

**KARL JASPERS:  
METAPHYSICS, ONTOLOGY,  
AND PERIECHONTOLOGIE**

**Introduction**

The pre-Socratics initiated philosophy's pursuit of *Being*. The label for such a pursuit later came to be called **ontology**. All the prominent Greek philosophers were, in the broadest sense, ontologists. Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, and Aristotle each made pronouncements about the first, the basic, and the real. Questions about the true, the good, and the beautiful then followed from the *arche*. Ontology was joined by metaphysics to focus upon what had been, what is, what can be, and what will be. The Greeks of the sixth century BCE became an ontological and metaphysical people. In various degrees, they bequeathed this designation to their successors. Thus all of Western philosophy can be said to be based upon a foundation in which the search for Being is the centerpiece.

In the twentieth century, the Germans Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers have reaffirmed *Being* as the target for the philosophical enterprise. To Heidegger the quarry has become hidden and forgotten. To Jaspers in a radicalization of Kant's Copernican Revolution the question of *Being* come to be located within the perspective of the one who is concerned about the question. Both Jaspers and Heidegger follow Novalis' characterization: "[P]hilosophy is really homesickness, an urge to be at home everywhere."<sup>1</sup> In his attempt to return "home", Jaspers' work "leads to a radical re-opening of the question of Being."<sup>2</sup> Jaspers suggests a new discipline, *periechontologie*, which can avoid the past blind alleys of ontology and metaphysics. *Periechontologie* is a descriptive/interpretive recommendation for reflection within the modes of what Jaspers calls the **encompassing**. Jaspers effort has been designated by Ehrlich, Ehrlich, and Pepper as "an essay at a radical theory of *Being*."<sup>3</sup>

From 1935 onward Jaspers realized the futility of a straightforward, objective ontology and metaphysics. In his studies of history, psychiatry, medicine, political theory, and logic, philosophy, which should have clarified,

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<sup>1</sup>Heidegger, Martin. *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. 5

<sup>2</sup>Ehrlich, Ehrlich, and Pepper. 137.

<sup>3</sup>Ehrlich, Ehrlich, and Pepper. 119.

instead confused the issue. From these failures Jaspers developed an indirect approach: *periechontologie*. Advantages for the new procedure are obvious. The conventional ontologist selects one particular aspect, or strata of happening (i.e. the self, the world, or God) as a standard of reality. This selection cannot be other than gratuitous and arbitrary. Anything designated “real” or the “basis of all Being” becomes suspect. Materialists, who designate atoms and the void as the “stuff” to which everything can be reduced, and idealists, who point to forms and ideas as the basis of all, are each indefensible. Jaspers is neither an idealist nor a realist. He rejects both positions as dogmatic and unsupported. Assumptions are left unexamined, methods are misapplied, and conclusions are reached with minimum evidence. The *arche* of the early Greeks (water, air, fire, or earth) is not the place to establish ontology. Jaspers instead follows Anaximander in adopting a skeptical posture with regard to any one basic substance. The boundless or unlimited (*to apeiron*) of Anaximander becomes the encompassing (*das Umgreifenden*) for Jaspers. As with the boundless, the encompassing is a canopy which serves as a background of multiple appearances. (Manheim translates *das Umgreifenden* as “the comprehensive” attributing to the German word a static quality which is not present in the term “encompassing.” It is also translated as the enveloping). The appearances of *Being* to an advocate of *periechontologie* take place within a series of dynamic horizons each of which requires consideration. Some modes of the encompassing are subjective and some are objective, but each mode can be described, analyzed, or adopted.

## METAPHYSICS

*Periechontologie* demands a new kind of metaphysics. This new metaphysics, ambiguous but enticing, manifests the characteristics of multiplicity, indefiniteness, and flexibility. Rather than repeat the metaphysical operations of the past, Jaspers advises a new approach. The new metaphysics contemplates a series of symbols or cyphers which lend themselves to an endless hermeneutic. No one symbol, group of symbols, or symbolic interrelation occupies a fixed place in the universe or in the universe of discourse. Any event, entity, process, or ideal, alone or in context, can appear symbolically. To Jaspers, aesthetic criticism, historical findings, and/or theology can become the focus for deciphering the meanings of symbols. Within these examples of pre-metaphysics, there is a perpetual interplay of meanings and counter-meanings. Any conglomerate of meanings or cyphers can deepen, grow, or fade depending upon the context. No one symbol system can be allowed to become fixed or definitive, and each system is available for reinterpretation. As is the case with simple, direct ontology, any metaphysics which treats symbols as things with static meaning is guilty of idolatry. The pursuit of Being

should avoid the superstitions of absolutization, universalization, and objectification. The activity of practicing metaphysics authentically for Jaspers becomes **transcending**. Such transcending exemplifies a philosophical faith. In changing philosophy from a noun to a verb, Jaspers echoes Heidegger's assertion, "Philosophy is philosophizing."<sup>4</sup> To Jaspers philosophizing is a perpetual, indirect quest devoid of definitive conclusions and without a permanent resting place.

## **PERIECHONTOLOGIE AND THE MODES OF THE ENCOMPASSING**

As transcending, *periechontologie* contrasts with conventional ontology. The latter is static; *periechontologie*, dynamic. Both are historical and changing, but *periechontologie* relinquishes hope for the eternal and the impersonal. Within *periechontologie* possibilities take precedence over actualities just as existences precede essences. The ontologist strives for packaged systems and unities whereas the periechontologist accepts and appreciates antinomies, disharmonies, and disunities. The periechontologist respects the diversity of the modes of *Being*. The ontologist is a reductionist. Ontology requires a determined, structured universe containing hierarchies of species and methods. The periechontologist welcomes freedom and openness with regard to categories, things, and events. The ontologist is secure with immanence while the periechontologist restlessly transcends all codes and arrangements. The periechontologist perpetuates a quest for *Being* which only arrives at tentative, inclusive, rationally acknowledged horizons within which a variety of positions, events, and ideals take place.

Jaspers coined the term *periechontologie* to function as a descriptive account of the authentic, ontological pursuit. He added the Greek prefix *peri*, "all around," "about," or "beyond," and *ech*, "from out of," to *ontos*, "being." The new compound designates "a study of being which appears from around, about or beyond." *Being* is that which shows itself between or in the background of happenings. Again Jaspers follows Anaximander: According to Aristotle, Anaximander says, "It [basic being] is neither water or any of the other elements now recognized but some other and different body which is boundless and from it arises all the heavens and all the worlds which they contain."<sup>5</sup> Jaspers has transposed Anaximander's boundless to his own encompassing. In so doing he has removed the naturalistic connotations of the ancient Greeks pre-suppositions. Jaspers seeks to describe a discipline which will include a complete description of the permutations of beings with no fixed limits.

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<sup>4</sup>Heidegger, Martin. *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. 4

<sup>5</sup>Bakewell. *Sourcebook of Ancient Philosophy*. 3

Jaspers again echoes Anaximander, “of the boundless there is no first principle to find a first principle for it would be to give it bounds.”<sup>6</sup>

Periechonotology is for Jaspers “to philosophize out of the *encompassing*” or the enveloping. His basic model is that of a field from which everything emerges and back into which it retreats. To philosophize authentically means to enter the field and to describe such comings and goings of things and processes according to the canons of reason. The modes are as varied and diverse: the incarnated human being, the organized consciousness, and the aspirations of spirit. Entities interrelating in the world are highlighted against the surrounding background and the accompanying foreground. Anaximander’s Boundless and the encompassing partake of the subjective as well as the objective as a series of actions between the two poles. Jaspers assumes that any survey of the *encompassing* must begin with a subject/object distinction. The survey does not remain there. Richard Grabau characterizes Jaspers procedure: “The idea is a simple one: Because the subject/object dichotomy makes it impossible for Being to appear adequately in the structures of subject and object, it can be presented only as an encompassing horizon.”<sup>7</sup> To get at the multiple procedures, various subject matters, historical periods, and world views must be examined. From the history of philosophy, Jaspers has learned that no one subject (an individual, a social collective, or a god) can become an Archimedean point. The appearances of *Being* are not *Being* itself. Both the background and the foreground of every aspect of the encompassing field must be articulated and re-articulated. This is *philosophizing* for Jaspers.

Jaspers’ pronouncements concerning the encompassing seem at first to be amorphous and indefinite. This judgment is much too simple. There are seven clearly defined modes of the encompassing. No one mode can be deduced from any other. The four subjective modes are empirical existence, consciousness as such, spirit, and *Existenz*. The two objective modes are the world and transcendence. The bond which unites the seven modes is reason. Jaspers disallows the philosopher an arbitrary choice of which mode to examine first. He recommends a surprisingly set pattern: One initiates philosophy by examining empirical existence and experience; then proceeds to consciousness-as-such; considers next spirit; and finally, *Existenz*. After these four subjective aspects have been explored, aspects of the world are brought into focus followed by Transcendence. The qualities of reason and understanding are the last to be described and investigated.

The first four modes of the Encompassing are, to varying degrees, personal, immediate, and human. The human subject in the world is labeled by Jaspers *Dasein*. (*Dasein* to Jaspers is used differently than it is to Heidegger). Introspection as well as the sciences (sociology, psychology, and anatomy) concentrates upon aspects

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<sup>6</sup>Aristotle. In Bakewell. *Sourcebook of Ancient Philosophy*. 4

<sup>7</sup>Schraeder, *Existential Philosophers*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1967. p 120.

of human experience and its action in the world. Although no one of the sciences of *Dasein* can be exhaustive, each offers reliable evidence for the human condition. Literature and the arts contribute data to what it means to be a subject. All of the human disciplines (*Geisteswissenschaften*) lay out the possibilities for human achievements and accomplishments. Philosophers utilize these empirical findings about humanity to suggest a unified picture of the human condition. Such attempts are always tentative and any hypothesis about human beings must be left open for new data. With the introduction of *periechontologie* Jaspers makes four assertions which remain unchanged throughout his subsequent work:

1. The *Being* sought may be pursued as either an object or as a subject but never exclusively as one or the other.
2. The methods used in the sciences as well as those used in the arts or religion contribute to proto-ontology.
3. Perspectives on *Being* differ according to the situation of the pursuer; it is impossible for any specific person's ontological aspirations to completely coincide with that of any other person.
4. Communication according to the canons of reason is essential in order to work out a composite picture of *Being* and beings.

With these four assumptions, Jaspers searches for *Being* in accordance to four steps. The first step begins with own's concrete situation in-the-world. The aspects of the world to which any human subject attends are those for which he/she has a vital interest or practical need. Upon the basis of such pragmatics, the subject entertains images, narratives, and models which go beyond the ordinary course of events. These processes may be examined for their own sake. Everything cognized, practically or theoretically, is a fragment or an aspect of the world, never the world itself. Following Kant, Jaspers conceives of the objective knowledge of the world as a series of guiding ideas. The world and all of its events and happenings surround particular men and man in general. But attention to and description of such events is only partially catalogued. The sciences classify and arrange, but such classifications remain open. Laws, theories, and hypotheses are confined to characteristics of things no to things themselves. They never confront the world as a totality. Jaspers contends that Being for us is not Being as it is in itself. "For us" means a position within the cosmos and not above or outside of it. We are never above or outside contemplating the whole cosmos. We can concentrate upon the knower or what is known, but since these never completely coincide, the subject/object split for Jaspers remains.

After investigations of empirical subjectivity and things-in-the-world, the philosopher shifts his/her intention to consciousness-as-such. This is the source through which events and processes are acknowledged. The

study of logic, mathematics, and pragmatic schemata are all aspects of consciousness. There is no one “science of consciousness.” But neither is there an infinite variety. An honest study in any of the human disciplines produces the same kind of fragmentation which shows itself in explorations of the world. Just as there is no one overall science of the world (physics, chemistry, geology, or biology) there is no one “science of man.” The pursuer of *Being* is left with data which emerge as one given science, ie physics, contemplates the world, or as one human science, ie psychology, considers humanity. Formal data, when confirmed or verified, constitutes a constructed whole. Consciousness to Jaspers is a collective repository of logic, mathematics, and the universal features of humanity’s calculative thinking. The rules which emerge from this thinking provide the basis for history and for the natural sciences. The self as consciousness arranges, classifies, and regulates according to the principles and rules of formal reasoning. Such endeavors are rich in accomplishments and achievements. To become a full human subject is to participate in consciousness not according to whim and caprice but in accordance with canons and rules. Formality can furnish neither a reliable metaphysics nor an ontology, but when openly surveyed it can contribute to *periechontologie*.

The third way in which a subject lives out of the Encompassing is as **Spirit**. This realm is distinguished from empirical existence and consciousness-as-such. Spirit as Jaspers sees it is the use of the imagination to formulate a kind of wholeness which is not found in the other two self expressions. As Spirit human beings strive for a coherent whole in various parts of experience. Poets and artists create wholes within which human beings can imaginatively dwell. A novel, for example, creates an imaginery whole within which the reader can be for a time. Music assembles a sequence of tones and harmonies which become meaningful to a subject as long as the music is heard. The scientists who are spiritually akin to the artist formulate models of the cosmos, of the historical sequence of events, or of some inner pattern of entities (chemical, physical, or biological). The sciences are spiritual accomplishments. Religion and philosophy also formulate wholes which present the dramatic events from creation to judgment (theology) or world hypotheses where man, God, and things have a place (philosophy).

The fourth aspect of subjectivity Jaspers calls **Existenz**. *Existenzial* subjectivity lives out of the Encompassing as a free chooser. *Existenz* represents a self unbound by the canons of logic, the conditions of nature, or the constructions of spirit. Over and above these phenomena, there is a noumenal self free of interference from any of these areas. The aspirations of *Existenz* for the possibility of *Being* is unfettered by other aspects of self, but it also forfeits a defense of its actions through past choices or conditions. Philosophizing in this area becomes a sheer possibility of *Being*. The goal of philosophy at this stage in the development of

understanding is not to contemplate, assimilate or manipulate but *to be*. Jaspers finds anticipations of this tendency in the lives of Jesus, the Buddha, Augustine, and Pascal as well as those of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard.

In *Von der Wahrheit (Concerning the Truth, 1958)* Jaspers asserts: “What I really am is the encompassing of self-being. Self-being is *Existenz*”<sup>8</sup> The characteristic of *Existenz* as self-being shows itself in communication, in historicity, and in freedom. Since it is unconditional, *Existenz* can never be described or analyzed as an objective entity. Whereas other aspects of the self manifest power, effectiveness, and articulation, *Existenz* is akin to silence. It emerges from a silence which is devoid of boundaries. Although in time it is oriented beyond time; although in space *Existenz* gains its meaning from something other than spatial. *Existenz* presents a dimension of the self unknown and unrealized in the other modes of the encompassing. As Jaspers says, “It is the origin out of which I think and act.”<sup>9</sup> It is from *Existenz* that the individual is aware of all the modes of the *encompassing*. It is severed from these modes but akin to them. Whereas spirit, consciousness, and empirical embodiment can be surveyed in part objectively, *Existenz* is pure subjectivity.

The subjectivity appears as logic, imaginings, concrete physical responses, and *existenzial* choices. The Encompassing shows itself objectively as a world of objects that interrelate with other objects. There are many disciplines which study the world. Chemistry considers chemical elements and their interaction; physics considers light, heat, and electricity in accordance with the canons of the atomic thesis. Zoology and botany examine animal and plant species in a behavioral and interpretive procedure. The sciences differ according to the world phenomena which a particular science has chosen to investigate. Although there are overlappings, each of the established sciences has designated the area within which it attempts a systematic description. Although there is a hierarchy of the sciences, it is generally conceded that it would be impossible and inadvisable to reduce all sciences to one. Chemistry investigates processes and things which physics cannot. And biological events cannot be completely reduced to physical happenings. The organization and classification of the sciences is never complete. The world can be investigated in many ways and by many disciplines.

The overall goal of science in any area is reliability, universal validation, and methodological repetition. But these are goals to be striven for rather than a task easily accomplished. To Jaspers, the only way to investigate the world reliably is through science. Nonetheless, scientific procedures can never be exhaustive or complete. Scientific findings are always subject to change, growth, and alteration. To see the objects of the world within the horizon of the encompassing is to see those objects as temporarily surveyed and historically described. Any set of objects in the world is open to reinterpretation. The history of science demonstrates that this is the history of

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<sup>8</sup>*Von der Wahrheit*. Munchen: Piper & Co., 1958. p 76.

<sup>9</sup>*Philosophical World Orientation*. Berlin: Springer, 1956. p 188.

scientific endeavor and it must be so in the future. To live within and among the objects of science is not to live in a stable, fixed series of structures but in an open field capable of rearrangement.

Transcendence is the sixth aspect of the encompassing. Since the world and its objects can never be self-sufficient, the philosopher is required to transcend the world. As objects emerge from the encompassing and recede back into it, the human subject transcends any patterns which seem to have warranted fixation. Transcending is the process where by the philosophical aspect of subjects strives to get beyond the mundane world to that of something beyond. It is in this area Jaspers comes closest to certain aspects of religion. If the categories of objectivity as well as those of subjectivity come eventually to naught, it behooves the honest philosopher to acknowledge that the source of *Being* is not some definite configuration of material objects and is not any particular subjective pattern. It transcends both of these. The striving for the unknown by way of the known is the human condition. To accept what is readily known as the substitute for the quest for the unknown is to renounce the philosophical endeavor. Both self-awareness and objective reflection when carried to completion appreciate what is beyond themselves. To live out the encompassing is to accept this condition. The six modes of the encompassing (empirical subjectivity, consciousness, spirit, *Existenz*, world, and transcendence) are interdependent. Each, however, remains distinct from the others demanding to be attended to on its own terms.

The process which unites all the modes of the encompassing is reason. The perennial task of philosophy has been to arrange the many approaches to the self as subject and to objects found in the world by a rational process. What constitutes this reason varies from philosopher to philosopher but it is very rare for someone that is in the guild to repudiate reason altogether. A commitment to reason is a commitment to philosophy and a denial of that commitment is to brand oneself a non-philosopher. Plato associated ideas with the *Good* and it was rationality which surveyed the examples of this *Good*. Aristotle was convinced that the divine life for human beings was the life of reason and that the contemplating life was the good life. The Enlightenment took for granted that the world order could be deciphered by the intellect. While the romantics denied this faith in reason, they replaced it with an enthusiasm which participated in intellectus, gratia, *Vernunft*. Jaspers characterized his philosophy in 1950 as “philosophy of reason (*philosophie der Vernunft*).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In his philosophical autobiography, Jaspers summarizes his intent in the whole periechontological enterprise:

The fundamental philosophical operation at all times is, more or less consciously, to transcend towards that out of which the objective as well as the thinking of the subject intending the objective arises. What is neither object nor act of thinking (subject), but contains both within itself, I have the *Encompassing*. This latter does not speak for itself either through the object or through the subject, but through both in one as that which is the Transcendence at one and the same time of consciousness as well as of Being.<sup>10</sup>

In summary the reader must ask if Jaspers has succeeded in his endeavor. Negatively, critics may say that Jaspers has not provided the promised foundation for the study of Being. The Encompassing has no definite content. It is merely suggestive and leaves the reader unsatisfied, frustrated, and confused. At best Jaspers may be said to provide a kind of prophetic philosophy which is a substitute for theology and a poor substitute at that.

On the positive side, one may commend Jaspers for his active philosophizing and his invitation for others to join in that activity. His philosophizing prevents any philosophy from becoming one more science among many. His constant shifts from meaning to meaning prevent a kind of superstitious underpinning which many twentieth century philosophers exhibit. Jaspers is certainly not metaphysical in the conventional sense of that word. Neither is he anti-metaphysical. To him, the search for Being is a meaningful one and although it can never be completed, the perennial call to an open freedom of investigation is one which philosophers will find appealing.

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<sup>10</sup>Jaspers, *Philosophical Autobiography*, 73. Quoted in *Jaspers and Bultman: A Dialogue between Philosophy and Theology in the existentialist tradition*. By Eugene Thomas Long. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968. 4.