CHAPTER FIVE

JASPERS, EXISTENCE, AND CONTINGENCY

ON THE RISK OF A LOSS OF SENSE FOR GOD IN MODERN PHILOSOPHY

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1. Introduction

In his profound philosophical reflections, the famous German philosopher of existence, Karl Jaspers, does not seem to have surpassed the standpoint of contingency. Even more, he appears to have declared a philosophy of radical contingency the only coherent, trustworthy, and veritable system of thought, at least in the context of twentieth century culture. This idea did not prevent him, however, from exploring the boundaries between existence and transcendence. To the contrary, transcendence for Jaspers is one of the key concepts of thought—a firm conviction which he is generally praised for, not only among historians of ideas or traditional metaphysicians, but also by a great number of philosophers of religion and theologians.

The question is, of course, what is meant by a “standpoint of radical contingency”? And, in addition: does Jaspers’ philosophy still provide an opening for the reality that was traditionally called “God” or “the absolute”? It is assumed that, in answering these questions, we will come across the basic issues of Jaspersian metaphysics. This contribution, however, does not aim primarily at an analysis of what Jaspers can teach us about contingency. Rather, its focus is the twofold question, whether Jaspers’ philosophy of existence is interpretable as a philosophy of con-

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tingency, and whether this peculiar approach does away with a certain sensitivity for the divine that traditionally accompanied philosophical thought?

Of course, this question itself relies on a specific understanding of contingency that needs to be elucidated beforehand. In this article, the logical significance of contingent as “that which is not necessary” or “that which does not happen necessarily” does not prevail. Contingency rather denotes a paradigm of thought that, in the history of philosophy, mentality, and culture, arose in the wake of modernity. ² This implies that speaking of contingency brings forth a hermeneutics of immanence, historicity, finitude, and particularity, as well as a thoroughgoing awareness of how difficult it is to deal with the absolute.

Concretely, this article first follows Jaspers’ metaphysics with respect to some crucial concepts it employed. I will demonstrate that a strong, even all-determining awareness of contingency permeated Jaspers’ understanding of “existence,” “transcendence,” and the “ciphers” mediating between them. Relying upon this analysis, I will further ask whether the nature of this awareness articulates some intrinsic shortcomings typical of modern philosophy. ³ In order to make this point clear, I will draw attention to two topics, both of which prominently figure in Jaspers’ philosophy of religion: “negative theology” and “faith.”

2. Existence in Contingency

For Jaspers, existence is not easily describable. Actually, it is quite impossible to catch hold of it and bring it, in some way, before the intellect, so that a satisfactory definition of it can be given. At any rate, existence is not to be identified with “soul,” “human individual,” “self-consciousness,” “mind,” etc., although a preliminary notion of these concepts

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² In line with Blumenberg’s and Marquard’s theses, Ingolf Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger argue that the notional content of contingency has become increasingly important since the modern paradigm shift, so emphatically that it dominates a whole philosophical era and its metaphysical and cultural approach to reality. Ingolf U. Dalferth and Philipp Stoellger, “Religion als Kontingenzkultur und die Kontingenz Gottes,” in Vernunft, Kontingenz und Gott (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 1; ed. I. U. Dalferth and P. Stoellger; Tübingen: Mohr, 2000), 1-44.

³ I discussed this issue at greater length in my Revelation, Reason and Reality. Theological Encounters with Jaspers, Schelling and Baader (Studies in Philosophical Theology 39; Leuven: Peeters, 2007), esp. 29-51.