

TRUTH and SYMBOL

from

VON DER WAHRHEIT

by

KARL JASPERS

Translated with an Introduction

by

Jean T. Wilde, William Kluback and William Kimmel



COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PRESS
New Haven, Connecticut

1959

The Grasping of Being in the Subject-Object Polarity

It is necessary to recall the fundamental phenomenon which was clarified in the theory of knowledge: whenever we are and know consciousness, we are standing in the polar relationship of subject and object. Knowledge is a state of being directed towards an opposite other.

Knowledge first of all requires objectness [*Gegenständlichkeit*] (for without it no thought is, in fact, possible); secondly, perceptibility (for without it there is, in fact, no content, no stuff, no differentiation); thirdly, validity (for without it there is no certainty of conscious knowledge).

Objectivity, therefore, comprises these three at first separable moments: it signifies objectness (being-an-object), perceptibility (being-a-thing), validity (being-a-claim to affirmation or to perception).

In order that Being may be for us, it is necessary that in the polarity of subject and object, through perception, imagination and representation in experiencing [*Erleben*], and experience in general [*Erfahrung*], Being become present. And therefore, whenever we feel, surmise or sense, even ever so dimly, there is in us an urge towards

subjective perception
of the object

Erkenntnis
des Seienden

reality, the ontological objectivity of philosophically conceived Being. It seems as though the will to objectivity achieves the support of Being.

On the other side stands the present content of experiencing. I complete what Being is, when it is Being for me. It is not enough that the sun is shining. I must see it shine and that is more than a sense perception of the eye. It is an event of the entire subjectivity whose mood, ardor, and rapture feels the soul of a world radiant with sunlight.

In point of fact, however, there is no separated duality of subjectivity and objectivity. Both are inseparably bound together. The presence of Being is in the movement which grasps and permeates subject and object simultaneously. We take possession of Being in the polarity, but in such a way that subject and object mutually overlap. While we are directed towards the object, Being in its essence is not already before our eyes as an object but is present only in the Encompassing,⁴ through object and subject simultaneously, as that which permeates both.

Each Encompassing in the polarity is not solely on one side as object or subject. The restriction to one side causes a loss of essentiality which does not, however, lie on the other side but in the modes in which object and subject are bound together in the polarity. Neither does

4. The "Encompassing" [*das Umgreifende*] is a key word in Jaspers' thought. It is not a word with a fixed, knowable connotation. It points to the all-inclusive comprehensiveness of Being itself as the foundation of all being and knowing but which itself cannot be grasped in concepts. Thus the Encompassing is at the same time the Comprehensive. Cf. Introduction, n. 1.

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

clarity, that is, an urge to grasp perceptibly and validly in an objective form this presentness³ which is dim, lacking the pregnancy of the subject-object polarity through which we first really become aware of it.

It is in accordance with this that we desire to possess not only every particularity of Being in its mode of being but also Being itself, the absolute, the all-causing, the unqualified, in the form of the objectness of an object, in the form of perception, through the validity of a correct proposition.

The grasping of Being does not, however, occur through a subject which would be an arbitrary point and which would have all Being solely in the opposite object. On the contrary, the being of the subject itself is the necessary condition for the presence of Being through a content which appears from out the depth of subjectivity. Consciousness of Being lies simultaneously in the grasping of the object and in the consummation of subjectivity.

At one time Being looks like an object in its fullness towards which an interchangeable subject-point (consciousness in general) is directed. Then, on the contrary, it looks like the content-full event of an ever single historical subjectivity which apparently merely attaches its own contents to the external point of being-an-object which obtains all of its content only through the movement of the subject.

On the one side stands the corporeality of the empirical world, the solidity of an observed and accepted

3. To preserve the distinction between "*Gegenwart*" and "*Gegenwärtigkeit*" we have used the terms "presence" and "presentness" respectively.

subjectivity, in the merely speculative movement of thought, the object and with it the content has also disappeared, then the "break-through to the object" becomes a passionate desire of thinking (for example, the young Schelling). Each time appears the stern demand to return from groundlessness to Being. Such a polemic attitude usually leads from one extreme to the other.

A. *The polemic will towards the object.* When the sublime efforts of philosophic thought to achieve its purest expression arrive at self-misunderstanding in unfettered intellectuality, when reflection loses its ground and is arbitrarily dispersed into anything whatsoever, then thoughts revolve around themselves in endless circles, without content, in spite of every effort of the tormented head, no longer actually saying anything. Then the result is reversal. The violent urge towards grasping a ground is expressed. Thus the everyday realist in us insists upon reality, as against illusion, the moralist upon the absolute validity of law as against relativity, the aesthete upon form as against the nebulosity of endless movement, the ontologist upon the stability of conceptualized Being as against the dissolution of transitory being.

I. The everyday realist says accusingly that we are neglecting the world where it is empirically real and are indulging in dreams of what ought to be, in phantasies of ideals, or in abstractions. It is rather a question of the empirically real. This must be soberly recognized; it must be quietly obeyed. It is harsh and severe. We must not try to run away from it. Experience proves it.

The incontestable truth of this realism becomes invalid

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

Existenz⁵ lie in any way in the subject as such; Existenz appears in the intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity.

The consciousness of Being has thus a double foundation in both objectivity and subjectivity. Always the animated soul in all the modes of its consciousness encounters the object as a being that is in itself, that is more than the soul and the thought which is being thought of, but which is not the act of thinking itself. The ultimate for the soul is always its subjectivity, the certainty that it is, the awareness of that which it is. The object can be raised to an absolute being-in-itself; subjectivity can no less be raised to the absolute. In the first instance Being is the substance, in the second, the ego. Both are false absolutizings of one pole. Each in itself leads to the consciousness of a groundlessness. Our consciousness of Being feels that Being is lost when it has nothing but the object, or is nothing but subject. Then in each case a reversal takes place in philosophizing. Whenever, in the objective knowledge of objects, the actual meaning of Being, and thereby essentiality and interest, cease, then the reality of Being is sought in a break-through to subjectivity (for example, Kierkegaard). Whenever, on the contrary, in the endless reflection of

5. "Existenz" and "Transcendenz" are also key terms for Jaspers and, like the "Encompassing" have no definable content. Existenz points not to man's existence in the world as this individual but as a possibility, an obligation, and a task of which he becomes conscious in self-awareness and in the presence of Transcendence. This latter word points to the frontiers of experience, the limit, or other, of reason, which Existenz encounters. Existenz and Transcendence represent the ground and the outer limit of being and knowing between which, and by virtue of which, the Encompassing of Being takes place.

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

when empirical reality is presumed to be wholly and conclusively known and when it claims to determine alone and absolutely what is at issue. Against this it must be maintained that the real world by no means is so simply present. Especially the human world is not adequately recognizable empirically as an existence which is, and always will be, just as it was perceived.

Rather the knowledge of reality is—as are from time to time its more unclear preliminary stages in the empirical assumptions of common practice—in each case a perspective into man's capability of objectifying. Such knowledge is correct and incorrect, is verifiable and unstable, and, as a credent knowing, is itself a reality, although it is one which can become radically different.

Thought works upon the reality of man. What thinking achieves in throwing light on impulses and in visions of possibilities, that is what transforms the thinking man. There is no absolute, permanent reality of man. Every action is like an experiment and the result shows, although again in no way unequivocally, whatever of reality was there, perhaps only in a preparedness which had not yet been realized.

What I think, is reality, if I do so not as a merely unconcerned play of intellectual possibilities of meaning which, in the process of thinking, I keep removed from myself, but if I think in such a way that what I have thought produces an effect in me.

To declare any reality of man as essential reality itself, signifies a neglect of the Encompassing. Kant rejects the "rabble of experience" at that point where the object of this experience is not a firmly established existent of

GRASPING OF BEING IN SUBJECT-OBJECT POLARITY

Nature but is man in his freedom and his possibilities. Here thought can bring forth and make what did not yet exist into an object of experience, that is, into reality.

2. The moralist insists upon the validity of laws, norms, and ideals and upon those, indeed, which are capable of being known unequivocally and which in each case indicate with inescapable definiteness what is correct and what is right.

The splendid truth of this position becomes invalid, however, when laws formulated in terms of a definite content are held to be always absolutely valid, at every time and in every situation. Then there steps into the place of the unconditionality of Existenz—which can also appear in an inflexible insistence upon obedience to law—an automatism which is emptied to the point of heedlessness.

3. An aesthetic position wills "form." It turns against the infinite relationships of things, against what is in the background, the nebulous, the fluctuating.

In it there is the urge towards objectivity in form, towards Being in a substance which can be possessed, towards the changeless over against the becoming.

In this there is truth as long as the cypher in the aesthetic objectivization of the picture is before our eyes and is read. It becomes untruth if the cypher is lost in favor of the free contemplation of forms. Then life becomes aesthetic contemplation, action becomes the enjoyment of feelings.

All Being is, as it were, congealed, even though in the most highly varied modes which allow for constant variation in its observation.

knowledge. If, for example, tragedy is brought into the framework of this attitude, then philosophical aesthetic knowledge, which claims to penetrate speculatively as though it were beyond that which has been thought, steps into the place of open tragic knowledge. This point of view tends to present systematically in tragedy misfortune of all kinds, which in itself should not be called tragic, or, failing to see the tragic in genuine tragedy, tends to recognize it erroneously. A sham salvation in contemplation permits the aesthetic attitude to accomplish emotionally and without consequences an uninvolved, unclear philosophizing. In the presence of the objectivity of the forms in the tragic, the aesthetic attitude can fall into pathos and enjoy its affects along with its own dispersedness and wretchedness, vanity and fearfulness in the world.

4. The ontologist tends to think of Being as itself, how it is in itself. He seeks satisfaction in knowledge of the essential, of its unfoldment, its distortions. He knows what Being is.

Thereby he approaches "sound common sense" which feels the need for a clear support for its thinking in the absolute object in itself and which, at the same time, wants the ease of the tangible which comes about through objectness and definiteness. The impulse towards the unquestionability of what has been thought seeks repose in something immediate which can be thought of reasonably and comfortably without further ado.

This ontological attitude is polemically opposed to every form of epistemological idealism, against those modes of thinking in a transcending manner in which the

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

This Being, in momentarily fixed form, and separating into an infinite number of interchangeable forms, can be placed in the realm of the subjective as opposed to objective validity, or in that of the objective as opposed to subjective validity. It is necessary only that in each case there be a being, something unchangeable, which by observation and thought can be taken possession of in the image.

If this Being is placed in subjectivity, then the conscious aesthete is produced. He wants to experience and to hear continually the new, to experience it as interesting. But the decisive characteristic is that he wants to be and to remain as he is. He wants himself as being, thus, feels himself to be immutable, resists any possibility of change. He does not want inwardly to become himself. The "I just am like that" wards off every tendency to question. He can become ill, can be destroyed, but he can not become different. (It is a psychological question whether precisely those human beings who suffer under their hopeless mutability, their unreliable propensity to be different, tend towards such a position—human beings who express just that which they are not, but in such a form that the being-thus signifies an empirical actuality, with which they ultimately affirm the unchangingness of their changeability.)

This is the direction of Schopenhauer's thought that man does not bring forth himself with horror or satisfaction in his life but rather through experience realizes what he unalterably is out of his intellectual ground.

In this aesthetic position everything transforms itself into ultimate validity in the form of perception and

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

concreteness of being-an-object is lost in Being itself. It turns against all sublimated philosophies as against a robbing of essential reality, against abstraction and acrobatics in thinking. Whether it is in the tangibility of the sensuous object or of a thought reality, whether it is in the object of a cult or in the historically testified revelation, what is known is always satisfying simply by being there as itself. The ontological attitude clings to the drastic, rebelling against all other possibilities, and affirms the immovable.

Let us sum up. In the points of view described there is something common to all. What is otherwise highly heterogeneous coincides in one point, in being bound to the object as such. From this point of view, it creates a strange impression to let them all pass in review. They belong together:—

Everyday realism: philosophical ontology (especially when it surrenders the high philosophical achievement —because it has become acquainted with it in a contrived, somewhat neo-Kantian form—to a supposedly new object, Being, which is Being itself); Catholic Thomistic philosophy and the rationalistically conceived Objectivity of the dogmatic contents of faith; the aesthetic passion for historical form (while warding off the separating detours of genuine cognition); the just-wanting-to-be-like-that of the individual; the materialism of absolutized contents of knowledge (such as, of the “unconscious” of the psyche, or of biological facts, or of technical economic processes, in so far as they are regarded as Being itself), etc.

To be sure, they all combat one another, but on the

same level on which they belong to one another. They differ in what they consider to be Being but agree that Being is a tangible thing capable of being known, something that can be grasped in the object.

B. *The polemic will against the object.* In the enthusiasm of transcendental types of thinking in which everything which is only an object is melted down and evaporates so that Being is solely in the movement of thinking which projects the objects out of itself and takes them back—in this enthusiasm the object-status is not allowed to exist as such. It is considered to be reprehensible dogmatism to regard objects as having any being. It is stupidity to cling to and even to regard as real these lumps as though they were stones which could even be thrown at one's head. It is superstition to regard the object as having any being; indeed, the superstition is defined as the mental attitude which considers the self-subsisting object-status to be Being itself.

The truth of this contempt for the object lies in the resistance against being bound to the object, just as, on the contrary, the truth of the claim of the object is valid in its opposition to the disintegration of the object in subjectivity. For the truth of the contempt for the object is lost where the contact with essential reality is missing. The path of true philosophizing loses neither the subject nor the object in the appearance of Objectivity, but instead grasps Being in their polarity.

C. *Schematic antithetics.* In the opposition of the will toward the object and toward the subject it would be a mistake to decide in favor of one side. Polemically both are right in their opposition to the obliqueness of

the opposing side, but are wrong in denying its peculiar kernel of truth. The conflict is resolved in the movement out of both sides in the Encompassing. The opposition and its alliance is to be expressed in variously modified categories. We sum it up once more in the contrasts of object and reflection, substance and function.

1. *Object and reflection.*

The one side: The object is itself. It is in direct relationship to seizing it immediately and essentially.

From there, reflection looks like a disturbance which withdraws from view the obvious and clear object-status, which abandons the ground together with observation and experience, and moves into the empty abstraction of a dizzy movement.

The other side: Reflection penetrates Being. It actually becomes aware of Being only indirectly, in the mirror and in the mirror of the mirror. For Being is fundamentally of the spirit, infinite in movement, dialectical.

From there, the mere object is an unpenetrated rigid thing, but falsely rigid. There is nothing positive in the immovable object-status, only a hindrance to revelation.

In truth philosophizing is an accomplishment in the encircling movement which overcomes this alternative. Genuine cognition holds what it has thought suspended between the already experienced and the new essential reality. Actual experience includes object and reflection in a totality. Both the dissolving reflection and the congealing objectivity of what is meant at any one time are annulled by being suspended within the movement

of knowledge. The consummating frontier⁶ beyond the limits of reflection and object is each time thinking in essential reality, thinking which has become essential reality.

2. *Substance and function.*

The one side: The passion for substance: it wants Being itself, the unshatterable, the eternally constant.

To this belongs the hostility towards the "functional" way of thinking, which annuls every substantial being and thereby Being itself. Functionalizing thinking dissipates; it destroys substance. The movement of thinking as such is to be overcome in the goal of repose in the presence of substance.

The other side: The passion for function: it seizes the entire world of objects as an appearance of Being in time, as the medium of the manifestness of the subject.

To this belongs the aversion to substance. This is a paralyzing dead-end. It is a false possession in time. It is that which is restricting, which destroys the ventures. It terminates seeking. It is the pillow on which rests the mind which is no longer knowing.

In truth philosophizing is accomplished only in the unity of substance and function in order to learn what is through the circular movement which expands and is fulfilled in infinity. Being itself is not substance; it is not in what is thought as something to be rounded off

6. Jaspers' term, "*Crenze*," points to the limit of being and knowing and at the same time to the possibility of transcending the limit in the direction of Being itself.

TRUTH AND SYMBOL

as a work of thought, as something available as objective truth, as something existing in itself without me. Being is also not in function; it is not in the thinking of the subject as only a present reality of this accomplishment. On the contrary, Being is that which, through the reality of myself, I understand as that which is in itself, even without me, but which is possible for me to perceive only through my entire nature as the organ as it were, of the knowledge of Being.

D. *The problem of an encompassing Objectivity.* Since the Being of the subject-object polarity lies neither in the object nor in the subject, it is accessible only in both through the mediation of the one in the other. The mediation between object and subject is accomplished in all knowing. It occurs through movements from the one to the other, through operation of one upon the other, through dialectic changes of one into the other.

Now there is finally the comprehensive and yet special task of grasping Being in totality in the subject-object polarity through the mediation of both, and to do so in such a way that both are immediately in Objectivity. Nothing that appears in the subject-object polarity provides a ground which could be Being itself. We do, indeed, clarify the world in the polarity, allow definite objects to be comprehended, and carry out the acts of subjectivity in their particularity. But the development of this orientation of the world does not satisfy our consciousness of Being. This orientation is, to be sure, indispensable; it remains a constant problem and a matter of great interest. But it is not completed, and even the idea of its completion leaves us unsatisfied if it does

GRASPING OF BEING IN SUBJECT-OBJECT POLARITY

not become the means of bringing us in touch with Being itself.

This task of actually taking hold of Being is fulfilled by the symbol (the metaphor or the cypher-status). That is now our theme. The cypher is neither object nor subject. It is objectivity which is permeated by subjectivity and in such a way that Being becomes present in the whole.