

# KARL JASPERS

## The Tension between Technical Mass-Order and Human Life

Limits are imposed upon the life-order by a specifically modern conflict. The mass-order brings into being <sup>[41]</sup> a universal life-apparatus, which proves destructive to the world of a truly human life.

Man lives as part of a social environment to which he is bound by remembered and prospective ties. Men do not exist as isolated units, but as members of a family in the home; as friends in a group; as parts of this, that, or the other "herd" with well-known historical origins. He has become what he is thanks to a tradition which enables him to look back into the obscurity of his beginnings and makes him responsible for his own future and that of his associates. Only in virtue of a long view before and after does he acquire a substantial tenure in that world which he constructs out of his heritage from the past. His daily life is permeated by the spirit of a perceptibly present world which, however small, is still something other than himself. His inviolable property is a narrow space, the ownership of which enables him to share in the totality of human history.

The technical life-order which came into being for the supply of the needs of the masses did at the outset preserve these real worlds of human creatures, by furnishing them with commodities. But when at length the time in which nothing in the individual's

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immediate and real environing world was any longer made, shaped, or fashioned by that individual for his own purposes; when everything that came, came merely as the gratification of momentary need, to be used up and cast aside; when the very dwelling-place was machine-made, when the environment had become despiritualised, when the day's work grew sufficient to itself and ceased to be built up into a constituent of the worker's life—then man was, as it were, bereft of his world. Cast adrift in this way, lacking all sense of historical continuity with past or future, man cannot<sup>[42]</sup> remain man. The universalisation of the life-order threatens to reduce the life of the real man in a real world to a mere functioning in the void.

But man as individual refuses to allow himself to be absorbed into a life-order which would only leave him in being as a function for the maintenance of the whole. True, he can live in the apparatus with the aid of a thousand relationships on which he is dependent and in which he collaborates; but since he has become a mere replaceable cog in a wheelwork regardless of his individuality, he rebels if there is no other way in which he can manifest his selfhood.

If, however, he wants to "be himself", if he craves for self-expression, there promptly arises a tension between his self-preservative impulse, on the one hand, and his real selfhood, on the other. Immediate self-will is what primarily moves him, for he is animated by a blind desire for the advantages attendant on making good in the struggle for life. Yet the urge to self-expression drives him into incalculable hazards which may render his means of livelihood perilously insecure. Under stress of these two conflicting impulses he may act in ways which will interfere with the tranquil and stable functioning of the life-order. Consequently the disturbance of the life-order has its permanent antinomy in a twofold possibility. Inasmuch as self-will provides the space wherein selfhood can realise itself as existence, the former is as it were the body of the latter, and may drag the latter down to ruin or (in favourable circumstances) bring it to fruition.

If, then, self-will and existence both seek a world for themselves, they come into conflict with the universal life-order. But this, in its turn, strives to gain mastery over the powers which are threatening<sup>[43]</sup> its frontiers. It is, therefore, profoundly concerned about matters which are not directly contributory to the self-preservative impulse. This latter, which can be indifferently regarded as a vital need for obtaining the necessaries of life and as an existential

absolute, may be termed the "non-rational". When thus negatively conceived, it is degraded to a being of the second order: but it is either promoted once more to the first rank within certain restricted provinces; or else, in contrast with purely rational aims, it may acquire a positive interest, as in love, adventure, sport, and play. Or, again, it may be resisted as undesirable, this being what we see in those who are affected with a dread of life or a lack of joy in work. Thus in one or other of these ways it is diverted into the decisively and exclusively vital field—to the denial of the claim to existence slumbering within it. The powers interested in the functioning of the apparatus, in the paralysing of the masses, in the individual mind, seek to further the demands of the self-preservative impulse as a non-committal gratification, and to deprive it of its possible absoluteness. By rationalising the non-rational, in order to re-establish it as a kind of gratification of elementary needs, the attempt is made to achieve that which is not genuinely possible. The result is that what was originally fostered as something other than it is, is destroyed by what seems to be an endeavour to care for it. A prey to technical dominance, it assumes a grey tint or a crude motley coloration, wherein man no longer recognises himself, being robbed of his individuality as a human creature. Yet, since it is uncontrollable, it rides rough-shod over the ordinances formulated to destroy it.

The claim to self-will and to existence [to self-expression] cannot be abrogated—any more than there <sup>[44]</sup> is a possibility, once the masses have come into being, of dispensing with the need for a universal apparatus as an essential condition for the life and welfare of every individual. Tension between the universal life-apparatus and a truly human world is therefore, inevitable. Each is endowed with its reality only in virtue of the other; and were one to effect a definitive conquest of the other, it would thereby instantly destroy itself. Attempted mastery and attempted revolt will continue their reciprocal strike, each misunderstanding the other, though each fruitfully stimulates the other. Mutual misunderstanding is unavoidable because of the conflict between the self-preservative impulse as a vital urge and existence [the craving for higher forms of self-expression] in its absoluteness.

The limits to the life-order will everywhere become manifest where man grows fully aware of himself.

What has made life as we now live it possible, and what is therefore indispensable, is nevertheless a danger to man's selfhood. The growth of knowledge during the era of advanced technique

in conjunction with the spreading dominion of apparatus seem to narrow man's potentialities even while enriching him. It is obvious that he may founder if, as is possible, no efficient leaders appear upon the scene. A symbol of the world in which, somehow or other, so long as he remains man, he has to live, a symbol of the world which is his necessary historical environment, is the life of the home. The fact that he knows himself menaced is shown by his dread of life; the fact that he can secure self-expression in his daily achievement is shown by (when he has it) joy in work; and the way in which he realises his vital reality is disclosed in sport.<sup>[45]</sup>

### CONSCIOUSNESS DURING THE ERA OF ADVANCED TECHNIQUE

The upshot of technical advances as far as everyday life is concerned has been that there is a trustworthy supply of necessities, but in a way which makes us take less pleasure in them, because they come to us as a matter of course instead of with the relish given by a sense of positive fulfilment. Being mere materials obtainable at a moment's notice in exchange for money, they lack the aroma of that which is produced by personal effort. Articles of consumption are supplied in the mass and are used up, their refuse being thrown away; they are readily interchangeable, one specimen being as good as another. In manufactured articles turned out in large quantities, no attempt is made to achieve a unique and precious quality, to produce something whose individuality makes it transcend fashion, something that will be carefully cherished. An article which thus satisfies ordinary needs arouses no peculiar sense of affection, and is only felt to be important if it should chance to be unobtainable. In that last respect, certainly, a general security of provision, growing ever more extensive, intensifies the emotions of want and danger should anything go wrong with the supply.

Among articles of consumption we distinguish the well-adapted and substantially perfected kinds, the definitive forms whose manufacture has become thoroughly normalised. Such commodities have not sprung completely finished from one exceptional brain, but are the outcome of successive discoveries and improvements that have continued, perhaps, for more than a generation. The bicycle, for instance, took twenty years to pass through the various stages of its revolution (some of which now look to us more than a little comic) before attaining finality in a restricted <sup>[46]</sup> number of minor



varieties. Although the majority of articles of consumption still repel in one way or another by inelegancies of form, by errors of excess or defect, by unpracticalness in matters of detail, by maladaptations in point of technique, or what not, the ideal shines forth, and in a fair number of instances has been attained. When perfectionment has gone as far as this, fondness for a particular specimen has become unmeaning. The general form is what matters to us, and, however artificial that may be, such things have a functional suitability which almost makes them seem like natural products rather than the creatures of man's activity.

Thanks to the technical conquest of time and space by the daily press, modern travel, the cinema, wireless, etc., a universalization of contact has become possible. No longer is anything remote, mysterious, wonderful. All can participate as witnesses of events accounted great or important. Persons who occupy leading positions are as well known to us as if we rubbed shoulders with them day by day.

The attitude of mind characteristic of this world of advanced technique has been termed positivism. The positivist does not want phrase-making, but knowledge; not ponderings about meaning, but dextrous action; not feelings, but objectivity; not a study of mysterious influences, but a clear ascertainment of facts. Reports of what has been observed must be given concisely, plastically, without sentimentalism. An aggregate of disjointed data, even sound ones, producing the effect of being the relics of earlier education, are worth nothing. Constructive thought is demanded, rather than the making of many words; simplicity and directness, rather than eloquence. Control and organization are supreme.<sup>[47]</sup> The matter-of-factness of the technical realm makes its familiars skilled in their dealings with all things; the ease with which ideas about such matters are communicated, standardizes knowledge; hygiene and comfort schematize bodily and erotic life. Daily affairs are carried on in conformity with fixed rules. The desire to act in accordance with general conventions, to avoid startling any one by the unusual, results in the establishment of a typical behaviour which reconstructs upon a new plane something akin to the rule of taboos in primitive times.

The individual is merged in the function. Being is objectified, for positivism would be violated if individuality remained conspicuous. The individual consciousness is absorbed into the social, so that, in exceptional instances, the individual has joy in work

without any tinge of selfishness. It is the collectivity that matters; and what to the individual would be tedious, nay intolerable, becomes endurable to him as part of the collectivity, in which a new stimulus inspires him. He exists only as "we".

Essential humanity is reduced to the general; to vitality as a functional corporeality, to the triviality of enjoyment. The divorce of labour from pleasure deprives life of its possible gravity: public affairs become mere entertainment; private affairs, the alternation of stimulation and fatigue, and a craving for novelty whose inexhaustible current flows swiftly into the waters of oblivion. There is no continuity, only pastime. Positivism likewise encourages an unceasing activity of the impulses common to us all: an enthusiasm for the numberless and the vast, for the creations of modern technique, for huge crowds; sensational admiration for the achievements, fortunes, and abilities of outstanding individuals; the complication and <sup>[48]</sup>brutalization of the erotic; gambling, adventurousness, and even the hazarding on one's life. Lottery tickets are sold by the million; crossword puzzles become the chief occupation of people's leisure. This positive gratification of the mind without personal participation or effort promotes efficiency for the daily round, fatigue and recreation being regularized.

In becoming a mere function, life forfeits its historical particularity, to the extreme of a levelling of the various ages of life. Youth as the period of highest vital efficiency and of erotic exaltation becomes the desired type of life in general. Where the human being is regarded only as a function, he must be young; and if youth is over, he will still strive to show its semblance. Add to this that, for primary reasons, age no longer counts. The individual's life is experienced only momentarily, its temporal extension being a chance duration, not remembered and cherished as the upbuilding of irrevocable decisions upon the foundation of biological phases. Since a human being no longer has any specific age, he is always simultaneously at the beginning and the end; he can do now this, now that, and now the other; everything seems at any moment possible, and yet nothing truly real. The individual is no more than one instance among millions; why then should he think his doings of any importance? What happens, happens quickly and is soon forgotten. People therefore tend to behave as if they were all of the same age. Children become like grown-ups as soon as they possibly can, and join in grown-up conversations on their own initiative. When the old pretend to be young, of course the young have no

reverence for their elders. These latter, instead of (as they should) keeping the young at a distance and setting them a standard,<sup>[49]</sup> assume the airs of an invincible vitality, such as beseems youth but is unbecoming to age. Genuine youth wants to maintain its disparity, and not to be mingled without distinction among elders. Age wants form and realization and the continuity of its destiny.

Since positivism makes a general demand for simplicity that shall render things universally comprehensible, it tends towards establishing a sort of "universal language" for the expression of all modes of human behaviour. Not merely fashions, but rules for social intercourse, gestures, phrases, methods of conveying information, incline towards uniformity. There is now a conventional ethic of association: courteous smiles, a tranquil manner, the avoidance of haste and jostle, the adoption of a humorous attitude in strained situations, helpfulness unless the cost be unreasonable, the feeling that "personal remarks" are in bad taste, self-discipline to promote order and easy relationships whenever people are assembled in large numbers. All these things are advantageous to a multifariously communal life, and are actually achieved.

### DOMINION OF APPARATUS

Inasmuch as the titanic apparatus for the provision of the elementary necessities of human life reduces the individual to a mere function, it releases him from the obligation to conform to the traditional standards which of old formed the cement of society. It has been said that in modern times men have been shuffled together like grains of sand. They are elements of an apparatus in which they occupy now one location, now another; not parts of a historical substance which they imbue with their selfhood. The number of those who lead this uprooted sort of life is continually on the increase. Driven from pillar to post, then perhaps out-of-work<sup>[50]</sup> for a lengthy period with nothing more than bare subsistence, they no longer have a definite place or status in the whole. The profound saying that every one ought to have his own niche, to fulfil his proper task in the scheme of creation, has for them become a lying phrase, used in the futile endeavour to console persons who feel themselves adrift and forsaken. What a man can do nowadays can only be done by one who takes short views. He has occupation, indeed, but his life has no continuity. What he does is done to good purpose, but is then finished once for all. The task may be repeated

after the same fashion many times, but it cannot be repeated in such an intimate way as to become, one might say, part of the personality of the doer; it does not lead to an expansion of the selfhood. What has been done, no longer counts, but only that which is actually being done. Oblivion is the basis of such a life, whose outlooks upon past and present shrink so much that scarcely anything remains in the mind but the bald present. Thus life flows on its course devoid of memories and foresights, lacking the energy derivable from a purposive and abstract outlook upon the part played in the apparatus. Love for things and human beings wanes and disappears. The machine-made products vanish from sight as soon as made and consumed, all that remains in view being the machinery by which new commodities are being made. The worker at the machine, concentrating upon immediate aims, has no time or inclination left for the contemplation of life as a whole.

When the average functional capacity has become the standard of achievement, the individual is regarded with indifference. No one is indispensable. He is not himself, having no more genuine individuality<sup>[51]</sup> than one pin in a row, a mere object of general utility. Those most effectively predestined to such a life are persons without any serious desire to be themselves. Such have the preference. It seems as if the world must be given over to mediocrities, to persons without a destiny, without a rank or a difference, without genuinely human attributes.

It is as if the man thus deracinated and reduced to the level of a thing, had lost the essence of humanity. Nothing appeals to him with the verity of substantial being. Whether in enjoyment or discomfort, whether strenuous or fatigued, he is still nothing more than the function of his daily task. As he lives on from day to day, the only desire that may stir him beyond that of performing this task is the desire to occupy the best obtainable place in the apparatus. The mass of those who stay in their appointed situations becomes segregated from those who ruthlessly press forward. The former are passive, remain where they are, and amuse themselves in their leisure hours; the latter are active, being spurred on by ambition and the will to power, consumed as with fire by the thought of the chances of promotion, by the tensing of their utmost energies.

The whole apparatus is guided by a bureaucracy, which is itself likewise an apparatus—human beings reduced to apparatus, one upon which all those at work in the greater apparatus are dependent. The State, the municipality, manufacturing and business



enterprises, are controlled by bureaucracies. To-day men are associated for labour in multitudes, and their work must be organised. Those who force a way into the front ranks have secured advancement and enjoy higher consideration; but essentially they, too, are the slaves of their functions, which merely demand <sup>[52]</sup> an alerter intelligence, a more specialized talent, and a more lively activity than those of the crowd.

The dominion of apparatus is favourable to persons equipped with the faculties which will thus bring them to the front: is advantageous to far-seeing and relentless individuals who are well-acquainted with the qualities of average human beings and are therefore able to manage them efficiently, who are ready and willing to acquire expertise in some department or other, who can strive unrestingly without concern for anything but the main chance, and who are sleeplessly possessed by the thought of getting on in the world.

There are further requisites. The would-be climber must be able to make himself liked. He must persuade, and at times even corrupt—be serviceable enough to make himself indispensable—be able to hold his tongue, to circumvent, to lie a little though not too much—be indefatigable in the discovery of reasons—ostensibly modest—have a readiness to appeal to sentiment on occasions—be capable of working in a manner that will please his superiors—avoid showing independence except in those matters wherein independence is expected of him by his chiefs.

Where scarcely any one is born to command and therefore educated to command, and where a high position in the apparatus has to be climbed up to by the aspirant, this acquirement of a leading situation is dependent upon behavior, instincts, valuations, which imperil true selfhood as a determinant of responsible leadership. Luck and chance may sometimes bring about advancement. Speaking generally, however, the winners in the race have qualities which disincline them to allow others to be their true selves. Hence the winners tend to snub all those who aim at adequate self-expression, speaking of them as pretentious, <sup>[53]</sup> eccentric, biased, unpractical, and measuring their achievements by insincere absolute standards; they are personally suspect, they are stigmatized as provocative, as disturbers of the peace, as people who kick over the traces. Because he only "arrives" who has sacrificed his selfhood, the arrivist will not tolerate self-expression in subordinates.

Consequently peculiar methods of advancement in the appa-

tus decide the choice among the candidates for high places. Because no one gets on who does not thrust himself forward, and yet to be "pushing" is considered bad form in any particular case, the convention is that the candidate must ostensibly wait till he is summoned; and the problem each has to solve is how to thrust himself into a position while seeming indifferent to promotion. A rumour is started inconspicuously, in casual conversation. Hypotheses are mooted with an air of indifference. The ball is opened by some such phrase as: "I am not really thinking of"; or, "it is hardly to be expected that", etc. If nothing comes of the suggestion, no harm has been done. If, on the other hand, it bears fruit, one can soon begin talking of a concrete proposal, declare that an offer has been made, and bruit it abroad that nothing was farther from one's mind than any such expectation. One can even feign reluctance. The aspirant accustoms himself to being double-faced and double-tongued. He will enter into as many promising relationships as possible, so that he may be able to turn some of them to useful account. Instead of the comradeship of persons all of whom are their genuine selves, we have the spurious friendship of a gang whose motto is "You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." The important thing is not to be a spoil-sport when pleasure is afoot; to be outwardly respectful <sup>[54]</sup> to all; to show indignation when one is sure that others will do the same; to join in log-rolling to the common advantage—and so on.