

MAN'S LIMIT SITUATIONS AND THE QUESTION OF BEING

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Introduction

Undoubtedly, it can be said that the current situation of humanity is marked by the pandemic of COVID-19. Bearing in mind not only numerous media reports but to an even greater extent the experiences of specific people, what determines us is a wide range of many fundamentally negative experiences: fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and finally the death of a certain number of infected. This editorial intends to reflect on these experiences from the point of view of philosophy, especially the one that we could label »existential«. This editorial also intends to point out that these situations, although undoubtedly negative, are ultimately an irrevocable part of being human and can be an opportunity to realize ourselves.

Long ago the philosophy concluded that man is a being determined by the tragedy of his existence: the essential features of his life are tribulation, struggle, and suffering. Søren Kierkegaard spoke particularly strongly about this, saying that »torment« and »anxiety« are the fundamental determinants of human existence. Moreover, what we are as human beings, is precisely manifested in these realities. Philosophy should have before its eyes the historical, concrete man in his concrete situation. Man is undoubtedly a being of history and must therefore always start from the »here« and the »now«; that is, precisely from the specific situation in which he finds himself. And we as humans are always in different situations. Therefore, every true question about the meaning of man's being necessarily starts from the realization of the »fundamental situation« in which we find ourselves. As Karl Jaspers puts it: »Realizing a situation is already the beginning of mastering it; to notice it already means that there is a will that fights for some being.«¹

¹ Karl JASPERS, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin – Leipzig, 1931, 23-24.

1. Man as a being of a concrete situation

The first and basic situation is precise that we always exist in some sort of situation. Because outside the situation, as concrete and historical, there is no existence. In situations and according to them, we only are and can be. They are our fundamental reality, our limitation, but they also hide the possibility of overcoming and prevailing them: they from »narrowness« become »sources« of freedom. In them, from survival, we come to existence, and through existence to the being itself. We can live and pretend that they do not exist, forgetting while doing so that we are all mortal, left to chance, and guilty; and in doing so we only deal with individual situations that we want to resolve in our favour.

But nothing we plan or want is certain, and therefore we become anxious. We disappoint ourselves in our failures, we think we know ourselves, while in fact, we are strangers to ourselves.

In some situations, a special opportunity presents itself to reach a true being; philosophers of existence like the already mentioned Jaspers and theologians of similar inspiration like Paul Tillich call them limit situations (*die Grenzsituationen*). These are inevitable realities that can seemingly lead to the destruction of our being, but they also represent a radical possibility. In them, we meet our limits: »Situations such as the situation that I am always in a situation, that I cannot live without struggle and suffering, that I inevitably take the blame, that I have to die – I call limit situations. (...) They are like a wall we hit, where we fail. We cannot change them but only »illuminate« them, although we cannot explain them and derive them from something else. They survive with the survival itself.«²

We cannot escape these situations, for we are affected and carried by them. These are always specific situations that are either an advantage or a disadvantage for us; the possibility of self-realization or an impediment. They are always historical and as historical they affect me. The thesis advocated by authors such as Jaspers and Tillich is that limit situations go beyond a purely psycho-physical definition, and are associated with a deeper meaning which for human survival at the same time means a limitation, an obstacle, but also a radical possibility; they both limit us and fulfil us. It is undoubtedly that there is no man outside of them at all. Some of them can be acted upon to change them, and some are immutable and cannot be passed over or influenced.

² Karl JASPERS, *Philosophie: II.: Existenzerhellung*, Berlin – Heidelberg – New York, 1973, 203.

2. Irrevocability of limit situations of death, suffering, struggle, and guilt

Jaspers thus lists four basic limit situations:

1. *Death* – Jaspers speaks of death as an objective reality and of death as the death of a neighbour; only the latter is possible as a limit situation. As an objective reality, a mere fact, which does not deeply affect us, death represents nothing to us, for we do nothing but avoid it; only when we reflect about it and see the destruction and disappearance of those we care about, death becomes a limit situation. Failure and disappearance become a place of existential realization: »Suffering for the end becomes a conviction of existence.«³

Death precisely gives meaning to man's survival because, without it, man's existence would be nothing more than a »mere duration«; and therefore death, now conceived as a limit situation, drives a man to self-realization; we are forced to make decisions and act, to take responsibility for our lives – invited to realize the possibility of true existence.

Death can be a loss of survival, but also a loss of existence, from which anxiety necessarily arises. We have to overcome anxiety and fear of death because if survival is taken absolutely and fear paralyzes us, we lose our existence. But without death, we would be meaningless as an infinite duration of survival, and death, through suffering due to the disappearance of survival, becomes a possibility of our realization and it no longer rules over us.

As a limit situation, death is always a concrete, historical, definite death: the death of a loved one or one's death. It is here that death is brought to life, if communication occurs, true communication whose being is an eternal reality. Although both existential fear and fear of survival are present, death is necessary for existence; it is its limit, without it existence could not exist at all, for there would only be an infinite duration: »death, the existence (...) treats it as the necessary limit of its possible completion.«⁴

It thus becomes the completion of existence, embedded in its historicity and inseparable from it. It is a constant invitation to man not to waste his time pointlessly or in vain. Death should be encountered as the truth of one's being, despite all the suffering and anxiety it causes, one should accept one's existence as a gift.

2. *Suffering*. This is also about the irrevocable reality of being human. We all suffer and we cannot avoid suffering. It is always like an illness, a handicap, or some socially unacceptable situation, a partial destruction of

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 229.

survival and death stands behind it. Trying to escape from it is self-deception. We fight it because we think we can escape it. And that is a deception. We do not want to hear the truth about the irrevocability of suffering and thus make it an opportunity, a chance to awake the existence: »I will avoid suffering regarding myself by not understanding the facts and therefore I will not be existentially affected by them, I will not turn them into activity, but only endure them.«⁵

Without suffering, existence would remain dormant and therefore suffering must be adopted. This is how one can see where one stands. Man sees suffering as an inevitability and does not want to deceive himself anymore, but to realize himself in spite of it. It should be overcome as mere tribulation and beyond itself, experience it as a possibility. Without suffering, we would not be able to appreciate happiness either.

We can, as in the case of death, starting from the experience of suffering as a limit situation, and transcending it, reach the transcendence as a source and here suffering is transformed from limitation and destruction of survival into a true phenomenon of existence: »If (...) suffering is hampered in its very source, it takes on an incomprehensible meaning because it has sunk into what is absolute. My suffering is no longer by chance the fate of my abandonment, but the phenomenon of the survival of existence.«⁶

There is no doubt that his own suffering due to a serious illness prompted Jaspers to such a deep philosophical reflection on suffering as a possibility of existential self-realization.

3. *Struggle*. It is a limit situation that does not exist without me, for I always create it. Struggle stems from suffering and anxiety and is our necessity. We must fight for survival; without struggle, we would not exist at all; it is also always the limit of our entire survival. But there is also a different struggle, a struggle for existence. It is a »struggle in the love«, which arises from the concern for existence and is radically open to communication. Its goal is truth, not the universal truth, but the truth of the being that takes place in communication. It is a struggle for »my« truth that does not exclude »your« truth. This struggle, not only excludes physical violence, but is also a stranger to any other form of violence, because it would lose its purpose as a struggle in the love, which does not destroy, but confirms the other: »The struggle in the love ceases to be even at the slightest use of violence, for example, such as intellectual

⁵ JASPERS, *Philosophie II*, 231.

⁶ *Ibid*, 232.

superiority or suggestive action. It is conducted only in the absence of any violence when everyone puts their forces at the disposal of others as much as themselves.«⁷

It questions both me and the existence of the other, based on solidarity, in order to find a new form of communication. It is not just a struggle with rational arguments, but above all with love and communication. And it is precisely this form of struggle that can be read from the tradition of philosophy: it is an incentive to communicate, to revise one's views, against any attempts to impose one's truths on another. The purpose is to encourage and affirm the other while remaining consistent with oneself.

If such a struggle in the love and communication were absent, existence would become futile.

4. *Guilt*. Everything we do has consequences we know nothing about, and those consequences, whether positive or negative, are inevitable. But despite this fact, we cannot stop acting, because non-action would abolish existence. It is needed to bravely take responsibility, stand behind your actions, and bravely deal with their consequences. Worse than fear would be only inertia – inaction for fear of taking the blame. Both action and inaction have guilt as a product.⁸

In inaction, guilt deepens even more because we do not undertake what is within the limits of our possibilities. It is a limit situation, says Jaspers, where there is nothing left but to be aware of everything that is happening thanks to us, without us wanting to. We are invited to become responsible for our actions, and that means taking the blame if it happens. Thus, guilt oppresses existence because if we reject it, we reject the possibility of accomplishing existence at all.⁹

Existence is manifested in limit situations: namely, we only exist in these situations and we can never leave them, but simply »slide« from one to another. But, it is in this impotence that power is manifested; from mere survival, we come to a real being. We test not the limit of the empirical experience of the world, but the hypothetical limit, the »limit of the limit« and through it, we pass from non-freedom to freedom no matter how many limit situations have done evil and suffering in our lives. »A border« is a fundamental human

⁷ *Ibid*, 243.

⁸ *Ibid*, 247.

⁹ *Ibid*, 249.

category. In other words, it is only when we face limit situations that we truly begin to live, to be liberated, and begin the path to self-realization: »Originality in limit situations awakens the basic urge to find the way to being through the tribulation. It is decisive for a man how he perceives tribulation: whether it remains hidden from him and he only actually overcomes it in the end, or he can observe it without blurring, aware that it is the constant limit of his survival; whether he resorts to fantastic solutions and appeasement, or he endures tribulation honestly, remaining silent before the inexplicable. It depends on the way a man realizes his suffering what will he become.«¹⁰

3. From non-being to being

Reaching the limit, the mind recognizes the limitations of survival, and here begins a changed view of both oneself and the objects around oneself. We see, in Tillich's words, that man's existence is a synthesis of non-being and being.¹¹ Limit situations show us that »what« a person cannot in any way unambiguously »fix« is determined by permanent insecurity. The opportunities before us may or may not end positively for us. As a possibility, the complete failure of all our efforts appears, that is, »a sight into the emptiness of nothingness – the possibility that we even seize to exist. But, even if non-being experienced as victorious, it presupposes being. Man's situation is marked by the constant tension between being and non-being – evil (both moral and natural) and suffering necessarily appear as non-being – but non-being implies being, and the question of being, the fundamental structure that gives the existence to everything, necessarily appears on the horizon.

How to think about »being«? As that power which gives to all that is to be and which is foreseen in all that is, and especially in man, in the form of an endless search for that which transcends his finitude. This is the reality that classical Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought calls God. Tillich's concept of »courage to be« can be helpful here. »Courage« is meant as a central ontological category by which man can – by participating in the power of the being itself – overcome and take over non-being. Moreover, »courage« is »the key to interpreting the being itself.«¹² And precisely because it »opens the door« to the being itself, it is at the same time »universal and much-needed self-

¹⁰ Karl JASPERS, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, München, 1953, 24.

¹¹ See also: Paul TILLICH, *Courage to Be*, 1955, 55.

¹² *Ibid*, 32.

affirmation of our being.«¹³ This means that »courage« also belongs to human existence as such.

What is »courage to be«? It is self-affirmation 'despite' non-being. That is, one who acts bravely, takes, in self-affirmation, the anxiety of non-being into oneself.¹⁴ In other words, »courage to be« is, in fact, the articulation of man's capacity for self-transcendence arising from the various »structures of finitude«: »The structures of the finitude are forcing final being to transcend itself, and for that very reason to realize itself as finite.«¹⁵ And the limit situations described earlier are just that. In this way, man can experience his infinite potential. And it is precisely in the context of tempting the utter finality and anxiety of limit situations, and the »non-being« present in them, that the possible horizon of the emergence of being is indicated. The possibility of self-transcendence to infinity is »the expression of man's belonging to that which is beyond non-being, that is, to the being itself.«¹⁶ It only then that becomes possible for a man to ask the question of being. He is the only being who is »able to look beyond the limitations of his own as well as of any other being«¹⁷ and in this the »being itself« is revealed to him which transcends and overcomes every finitude. In relation to non-being, being is ontologically »earlier«: without the being, there could be non-being as its negation, because »the ontological status of non-being as non-being is dependent on being.«¹⁸ Non-being *per se* has no qualities, except in relation to being: »Being 'encompasses' itself and non-being. Being contains non-being 'within' oneself as that which is eternally present and eternally overcome in the process of divine life. The foundation of all that is is not dead identity without movement and becoming; it is living creativity. By creating, it affirms itself by eternally mastering its non-being.«¹⁹ And that is the meaning of courage.

Christianity has always been conscious of this irrevocable »existential« fact. Within Christianity, this issue is often articulated as a question of the problem of evil and the possibility of theodicy. Walter Kasper is right when he says that »evil with all its terribleness is only a secondary reality that is possible

¹³ *Ibid*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁵ Paul TILLICH, *Systematic Theology* I, 1951, 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 191.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 186.

¹⁸ Paul TILLICH, *Courage to Be*, 40.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 34.

only against the background of good and that can only be experienced on the horizon of good. (...) The relativity of evil towards good does not allow for harmonizing equalization, let alone weighing one against the other, it on the contrary reveals in itself the contradictory character of evil. Based on this internal contradiction, evil is not some 'nothing', but it is nevertheless annulled in itself.«²⁰ Theologically speaking, »The question of God and the question of suffering (...) belong together. Namely, we could not suffer because of our situation, if we did not have at least an implicit first idea of an undamaged, happy, and fulfilled existence, if we would not at least implicitly ask and strive for salvation and redemption. Just because we humans are made for salvation, we suffer from our unsaved situation, for this is the only reason why we rebel against it.«²¹

Thus we can undoubtedly hold that even the situation of the current world pandemic is not a reality in which we must indulge in hopelessness and nothingness. Suffering, pain, struggle, and even death itself do not have the last word; a possible horizon of salvation opens up in them. To us Christians, Christ – God equal to us in everything but in sin – shines as that ultimate reality in which the complete victory of being over non-being is manifested.

²⁰ Walter KASPER, *Bog Isusa Krista*, Đakovo, 1994, 251.

²¹ *Ibid.*