

[1959. Review of *The Idea of Transcendence in the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, by Robert D. Knudsen. *The Gordon Review* (Summer).]

*The Idea of Transcendence in the Philosophy of Karl Jaspers*, by R. D. Knudsen. Doctoral Dissertation at the Free University of Amsterdam. 195 pp.

First, this study is superior doctoral dissertation; or, rather, it ranks as a mature exposition worthy of any scholar. It is well constructed. The author does not permit the reader to forget the past stages nor the goal ahead. This entails some repetition, and one may weary of reading so many times that Jaspers eschews every fixed standpoint. Yet for a person unfamiliar with the field, even this may be justifiable.

Second, probably something should be said of Jaspers. Briefly, Jaspers rejects all absolutisms, Hegelian, Positivistic, or Christian. Dialectic never ends and antinomies merely point to an unintelligible transcendent background. Where Jaspers criticizes Freud, or Positivism, or someone else, he often makes telling points. But his constructive effort is, in the reviewer's opinion, vague and ambiguous.

For example, take the distinction Dasein, Consciousness in General, and Geist. Dasein is an immediate awareness; it is that which is 'just the way it is' (*nun einmal so*). Consciousness in General is the medium for the attainment of generally valid, objectively compelling knowledge. And Geist is always living and moving in concretely understandable totalities (58, 59, 63-64). But are not Consciousness in General and Geist *nun einmal so*? Are we not just as immediately aware of objective knowledge as we are of the facticity of Dasein — particularly the facticity of other Dasein which I see as objects in the world (58)? If nonetheless someone should insist that Dasein is the genus of which the other two are species, we would wish to know the difference between Consciousness in General and Geist. Are not concretely understandable totalities generally valid objective knowledge? Admittedly the text says "To spiritual totalities one is not related in the same way as consciousness over against an object. There is an inexhaustible order brought by the idea which goes beyond the mechanical and technical relations discernible to thought" (64). But this denial of definiteness to the idea seems inconsistent with the following statement about Geist: "It wants to give everything its place in a meaningful whole [and] in doing so it rejects that which will not be compatible" (65). It would seem therefore that Jaspers' words go beyond the objective knowledge discernible to the thought of the reviewer, who much prefers clear and distinct ideas.

The author gives Jaspers' reply to this charge of ambiguity. "The form of the objection, Jaspers would say, betrays that there has been a tacit absolutization of the world" (155-156). Thus

Jaspers tries to avoid the criticism by admitting it. The upshot of this is: “Against a position that will not allow itself to be critically relativized in this way, Jaspers can only speak out his anathema; as he does in no uncertain terms with reference to the position of John Calvin” (158).

If Jaspers is thus forced to anathemas, it might seem that he has been sufficiently refuted. Knudsen, however, wishes to continue with thirty more pages of detailed and indeed revealing criticism. Yet one of the details shows that there is a single pervasive flaw in Jaspers’ thought.

“He wishes to say neither that reality is meaningless nor that it is meaningful” (167). No wonder then that he concludes that there is no one religion valid for all men, and that Incarnation is a threat to human dignity (176, 182). But if the law of excluded middle is false and if what some people deride as straight line logic is untrustworthy, anything follows. Or, rather, everything follows. Antinomies, contradictions, ambiguities, pictorial meaningless language and irrationalism all follow. Shades of Protagoras, everybody is right because everybody is wrong.

— *Gordon H. Clark*