

The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers and its Implication for Contemporary Christian Living

Felicien Ngitnyu Mumbah

INTRODUCTION

Karl Jaspers February 23, 1883-1969. He studied law and medicine. He practised medicine as a psychiatrist before eventually turning to philosophy, and he is now a professor of philosophy, of which Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were his influencers.¹ On April 1, 1922, he took over the full professorial chair for philosophy in Heidelberg; he was not originally a philosopher. He said, “But when the intellectual world is vacant of philosophy, it becomes the duty at least to bear witness to philosophy, to direct the attention to the great philosophers, to try to stop confusion, and to encourage in our youth the interest in real philosophy.” His primary aim was to teach the truth we live by. His life and work were at risk during the Hitler dictatorship. He was compulsorily retired in 1937. in 1938, the Publication of his works was banned.²

THE PROPONENT(S)/DEVELOPMENT OF THE IDEA

Existentialism grew up within the emptiness left by the decline of religion. Existential philosophers wanted to pull philosophy down from the academy and bring it to the real life of people in the streets. Philosophy attempts to understand the basic

¹ Joseph, Omoregbe. *A Simplified History of Western Philosophy: Contemporary Philosophy*. (Ikeja, Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers Ltd, 2012), 59.

² Hermann Horn, “Karl Jaspers,” *International Bureau of Education* Vol. XXIII, No. 3/4, (1993): 721.

logic that motivates the way people think.³ Most scholars trace existential philosophy back to Soren Kierkegaard, a troubled Danish writer in the early nineteenth century. He protested against the prevailing church of his time, which he found to have lost the spirit of Christianity and become just a nonspiritual organisation with no soul, and also against the system's idealistic philosophy.

Another remarkable existentialist is Friedrich Nietzsche. He developed his thinking independently of Kierkegaard. Nietzsche's thinking was remarkably similar in spirit to that of Kierkegaard, even though Nietzsche was a fervent atheist while Kierkegaard was a Christian. Both thoughts prevailing religious and philosophical institutions to the spiritual needs of the new world.⁴

Karl Jaspers, one of the leading articulators of existential philosophy in the twentieth century, wrote in his book *Man in the Modern Age* that the rise of existential philosophy represents the struggle by modern man to lead an authentic and genuine life despite the contemporary drift toward mass, standardised society. He could be credited with bringing together the work of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche for the twentieth century and outlining the unified ground of the existential philosophers in his book *Existenz Philosophy*. However, he objected to the label "existentialism" when it arose later in France because it seemed to denote a school of thought, a doctrine, which he saw as a limitation.⁵ However, he prefers to use 'Existenz' to distinguish himself from others. To him, Existenz is what never becomes an object, the origin from which issues are thinking and acting.⁶ The notion that man not only exists but wishes to be himself was established

³ David Cogswell, *Existentialism For Beginners* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Steerforth Press, 2008), 12.

⁴ Cogswell, 17.

⁵ Cogswell, 17.

⁶ Paul Arthur Schilpp, *The Philosophy of Karl Jaspers* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1957), xix.

by Jaspers in 1932 in his three-volume 'Philosophy', which is structured as follows: firstly, a worldly orientation as a study into objective truth; secondly, the clarification of existence as a plea for the individual to be himself; thirdly, metaphysics in relation to the transcendental.⁷

Existentialism focuses attention and concern on the individual over the group, mass type or category, on the specific over the general, actual events and experience over the ideas, theories, statistics or imaginary events. To achieve a reliable life, an individual must direct oneself and fight the pressure of mass society to create standardised human beings.⁸ Existenz philosophy is the way of thought through which man seeks to become himself; it makes use of expert knowledge while going beyond it at the same time. This way of thinking does not cognise objects but explains and makes actual the being of the thinker. Brought into a state of suspense by having transcended the cognitions of the world (as the adoption of a philosophical boldness towards the world) that fixate being, it appeals to its own freedom (as the illumination of Existenz) and gains space for its own unconditioned activity through conjuring up Transcendence (as metaphysics).

MAJOR CONTENT(S)/FOCUS OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL IDEA

Jasper's significant contributions to the development of existentialism contain his concept of two states of being: 'Dasein' and 'Existenz', 'Boundary Situations', 'Transcendence', and 'Encompassing'. Jaspers opens with worries and tries to find himself and these questions down on him, and he raises them as a concern, pointing out, "What is being? Why is anything at all? Why not nothing? Or who am I? Or what do I want"? These questions arise from a past

⁷ Horn, 722.

⁸ Cogawell, 20.

situation in which he finds himself.⁹ The main idea here is for him to find himself, but how can he become aware of himself in this world when he has taken things up and dropped them again, and still yet, he wonders and asks himself what it is? For all things pass away, and he was not at the beginning, nor is he at the end. Even between the beginning and the end, he asks about the beginning and the end. Jaspers seeks answers to all these, but he comes to a point where he realises that this world cannot help him understand his situation, nor can his situation enable him to understand the world.¹⁰ Therefore, there is a need to search for a being; he stresses that to think of a being is to make it a distinct being. If we ask what being is, we have many answers to choose from: empirical reality in space and time; dead and living matter; persons and things; tools and material; ideas that apply to fact; rational constructions of ideal objects, as in mathematics; contents of the imagination in an objectiveness. Hence, whatever being I find in my situation is, to me, an object.

This being is my existenz, and I am Existenz if I do not become an object for myself. In existenz, I know, without being able to see it, that what I call myself is independent. The possibility of existenz is what I live by; it is only in its realisation that I am myself. It is thus not my existence that is existenz; but, being human, I am possible existenz in existence. He continues that existence is fulfilled in mundane beings, so possible existenz thus sets itself off from the world in order to find the right way into the world. Existenz is never general and not a particular under a universal. The union of existenz and the world is an incalculable process that no one who is a part of it can be sure of.¹¹ Jaspers stresses the doubts of the being of existenz; once we divorce existenz from existence, from the world, and from a general character, there seems to be nothing left. So, he feels unsatisfied if he reduces all things to mundane existence,

⁹ E. B. Ashton, Karl Jaspers Philosophy Volume 1 (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1932), 43

¹⁰ Jaspers, 44-45.

¹¹ Jaspers, Philosophy, Vol. 2, 3-6.

either in theory or in practice. Nothing I know in this world can give me any reasons for my decision, but what I am to decide can be grasped in the medium of that knowledge.¹²

Elucidating Existential Communication. At this point, he then said when I come to myself, two things lie in this communication: my being 'I' and my being with 'another'. If I am not independent myself or upright on my own, I shall be lost entirely in the other. He now said communication is two people who come to each other out of solitude and yet know isolation only because they are communicating. So, I cannot come to myself without entering into communication, and I cannot enter into communication without being lonely.¹³ You enter the most profound communication when you are on your own. On this note, Jaspers expatiated that communication is the manifestation of the real you because what emerges from you reveals yourself to you. Since communication is about self-realisation and finding answers to questions, there should be some element of truthfulness to an extent because one needs to gain answers to his worries. Thus, for every contact, there must be content because communication without content is senseless and void, and in time, no man can ask for the perfection of another or of himself.¹⁴ Jaspers also emphasises love in communication because love is the substantial source of communicative self-being. It can produce self-being as the movement of its own manifestation; it cannot perfect a self-being that would be conclusive, and communication is not to be project man.¹⁵

Jaspers again talks about the deficiency in communication. To him, since communication in existence is a process, not something complete, its reality is a sense of being deficient. The deficiency may take the form of a mere desire, or it may

¹² Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 8-9.

¹³ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 56-66.

¹⁴ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 56-66.

¹⁵ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 56-66.

turn into an indispensable link in manifestation or take the form of an incomprehensible boundary that shocks our sense of being. There is a default in communication when we are still young or when we die, and also when there is no absolute truth in communication.¹⁶ Jaspers stresses the importance of dignity in communication at any level. He also emphasised the part of loneliness. To him, loneliness is the irremovable end without which there is no communication. Solitude as the possibility of an empty I is a conception of core nonbeing at the edge of the void from which my historic decision to communicate brings him back to reality.¹⁷ Loneliness is the present lack of communicative ties to others and the uncertainty of whether this can be helped. Self-being in the polarity of solitude and communication called for the thesis that I cannot be myself unless another is himself with me. Even among the abundance of existence, loneliness may suddenly drag before me as the possible abyss of nonbeing.¹⁸ The certainty of having never felt any communicative ties will make me tell myself I haven't anybody. However, it is different if loneliness is due to rejection by another or if I did not happen to meet someone to communicate with over time. Jaspers then holds that if he feels doomed to a lonely death, it is in Transcendence alone that unfulfilled communication can be channelled.¹⁹

Another thing Jaspers talked about is the will. Looking at this, in an open statement, he said, I can say of something that at the time it is and is not my will; that I cannot will anything. I do not come to the resolution that is really me when I will be willing. So, the will that wills something can be described as a psychological phenomenon; the will that wills itself is the active assurance of being, which my volition of something derives from the ground of freedom.²⁰ According to him, in the

¹⁶ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 67-73.

¹⁷ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 67-73.

¹⁸ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 67-73.

¹⁹ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 67-73.

²⁰ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 133-138.

phenomenology of volition, volition itself does not exist until there is discriminating thought. Here, ends and means come to be objects of deliberation; I think about the means and whether they suit the purpose, and I think about the end and whether it is my true purpose.²¹ Jaspers stresses here that there are always motives behind our choice, which is always in struggle and the most vital wins. He further states that when we think and plan for a long time, the will intervenes in existence, transcending the realm of our reality not just factually but knowingly, and the effect is based upon the point of action. All results will depend on mechanisms in psycho-physical existence that lie outside our consciousness and on given facts and contexts in the world that are unknown to us when we act. He also points out that the will can shape its psycho-physical existence slowly over time through habit, practice and training.²²

Volition and involuntary acts, here, the struggle may lead to a permanent split; in that case, it remains sterile. Our psycho-physical nature stops obeying my will and defies it in involuntary processes. I cannot do as I will, cannot keep my mind on what I am reading, cannot make the natural moves unsought things befall me, and feelings and inner impulses that seem alien to me. I try to control myself, but it only gets worse. In the form of the will. Continues that when my will, my clear sense of purpose, wills a thing, both the item and the means to it must have been set before me by my intellect. When the pathos of the idea and existenz flags for a time, rationalistic volition may serve.²³ The will may obey a passion rather than an idea. In the formal traits of discipline, there are clear relations between ends and means. The choice may come to be a habit. When we speak of a strong will, we talk about the intensity of the will, and it is the affect-conditioned strength of the moment. The tenacity of will is persistence over

²¹ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 133-138.

²² Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 133-138.

²³ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 140-152.

time. The power of will is the conduct of a man who does not notice and has no use for conditions prevailing within and without himself.²⁴ In the aspect of free will, Jaspers holds that independence is the goal of his will to be free in the world, but I am independent to the extent to which I can determine the conditions of my existence.²⁵

Jaspers again talks about his situation. When I imagine a situation, I see it as the relative location of things. Situations exist by changing, and there comes a moment when they no longer exist. It may be linked; one may arise from the other. Since existence means to be in states, I can never get out of one without entering into another.²⁶ That you cannot live without struggling and suffering; I cannot avoid guilt; that I must die. Jaspers call them boundary situations, and we can prevent situations by closing our eyes to them.²⁷

IT'S IMPLICATION(S) TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN LIVING/LIFE.

A. Weaknesses (How Have These Weaknesses Affected Christian Life and Belief and How We Can Respond To Them from a Christian-Biblical Orientation)

Jaspers holds that if he feels doomed to a lonely death, it is in Transcendence alone that unfulfilled communication can be channelled. For Jaspers to say the unfulfilled communication can be directed in death is like saying there will be repentance in the grave. This statement by Jaspers is profound to African Traditional Religion, which also believes in communication with the dead. This view can easily affect Christian life and belief systems, especially in African Christianity. Contemporary Christians are to note that there is no communication in the grave. Death can only hear the voice of

²⁴ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 140-152.

²⁵ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 140-152.

²⁶ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 178-184.

²⁷ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 178-184.

the Lord at the coming of Christ (John 5:28), in which judgment is followed (1 Corinthians 7:27).

He also holds that evil exists because there is freedom. The will alone can be evil. This statement or doctrine of Jaspers will make no sense in African Christianity because evil in Africa has nothing to do with the freedom of man. Evil in Africa, like the killing of innocent souls, rituals and many others, is not the freedom of the victims. There are also forces in Africa that push and pull people to do evil. Evil can be moral or physical. Rape, infidelity, suicide etc., can be seen as moral, while born blind, earthquake etc., is physical. Hence, evil is the absence of good.²⁸ Therefore, evil should better be understood as the result of man's misuse of free will and a demonstration of his greed and ignorance of the good. In response to this, Jesus said in the book of (John 9:3) that "neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him." Physical evil is not the free will of man but the act of God to demonstrate his power by calling or punishing a people or a nation for his glory. Also (John 11:4), Jesus said, "This illness will not end in death, but it is for God to glorify the Son."

Another weakness of Jasper's philosophy is the view that we could avoid situations by closing our eyes to them. There is no way Christians can close their eyes to the conditions around them. This kind of thought affects Christian belief, especially in today's Christianity, where preachers tell members it is well when they know it is not well. Also, this view can discourage man from finding solutions to his problems by just closing his eyes and opening them and still seeing the situation. But the Christian response to this is that, instead of closing our eyes to conditions, the Bible says in (Hebrews 12:2) "let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith."

²⁸ Agbor Paul Agbor, *The Path to Wisdom* (Cameroon, Buea: Concept Printers Buea, 2011), 189.

Furthermore, Jaspers emphasises that the basic fact of our existenz in existence is that neither without fear nor without the transition from fear to peace of mind can reality, the source of the destroying anxiety, be seen as it is. That man can simultaneously see truth, be a reality, and yet live without fading out in fear. What does he mean by existenz in existence? How can we draw implications when we don't understand what he says? The Christian response to what he talks about fear in simple terms is in the book of Proverbs 1:10, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is Understanding." Only God can give us meaning in existence; what we need is found in Him.

Jasper's philosophical thoughts are sometimes very confusing. It is tough to understand what he means. He outlines that there is no solution for a truthful sense of being. There is no answer in the great silence. There is no justification for what it is and how it is; there is no tranquillisation or unveiling in the cypher.²⁹ The question is, where can we find a solution for our being? Where can we get answers? He has not given answers to all these. However, from a Christian perspective, man can only find answers to the worries of life in Christ Jesus through general and special revelation. The Bible have the answers to our being. "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for" Eph. 1:11 (MSB).

Another misconception of Jasper's view, which is unhealthy for the Christian church, especially contemporary Christians, is that the road to peace is long-suffering. Passive suffering is empty, merely a form of restless self-relinquishment, of letting things take their course. Still, active sufferance allows me to experience the foundering of all existence and yet to engage in realisations as long as a grain of strength remains.³⁰ Christ is the prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6). Therefore, true peace

²⁹ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol 3, 272.

³⁰ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 3, 272.

can only be found in the umbrella of Christ Jesus. Endurance or long-suffering is part of the fruit of the spirit, as stated in (Galatians 5:22).

B. Strengths (How Can the Strengths of This Idea Be Annexed to Improve Christian Living and Relationships in the Contemporary Society)

He expresses that there is nothing new that comes to be as well as there is no lasting and definitive objectivity, for there are not two worlds lying side by side; there is only one world in different dimensions that existenz comes to be articulate for us without being known.³¹ A Bible student, teachers of the words, Christians, and theologians will agree with Jaspers on this view and in conjunction with the Bible in the book of (Ecclesiastes 1:11) in summary, it says, “what has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything one can say? Look! This is something new. It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.” Hence, contemporary society should annex these Jaspers and Biblical views to improve Christian living.

He furthermore states that silence is another deficiency in communication; to him, silence is a form of inaction, the suspension of communication in mere existence. But it is not always in action. Silence is a function of communication itself, and the faculty of silence expresses a strong self-being’s readiness to communicate. There is a time to keep silent, and this silence is the continuity of communicative becoming. This is a great philosophical thought from Jaspers, which Christians can annex to improve Christian living, especially in this contemporary time. “Silence at times is the best answer,” even the Bible says in the book of (Ecclesiastes3:7b) that “there is a time to be silence and a time to speak.” This is a treasure of biblical and philosophical wisdom from Jasper,

³¹ Jaspers, Philosophy, Vol. 2, 18.

calling on contemporary society to understand when, how, and where to be silent and to speak. He also emphasises that when you keep silent at times, you gain knowledge and more insight for the next words that will come out of your mouth.

His understanding of being is so glaring that contemporary society cannot but bank from his fountain of knowledge to improve Christian living. To value Jasper's views is to look at what other philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre said. To Sartre, "Existence Precedes Essence." By this, he meant that things and people exist in the world before making meaning of their existence.³² However, a careful study of Jaspers emphasises that "Essence precedes existence"; that is to say, the purpose of a thing must first be in the mind of its makers before it is produced. A laptop was in the mind of the producer before it was produced. "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you" (Jeremiah 1:5). We were in God's mind before birth. Hence, Jasper's views on existence should be adopted and developed for contemporary Christian living.

Jasper's view about fulfilled absolute consciousness is that love is the only fulfilment of any quest, and conscience remains aimless without love. Love is infinite and clear-eyed; in love, there is exaltation and present satisfaction, motion, rest, betterment, and goodness. Love is self-becoming and self-yielding. In love lies absolute trust.³³ This is another major strength of Jasper's philosophy that should be encouraged for contemporary Christian living. Love conquers all things. The Bible also emphasises that love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres." (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Love is a significant theme in Jasper's Existentialism, which

³² Agbor, 154.

³³ Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, 241-243.

contemporary society can adopt for Christian living and the betterment of our community.

He also stresses the aspect of faith in which he holds that in faith, there are no reasons for it. I cannot will it, but I will on the grounds of it. I cannot prove it, but I understand it always in a specific objectivity of thoughts or images. Faith is how the soul, without sufficient concepts, is sure of its being, roots, and goal. This is another theme in Jasper's existentialism that contemporary society can annex to develop and enrich Christian living. The Bible also point out in the book of (Hebrews 11:1) that "Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

Education is another theme in Jaspers' philosophy that cannot be ignored. Education consists of everything imparted to young people by communicating content, allowing them to share the substance of things and disciplining their conduct so that this knowledge continues to grow within them and enables them to become free. The process by which knowledge is imparted should lead young people progressively to the origins, the genuine, and the true foundations. This presupposes that young people will themselves come to terms with the surrounding reality whose many different wings they may experience through play, work and practical activities. The list of this experimental practice ranges from skills in methods of work through physical training, clear speech and disciplined discussion to the intellectual grasp of original contents in poetry, the Bible and art, and also to an understanding of history and familiarity with the basic techniques of the natural sciences.³⁴ Children must acquire skills and learn knowledge. Children must be educated according to their own inclinations and abilities. Even the Bible says we should be diligent (study) to present ourselves approved to God. (2 Timothy 2:15). Also, my people are

³⁴ Hermann Horn. Karl Jaspers (1883-1969), *UNESCO: International Bureau of Education*, Vol. XXIII, No. 3/4, (1993): 3.

destroyed for lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6). Hence, contemporary society must seek knowledge and Education for Christian living.

Education is not a uniform process. It changes throughout history and assumes different forms in different societies. Jaspers observes that Scholastic education, which prevailed in the Middle Ages, is confined to the transmission of a fixed subject matter, compressed into methods, and dictated with an accompanying commentary. The teacher and his pupil are on the same level in relation to ideas. It helps to bring the student's hidden ideas into clear consciousness; the potential which exists within him is stimulated, but nothing is forced upon him from outside.³⁵ Here, Education is understood as the element through which human beings come into their own through interpersonal contact by revealing the truth that is hidden in them. Consequently, Education should be encouraged in contemporary society, especially in African Christianity. Many African communities and Christians are suffering today because they do not have this basic knowledge that Jaspers is emphasising.

CONCLUSION

Without any debts, Karl Jaspers is a profound philosopher with an excellent mind for reasoning and a great thinker whose philosophy has made a mighty contribution to contemporary Christian philosophers and philosophers, especially in his existentialism. This paper has tried to look at only a few of Jasper's philosophical thoughts on some selected ideals in his existential view, like communication, faith, love, Education, etc. Notwithstanding some of his weaknesses listed above, his strength overpowers his shortcomings. Hence, Jasper's philosophical view should be encouraged and practised in society for Christian living.

³⁵ Horn, 4.