what will follow after death. Hence he remarks, 'the rest is silence'. This Shakespearian idea of silence alludes to an ignorance of what will befall us after we are dead. Death throws a challenge to us in the sense that one has to face the trial of death while one is still alive.

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.'

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".'

Death and suffering are boundary situations to which one is exposed in spite of oneself. Struggle and guilt, on the other hand, are situations which we ourselves contrive and bring into being. Evasion is not feasible because existence entails our participation in them.[^] Struggle, as political realists from Heraclitus and Callicles to Machiavelli and Nietzsche have recognized, is an inevitable feature of life[^]

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, sustenance 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.' 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, overpowering".[^]

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.^