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Boundary situations

Karl Jaspers' contribution to spiritual care

Introduction

The fact that a person's confrontation with their imminent death represents a boundary situation in the sense of Karl Jaspers does not need to be explained in detail. After all, it is a situation in which the realisation of the limitations and finiteness of one's own existence becomes inevitable. The situation of the dying person and those who accompany them in death thus becomes a field for which Jaspers' philosophy of existence can gain particular significance. In order to show this in the following, I will first examine the concept of the boundary situation in Jaspers in general. Building on this, I will turn to the situation of the dying person, in particular the feeling of despair that can take hold of them. Here the boundary situation comes to a head once again, and we can ask what possibilities of coping and accompaniment arise from this.

Jaspers' concept of the boundary situation

I will begin with a quote from Jaspers' "General Psychopathology":

Man is always in one situation or another, and all these situations are finally resolved into boundary situations, that is, certain impassable, unchangeable situations that belong to our human existence [Dasein] as such. In these situations mere human existence [Dasein] founders and awakens to Existence itself (APE: 330; translation slightly modified).

This already addresses several decisive concepts, in addition to the boundary situation, those of Dasein, existence and failure. For Jaspers, Dasein and existence are two different modes of being: on the one hand, the ordinariness of unquestioned life, on the other, the elevated experience of existence, which is based on a suspension of mere Dasein. Before it experiences itself as existence, Dasein must first fail at a boundary. For Jaspers, existence is thus human being on the borderline; it does not itself belong to the realm of phenomena and can only be circumscribed conceptually. However, boundary situations are the distinct possi-

bility of becoming aware of existence; indeed, Jaspers writes: “Experiencing boundary situations and existing are the same thing” (PhII: 204; own translation).

Jaspers sees the precondition for boundary situations in the fundamentally antinomic structure of Dasein, i.e. in the contradictions of life, which cannot be resolved or eliminated as merely apparent, but must be endured (PhII: 249). Jaspers speaks of ‘basic situations’ (*‘Grundsituationen’*), in which we always find ourselves, even without being aware of them. These include, above all, the situations of having to die, of suffering, the need to struggle, being at the mercy of chance and inevitably being guilty. However, the primary basic situation already consists in the fact that “[...] *as Dasein I am always in a specific situation*, not generally as the whole of possibilities” (PhII: 209) – a necessary particularity that at the same time represents a restriction of my will. It entails the existential guilt of always falling short of one’s own possibilities and not realising possible existence. I will come back to this later in the topic of the ‘unlived life’.

But unavoidable guilt also arises from the fact that every Dasein is a struggle, i.e. it must not only be in connection with others but also compete with them (PW: 231). Antinomic is the structure of our duties, which must come into conflict with one another; antinomic is our will itself, insofar as willing is linked to a non-willing or counter-willing; antinomic, finally, is our action, insofar as everything we strive for is connected to something that we do not strive for in actual realisation. In other words, “we ourselves and the world are antinomically split” (PW: 230f.). These contradictions cannot be resolved in principle: “The opposites belong to each other in such a way that I cannot get rid of the one side that I want to fight and abolish without losing the whole polarity and thus also what I really want” (PW: 250).

These basic situations now become boundary situations when they step out of the merely general and become a shattering experience for the individual. “In every boundary situation, the ground is pulled out from under my feet, as it were” (PW: 249). Something that Jaspers calls the ‘shell’ (*‘Gehäuse’*) breaks: shells are fixed basic attitudes, basic assumptions and thought structures that give people protection from the contradictions of life and the abysses of existence. These can be explicit, religious or other world views that give meaning to the world, but also implicit, self-evident basic assumptions about life, about oneself and the world – assumptions that hide or deny the antinomies of existence, e.g.: ‘The world is fundamentally set up justly’; ‘If I don’t do anything wrong, nothing bad can happen to me’; or ‘Others may fall seriously ill or die, but I am not affected’, and so on. One could also speak of *existential defence structures*.

Boundary situations now have the character of an *exposure*: The shell breaks and naked existence becomes visible.

The conscious experience of boundary situations, which were previously concealed by the solid shell of objectively self-evident forms of life, world views and beliefs [...] allows a process to begin that brings the previously self-understood shell to dissolution. [...] now it becomes more or less clear what the shell is, and this is experienced as binding, limiting or doubtful, without having the power to hold (PW: 281).

A basic characteristic of boundary situations is thus failure: they are experienced when the shell falls apart and a life plan fails. As Jaspers goes on to explain boundary situations in his *Existenzerhellung*, they

[...] are not manageable; in our existence we see nothing else behind them. They are like a wall against which we bump and fail. We cannot change them, we can only clarify them without being able to explain and derive them from something else. They are with existence itself (PhII: 203).

Since boundary situations call into question the previously valid framework of interpretation, the self-understood order of life itself, they defy predictability and calculability. The person is faced with the choice of accepting them or avoiding them, be it through denial, rationalisation, generalisation or repression. But how can they be accepted and possibly overcome? No longer with planning and calculation, according to Jaspers, but only

[...] through a completely different activity, the *becoming of the existence possible in us*; we become ourselves by entering the boundary situations with open eyes (PhII: 204).

In them,

[...] selfhood can become aware of being through a *leap* of being: consciousness, which otherwise only knows about boundary situations, is fulfilled in a unique, historical and unrepresentable way (PhII: 204).

In boundary situations, the continuity of the previous life plan is interrupted. In this respect, according to Jaspers, boundary situations are ‘unbearable for life’. Yet this is precisely what creates the possibility of freedom, namely to enter into boundary situations, to confront them and thus at the same time to gain an abutment for the ‘upswing’ to one’s own existence. In the existential decision, in the ‘seizing of existence’, a person decides on a way of acting or living in the awareness that they can no longer realise other possibilities and may also incur unavoidable guilt (PhII: 196). This decision cannot be transferred or delegated to others. However, it opens up a completely different temporality: “The leap to existence is not like the growth of a life that reflectively takes the appropriate steps at their respective time according to researchable laws” (PhII: 207).

Boundary situations confront the person with his freedom to understand a life situation that may initially even be experienced as hopeless as a personal task that falls to him alone and that is unrepresentable. However, accepting them also entails risks, as they do not guarantee the person's development, but at the same time endanger it. Acceptance requires the strength and courage to recognise and endure the precariousness of existence. This perseverance, however, allows the real foundation of existence to emerge from behind the boundary situation.

Despair at the end of life

So much for my description of Jasper's concept of the boundary situation. Let us now turn to the situation at the end of life, and in particular to the experience of despair and hopelessness that can grip the dying person in the face of inevitable death. Such states are quite common, even if they often alternate with phases of hope or acceptance. First of all, however, the approaching end of life is fundamentally a boundary situation, as Heidegger (1986: 253) points out, since the general knowledge that "you die once in the end" is now transformed into a unique, unrepresentable experience: 'It is I myself who will die, and no one else!'

The existential threat of anticipated death and thus the boundary situation of possible despair can be of very different kinds. In the following, I will list the most important forms and motifs, which are of course often interwoven in many ways:

- (1) First, the *process of dying* can be experienced as a boundary situation, namely as the loss of any possibility of self-determination and as being powerlessly at the mercy of an irreversibly progressing process. The experience of physical deterioration, the loss of control and the ability to act, possibly the experience of unbearable pain, shortness of breath or other agonies are possible causes of despair.
- (2) A boundary situation is then death itself as the anticipated "*impossibility of all possibilities*" (Levinas 1987: 73; 402) – as the final farewell to all the joy, pleasure, fulfilment, relationship and love that life has held in store; as the breaking of bonds, the loss of all close and beloved people. From an attachment theory perspective, this can also reactivate elementary fears of abandonment that were experienced in early childhood.
- (3) Dying can then be perceived as a path to *ultimate, extreme loneliness*. Death individualises, it makes me an individual in a radical sense: Ultimately, every person dies alone. The assumption that death in this sense as the "most proper, unrelated" (Heidegger 1986: 263) and unrepresentable possibility of Dasein can lead to a highly individual, authentic existence, as Heidegger

postulated, is at least not accessible to everyone. The despair of this ultimate loneliness can be intensified by the 'social death', i.e. the actual lack of supporting relationships in the last phase of life.

- (4) Even more radical is the threat that lies in the anticipated *disappearance of the self* and its world. It is the actual fear of nothingness, which becomes all the more abysmal because nothingness is inconceivable. Sigmund Freud once wrote that "one's own death [...] is unimaginable, and as often as we make the attempt to do so, we can notice that we actually remain as spectators" (Freud 1982: 49). This may be true to a certain extent, but dreamless sleep at least gives an indication of the assumption or fear that death could mean the radical and irreversible extinction of consciousness and thus of the self. Epicurus famously said that death should not be feared at all, because as long as we are, he is not, and when it is, we are no more. But the shudder of this very abyss of non-being can hardly be dispelled by such sophisticated considerations.
- (5) This demise of the self ultimately also implies the loss of the common future – what Hans Blumenberg (1986) has described as the *separation of life-time from world-time*. The world will continue to turn, my loved ones will continue to live, but I will no longer be present in everything that is to come. I may still be remembered for a while, but at some point the world time will have passed me by and not even a memory of me will remain. My whole life will dissolve into nothingness.
- (6) Linked to this is another aspect that can lead to despair, namely the *destruction of all meaning and significance* seen in death: All that one has achieved in life, all that is of value, all that one has experienced or accomplished, seems to dissolve into nothingness. Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, a careerist lawyer who leads a self-satisfied, egocentric life, falls ill with a fatal disease at the age of 45 and experiences a complete devaluation of his previous life. "Everything that once seemed to bring him joy melted away before his eyes and turned into something insignificant and often repugnant" (Tolstoy 1975: 72).
- (7) This devaluation of one's own life is often linked to despair over what one can call the "*unlived life*". Ivan Ilyich is also tormented by this: "And what if my life really hasn't been the right one? The thought occurred to him that what had previously seemed completely impossible to him – that he had lived as he shouldn't have – was the truth" (Tolstoy 1975: 77). Ilyich clings desperately to his last hopes for life which are inexorably slipping away. It is not just about the fear of death, but about the fear of *dying now*, so that life can no longer be corrected, no longer be integrated into the 'gute Gestalt' ('good shape'). Finitude also means *finality*; life is almost completely frozen in the past. Despair is then focused on the unfinished, the irreparable, indeed the

fragmentary and unfinished nature of life itself. Remorse, self-reproach, quarrelling with one's own life decisions can lead to despair over the non-realisation of one's own self, as Kierkegaard also had in mind.

The prospect of death is easier when existence is, as it were, saturated with life through the richness of what has been realised and experienced. "The more decidedly one has fulfilled," writes Jaspers, "the more the possibility has been consumed, not in favour of omission, but of reality, the closer existence comes to the attitude of dying gladly as *Dasein*" (PhII: 228). The terror of death, however, grows "to the extent that I have not lived, i.e. have not decided and therefore have not gained a being of the self" (PhII: 228). The fear of death, as corresponding studies also show, increases to the extent that central possibilities are finally denied, neglected or missed. (See also Hinton 1975; Yalom 1980/1989: 248.) Death then also threatens to drag the remaining time into the maelstrom of devaluation and meaninglessness.

Despair and its transformation into possibilities

We see many forms in which existential despair can manifest itself at the end of life. Now, as Jaspers explains, every boundary situation opens up various possibilities – from evasion, rationalisation, denial and resignation to consent, be it in radical acceptance or finally in the leap that seizes one's own existence. Now despair already indicates that evasion or denial is no longer possible, so that resignation is the first possible consequence. Surrendering to the inevitable in a dull despair without fighting it, but also without really accepting it – that is certainly one of the attitudes we can observe in dying persons. But precisely when one has 'nothing left to lose', when all hopes of escaping doom have finally been dashed, despair can paradoxically also open up new possibilities. I will only mention a few such possibilities in the following.

a) Suicide as an act of despair

We must not overlook the fact that the possibility of suicide lies in the resolution of despair itself; indeed, it can be said that a serious suicide can only be considered and carried out on the basis of despair. But suicide is often not simply the realisation of despair, but rather its transformation into a new, final possibility. The feeling of fatality and powerlessness can then turn into the freedom to leave the hopeless situation at any time. Hence the frequently observed, seemingly

unmotivated improvement in the mood of those affected, which is based on the decision made, can be explained by the regained freedom of action.

It seems paradoxical to take one's own life out of the fear of death. However, this is not usually a fear of death, but of dying, namely of the suffering, helplessness and dependence that one anticipates. For Jaspers, suicide can also contain the paradoxical meaning that the desperate person does not accept the hopeless situation: in an act of "most resolute independence" (PhII: 314), he seizes his own existence, but at the same time rejects it. For Jaspers, there are even cases in which the person who lays hands on herself actually passionately asserts her freedom. The hopelessness of the situation is reversed into the experience of ultimate and utter freedom. In this context, the decision to commit assisted suicide can also be traced back to the options for action that can arise from despair, although this and the associated ethical problems shall not be examined in more detail here.

b) The leap of faith

Of course, we are unlikely to encounter such acts of despair in the context of palliative care. Let us now turn to other possibilities that despair can open up and which have been thematised in existentialist philosophy in particular. For Kierkegaard, the thinker of despair, this is the leap of faith, ultimately made possible by the grace of God, to which the truly desperate can surrender, for "everything is possible with God" (Kierkegaard 1849/1992: 35). The believer or the one who has decided to believe can leave it up to God how he is to be helped; he can rely on salvation in a hopeless situation.

But this leap is only conceivable as a dialectical one if the desperate person, as Kierkegaard demands, finds the courage to "lose himself in order to win himself" (Kierkegaard 1849/1992: 67). In the defiance of rebellious despair, the self still wants 'desperately to be itself', i.e. to be its own master, to control itself or even to recreate itself according to its own will. This defiance must be discarded and one must surrender to God. "The self must be broken in order to become self" (Kierkegaard 1849/1992: 65); it must abandon the claim to be its own master. In contrast to suicide, which can be experienced as the final act of self-empowerment, this is precisely about renouncing the autonomy of the finite subject in the face of the infinite. In passing through despair, but now in the form of radical self-abandonment, the self can be given to itself anew.

c) The encompassing

Even if Jaspers himself said that he owed the concept of existence to Kierkegaard (PA: 125), his answer to the boundary situation is different. He does not equate the supporting reason that points beyond the boundary situation with a personal God.

We have already seen that for Jaspers the confrontation with death is the central boundary situation of existence. For here, one's own death is not experienced as an objective fact, but rather as a possibility and condition of *existence*: "If it were not for disappearance, I as being would be endless duration and would not exist" (PhII: 220). For Jaspers, an endless life would be the end of existence, for this is only possible in the seriousness of decision and self-commitment in the face of finitude. In the attitude of truthfulness, death is "accepted into existence [...] as a probation of itself" (PhII: 223); for "life becomes deeper, existence becomes more certain in the face of death" (PhII: 227). Only what remains valid before death is essential.

In the boundary situation of death, one is radically confronted with non-existence. But it is precisely from this that one gains the opportunity to use the situation as a kind of abutment for the 'upswing' to his own existence. Here too, as with Kierkegaard, it is a question of a dialectical "leap" (PhII: 204), but it is not a leap into divine transcendence, but into one's own existential reality. It becomes possible in an attitude of bravery, "in the courage to face death of the heroic man who engages himself out of freedom", so that "he can say to himself, certain of his existence: here I stand and fall" (PhII: 226). In fact, the failure that is part of the boundary situation can also be concealed and avoided by an all too cheap religious interpretation:

Bravery in the face of death [...] is reduced to a minimum when, through sensual ideas of the afterlife, death is abolished as a boundary and made into a mere transition between the forms of existence. It has then lost the horror of non-existence (PhII: 225).

Truthfulness and courage demand that we do not euphemise death, that we do not soften the 'horror of non-existence', because only then, despair can be transformed into true self-being:

Only from this nothingness can I gain the certainty of true existence, which appears in time but is not temporal [...] Only from despair is the certainty of being given (PhII: 226 f.).

Based on this certainty, one can even regard death as a 'completion' of existence and, as Jaspers writes, find a kind of 'security' in it. The boundary situation of death thus also refers to a form of transcendence that Jaspers calls the 'encompassing'. This means that existence is 'embedded' into something that transcends

it in an ambiguous way, not in a knowledge of an otherworldly life or a mystical union with a divine ground. Rather, the encompassing refers to the tendency inherent in human existence towards self-transcendence, towards the experience and recognition of a sphere beyond what is objectively ascertainable, knowable and calculable. It intends a wholeness that surrounds us, which we cannot grasp, but from which we experience ourselves and our lives as given. Therefore, this transcendent does not have the function of an answer, but rather it conveys the experience of being given to oneself from the infinite:

For existence, transcendence is the other, which it can rely on. Where I am actually myself, I am not through myself. I did not create myself. Where I am actually myself, I know that I am given to myself (W: 110).

This ultimately incomprehensible experience of being given means a fundamental transformation: I experience a certainty of being without being able to grasp and recognise its original ground. One fails again and again in the attempt to get to the bottom of the mystery of existence. But if one abandons this attempt, in a moment of giving up, one can experience oneself as being carried for no reason.

From the certainty of existence, it is possible to control the greed for life and to find peace before death as serenity (*Gelassenheit*) in the knowledge of the end (PhII: 226).

This is ultimately what Jaspers means when he speaks of ‘philosophical faith’, a faith that has renounced all insight and all knowledge, and which can be understood with Rico Gutschmidt as “a kind of floating above the abyss of the incomprehensible” (Frick & Gutschmidt 2023: 373).

d) The present

This now reveals another possibility that despair in the face of death can open up, precisely because it initially locks the subject in the present and allows no hope for the future. The unrestricted acceptance of this situation can also provide the impetus for a radical change, namely from hope for the future to the present moment. Many patients with a terminal illness report that their illness has taught them to live more intensely in the present. In the awareness of death, appreciation for the ‘things of life’ can grow, for everyday events and beauties, even inconspicuous ones. Mindfulness cultures and techniques, which have increasingly found their way into psychotherapy, are not only reserved for long-term meditation practice, but can also be practiced in the last phase of life. They promote sensitivity and alertness to the immediate present, attentive and loving devotion to things

as well as to people. In doing so, they support an attitude of self-relativisation and self-transcendence, which also defuses thoughts of non-existence.

At first, the approach of death threatens to drag everything into nothingness. But it also opens up another possibility. The last time, the last walk on a spring morning, the conversation with someone after a long argument, the last meal with a friend – all of these can take on the indestructible flavour of life itself. In the experience of this last time together, writes Robert Spaemann, there can be a sense of something precious that snatches the event away from the pull of transience:

A feeling of 'It's good like this', which is not threatened by the impending end of life [...] but is first awakened by it (Spaemann 1996: 129).

This validity is not abolished by the passage of time:

It is good and will remain good that this fleeting moment was [...]. The nothingness of what perishes in time is transformed into preciousness (Spaemann 1996: 128).

Meaning is this 'significance hardened in the consciousness of finitude'. We find a very similar thought in Jaspers:

Thus, the presence of the boundary situation of death for existence enforces the duality of all experience of Dasein in action: what *remains essential in the face of death* is done in existence; what becomes *invalid* is merely Dasein (PhII: 223).

For Jaspers, this indestructibility of meaning in the face of death is realised in a special way in what he calls *existential communication*. Boundary situations are, first and foremost, situations that affect each individual person in his or her uniqueness; they are unrepresentable. However, insofar as they find expression in the encounter with the other, they are also a matter of human, existential communication. It can arise from therapeutic or spiritual counselling, but it lies beyond the therapeutic relationship, because in it the therapist and patient meet as free, equal persons who are equally affected by the contradictions of existence. This is especially true when approaching death and dying, before which we all ultimately become equal.

Existential communication goes beyond anything that can be planned; it does not depend on specific intentions and goals, but on the truthful, serious and empathetic relationship between the dialogue partners involved. By engaging with each other without restriction, possibilities open up for perceiving one's own existence and transcending perspectives. In this way, communication becomes an 'elucidation of existence', i.e. a recognition of possibilities of existence and at

the same time their realisation in the creative process of the conversation. And this communication can now become a form of overcoming death in the boundary situation of death itself, namely in the shared, absolute present:

But this communication can be so deeply rooted that the conclusion in dying itself becomes its manifestation and communication preserves its being as an eternal reality [...]. Life proves the truth of communication that outlasts death by realizing itself [...]. My own death has ceased to be just the empty abyss. It is as if in it, no longer abandoned, I connect myself to the existence that was closest to me in communication (PhII: 221).

Conclusion

There are few thinkers who have dealt with the situation of dying and death in such a serious, fearless and truthful way as Karl Jaspers. He regarded the approach of death as the ultimate human boundary situation – the situation that causes all shells, all calculations and superficial hopes to fail. But ‘Dasein’ must fail at a boundary in order to experience itself as existence and thus transcend itself. From a philosophical point of view, it is about two ways of being, ‘Dasein’ and existence; from a psychological point of view, it is about growing through painfully experienced boundaries, such as a devastating loss, a final renunciation or a fatal illness.

The boundary situation of approaching death culminates in the despair, which is triggered by the perceived impossibility of central life wishes and goals in life. The initially struggling, desperate rebellion against the threatening impossibility, with the wavering between fear and hope, ultimately leads to real despair: the realisation of the final hopelessness. I have shown that it is precisely in this extreme situation that a peculiar space of possibility opens up, namely through the leap into a new frame of reference. I have given some examples of this: the affirmation of suicide as a reversal of powerlessness into a final, paradoxical activity; the Kierkegaardian leap into faith through radical self-abandonment and self-surrender; Jaspers’ experience of existential self-certainty in the face of death; and finally the liberation to an indestructible presence of meaning, which even the certainty of death cannot abolish – a presence which for Jaspers finds its highest form in existential communication.

When accompanying people who despair in the face of death, enduring this despair together is just as important as the prospect that it does not have to have the last word, but that can ultimately open up new possibilities. The contradictory nature of these situations is easier to bear if they are understood as an expression of a dynamic, searching and open relationship that human beings

must necessarily have with death, since it can never be determined as a final, objective reality. Giving Jaspers the floor one last time:

... *death changes with me*. Therefore it is not a contradiction of man with himself when he clings to life with every fiber of his being [...]; when he seems to despair of death and in the face of death becomes aware of his true being; when he does not understand and yet trusts; when he sees nothingness and yet is certain of existence (PhII: 229).

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