



Reflections on Transformation

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Abstract: The essay reviews how transformations differ from transitions and whether they are almost exclusively the consequence of underlying conflicts or if, even more fundamentally, they are the outcome of encounters with various voids. G. W. F. Hegel and many after him focused on conflicts. Martin Heidegger and others more recently dwelled upon voids. By exploring this latter pathway I assess if a historical era, most particularly our own, might itself be construed as needy because in some way empty, lacking in something and thereby undergoing absence. The question arises what might be lacking, especially if, as many claim, it is something neither visible nor even material? Absence implies a failed presence and bringing to life such abstract notions in concrete and specific ways remains challenging. On the supposition that ours is a needy time, it appears that individuals living in such a time are especially difficult to comprehend and even more so to diagnose and to help. What symptoms reveal their predicament and at what threshold such individuals stand is addressed by articulating the notion of "threshold" as a means of understanding ours as an early-stage transformation. I submit that we are moving toward a more communicable form of spiritual existence; this movement I call "thresholding."

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; absence; *thresholding*; transformation; transition; voids.

"Transformation" is a heady word and its referent a somewhat opaque event. We do know, or think we do, that transformations occur. Of this there is seemingly little doubt. There is considerable controversy, however, over how and why they come about.

Karl Jaspers, in his *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: The Paradigmatic Individuals* remarks that a living reality regarding the world forced the beginning of a major human transformation and that in order to better understand this living reality some transformation had to take place.¹ Jaspers states that

the transformation exacted by Socrates, for example, was a transformation in thinking, while the Buddha called for a meditative way of life. Confucius attributed the required transformation to the process of education, and Jesus called for a devotion to God's will that ruled in yet beyond this world. I might add to Jaspers' list of transformational experiences that, in contrast to Christianity, Islam saw transformation as resting in the power of the individual. The Koran asserts that God does not transform what is in people until they first change what is in themselves (Koran 13:11/12). This would appear to be the reverse of the Calvinistic doctrine of *ordo salutis* where God, through the Holy Spirit, takes the initiative to change our hearts.

¹ Karl Jaspers, *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus*, from *The Great Philosophers, Volume I*, ed. Hannah Arendt, transl. Ralph Manheim, New York: Mariner Books, 1966.

With regard to transformation it is also true that something remains very much itself, yet nonetheless becomes substantially different than it was before. This difference is not marginal. It is not at some easily identifiable periphery, as when a brown fence is discovered to have been painted white overnight. On the contrary, when transformation occurs, something quite essential and integral to what is transformed is believed to have taken place. That which has been transformed is somehow fundamentally changed, yet it also remains identifiable as basically the same entity that it was before. Our fence, for example, would not be appearing as white instead of brown, but its inner core would have changed. No longer made of plastic, for example, the fence would now be a wooden one, but still looking brown as before.

This is genuinely baffling, so much so that there are strong tendencies in the sciences to deny the existence of any genuine transformations. From a scientific perspective transformations tend to be viewed much like myths, *viz.*, as halfway houses between various prisons of ignorance and various safe havens of liberation secured through knowledge. They are thus construed as (mere) transitions, extremely subtle but quantifiable modifications (in and of something) that are not yet fully, but nonetheless will eventually be understood thoroughly. Knowledge, it is believed, will catch up with alleged transformations and then translate them, one by one, into those complex, but thoroughly comprehensible transitions that they actually are. We might call this claim one of the enduring dreams of reason. Jaspers remarks in his "Science and Technology" chapter of *The Origin and Goal of History*, that a prevailing scientific attitude in the modern world is questioning, investigating, testing and reflecting upon everything it encounters from the viewpoint of all-inclusive reason.²

Let us note that transformations are typically ascribed to human beings alone. We are wary of attributing them to other regions of reality. What this tells us, however, is that arguments over transformations find their primary, if not exclusive battleground on the field of the human. To speak of transformation is almost always to engage in contention over our human nature.

As already implied, we tend to think of transitions as quite different from transformations. Transitions are

typically construed as gradual and largely continuous in nature. Aristotle's notion of efficient and final causes working themselves out in and through matter is a most useful model for construing transitions. With few exceptions this model fits the natural world remarkably well. It is a world of acorns becoming oaks and, later though problematically, of evolutionary processes. Transformations, however, we tend to think of as primarily abrupt and discontinuous, that is, discrete and often dramatic. They are typically construed as rapid in their onset and occurrence rather than slow and gradual in their unfolding. If transitions involve movements toward maturity, transformations suggest reorientations or, in religious terms, conversions or redemptions. This is again to suggest that we find ourselves most at home thinking about transformations as finding their primary if not exclusive locus in humans. If Aristotle helps us greatly with transitions, it is probably the early Hegel who provides us with a first sustained entry way and access to transformations.

On Hegel's account, regarding which continentally-oriented philosophers are mostly familiar, transformations in human history are driven by failures of integration. What are construed as somewhat flexible, yet also settled features of an historical moment or human situation coexist and interrelate but do not harmonize with each other. More often than not these same features are in a state of overt or hidden conflict with each other. Such conflicts, Hegel tells us, are best revealed and, paradoxically, most productive in outcome, if human lives in a particular era are lived earnestly, seriously, and even passionately. This is to say, wholeheartedly with respect to the prevailing values and understandings of that era or situation. To be noted especially is that what drives these potentially transformational situations as well is an underlying goal embedded within them. That goal or meta-purpose provides the most efficacious component of their dynamism, and may almost always be misconstrued or miscomprehend, not only initially but for a long time thereafter. Whether known or unknown, however, this purpose drives the transformational process. Without it, in fact, a transformational process—often and especially a social and/or politically revolutionary one—is unlikely. For such a process to become likely an integrated world is assumed and projected in, for and as the pending future. Often painful and even destructive, the resolution of conflicts in the current world is largely driven by such visions and then translated into practical goals.

² Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, transl. Michael Bullock, New Haven: Yale University Press 1968, p. 87. [Henceforth cited as *OGH*]

Quite deliberately I have avoided the usual Hegelian labels for what I have just been sketching. These labels often mislead us into a false sense of security regarding some portions of what Hegel has in mind. We are tempted to admire an extraordinary dialectical-logical ingenuity at the price of overlooking the almost equally extraordinary agony and battlefield messiness of it all in the actual world of human life. Over and beyond this, these labels often unwittingly serve to dampen our appreciation of the dynamism of Hegel's account, found far more boldly in his earlier rather than in his later works.

But what if no goal or identifiably active engagement toward one can be found in a current historical circumstance? What happens, then, to the conflict model I have so briefly sketched? Note that Hegel himself had anticipated such a situation as all but inevitable. If, as Hegel believed, History had or would reach its consummation in his time, then options available in a post-nineteenth century future would be somewhat bleak. Let me mention just a few: (1) the education and reformation of supposedly less advanced peoples, an essentially enlightenment-inspired project; (2) more generally, numerous ameliorative and reformist projects in the service of repairing societally or personally structural elements in a condition of deterioration; and (3) nihilism, construed as the destruction of the current state of things, this in the name of destruction itself or in the service of an alleged ideal so far removed from the constructive, positive and plausible as to be thoroughly rejected by the overwhelming majority of sensible and decent people. This species of nihilism we see growing around us today, in portions of the Middle East and elsewhere.

The above is what I believe has happened with the conflict model in our time. This is to say that many of the salient features of its aftermath, largely sort out into the three alternatives just mentioned.

There is another temperament and orientation, however. I shall refer to it as the "void" model. It stands in significant opposition to the conflict account. As with most overarching stances, the void orientation has numerous variants, themselves often in significant contention with each other. There are at least two prominent, historically grounded examples we can draw from within continental philosophy. In Friedrich Nietzsche, the proclamation of God's death is meant to open and make accessible an occluded, largely hollow and empty space that will then provide in its newly resonant openness opportunities for free and creative

value engenderings. By way of contrast, in Martin Heidegger the relative obsession with absence, the "Nothing" and "clearings," is meant to make way and make a way for a new dispensation, one more luminous and transcendent than it is exclusively and discernibly human.

Our current circumstances, the human condition of the last many post-Nietzschean decades is one in which various conflicts still do abound. Human history has always been replete with them, and it is nearly impossible not to view conflicts as constitutive with respect to the human condition itself. This I do not wish to deny. With due recognition and acknowledgement of the twentieth century existential thinkers however, not the least of them Karl Jaspers, these conflicts might nonetheless be characterized as primarily political and economic in nature. This may be a function of the increasing secularization of the technologically oriented intellectual world. What were once largely religious controversies came to get parsed and fought out in political terms. These political battles in turn, as we well know, subsequently found allies in the realm of economics. But then politics and many of its multiple contestations gradually, relentlessly and then rapidly became wars over economic ideologies. They became, in short, economic wars, theoretical and practical.

An excursus into the genealogy of Continental philosophy will help ground the void model even further within the philosophical tradition. This model could not reasonably be confined to some more recent aspects of the now receding psychoanalytic tradition, though the void model may have had greater visibility there. In what follows I shall paint in somewhat expressionistic strokes. A pointillist approach would be more revealing, but that would constitute a book in itself.

Kant, we know, distinguishes receptivity from spontaneity. Each of these avenues is a source of knowledge. Kant's major focus, of course, was upon reason, not sensibility. In his Antinomies he purports to demonstrate how reason can come to be at odds with itself—in short, come into internal conflict. In the dialectical hands of Hegel, such conflict gets both historicized and dynamized. We are plunged into a realm of robust rational conflict over time, but conflict nonetheless.

What if we were to revisit Immanuel Kant, however, and pick up the receptivity strain in his thinking. A few, already significant cues emerge from this sort of reflection. One of the pure forms of sensibility,

i.e. receptivity, is space. Kant tells us that though we can think of space without objects, we cannot think of objects without space. (Of course there is an exception to this involving internal time consciousness, but this need not concern us here.)

Kant does have a sense-bound epistemology. That which we are equipped to encounter and construe is mediated through our senses. In this way Kant in fact resembles David Hume and that empiricist tradition that had initially been foreign to him.

What happens, however, if we open ourselves to the possibility that our receptivity is in addition capable of encountering a world of meaning? To be sure, most, if not all of this realm of meaning may well be attached to the sensible realm, but it would nonetheless not thereby be reducible to it. Such a reduction would require a significant number of further arguments.

Consider, now, the possibility that a space of meaning may be part and parcel of the structural constitution of our cognitive life as human beings in the world. Consider further the historical possibility that an era might emerge in which no meaning-laden objects are found nor arrive in this space. Kant does tell us that concepts without percepts are empty. On the view I am forwarding, would it not make sense to say that non-sensibly oriented space, one bereft of meaningful items, would not only be empty but would also be potentially devastating in its bleakness? Were this the case, we might find the notion of voids not only imaginable, but even compelling. We might also become more inclined to believe the notion of conflict, rational or other in nature, is insufficient with respect to grasping the dynamics of potentially transformative human situations and predicaments.

Confirmation of the viability of this suggestion is found historically in Nietzsche. Jaspers writes in his "The Present Situation of the World" that Nietzsche was the first to see the growing lack of faith in our era in its "calamitous magnitude, to disclose it in all its manifestations, to suffer it himself as the victim of his time, to seek with a mighty effort to overcome it—in vain" (*OGH* 131). The proclamation that "God is dead" speaks well beyond theological considerations. It suggests the precarious existence of a spiritual space bereft of occupancy. That it is so bereft might be a function of an attributed occupancy to that space that is non-existent and thus unsustainable. Some have accused traditional theology of fabricating occupants for such a space.

Now once this is fully realized, once the reality of

non-occupancy is fully absorbed, will the underlying space itself become under siege and/or, paradoxically, become vulnerable to an internal shrinkage and collapse? This surely is a possibility, and one that is foreshadowed by other things Kant actually ruminates over. Kant tells us that certain basic questions, those metaphysical in nature, must be asked by us, *i.e.* we must remain open to them, if we are to retain our humanity and defend it against diminution. It is in fact not a great stretch to claim that such questioning must occur in spiritual space. This sort of space, however we choose to label it, must be a condition of the possibility of such questioning.

What might it be like to endure the absence of meaning-laden objects within a space? Is this even possible? We could muse that it might be feasible in a transitional way, but probably not over a vastly extended period of time. What is more likely is that the emptiness of this space would give way to the blandishments of technology. This surely was Jaspers and Heidegger's view of the likely outcome. One thing is more or less certain. Whatever the variant accounts of our rationality might suggest, it would most likely not be out of our own spontaneity that resolution of this emptiness would be found. Though Nietzsche himself thought it possible in an Apollonian-Dionysian way, it is arguable that an appeal to spontaneity misunderstands radically the receptivity issue involved and those dimensions within which receptivity finds its residence.

Let me now bring some closure to these reflections by means of a few historically oriented reminders. First, it is hard not to appreciate a dimension of givenness within our human cognitive situation. Second, it is equally difficult to reduce the givenness of meaning to that of sensible content. Third, unless we go the route of a monadology, givenness is not explicable except through an appropriate receptivity. Fourth, what in epistemological tropes we are inclined to label object or content may well have an historical life of its own, one somewhat independent of our particular aspirations, needs and agendas. If so, it might well not be insightfully construed as enduringly accessible. Were it so, we might make a lot more sense of maneuvers we might undertake, cognitive strategies we might employ to re-engage Presence.

Of course a method of active approach to currently absence content cannot be ruled out altogether, but the sketch of an alternative possibility grounded in receptivity such as I have suggested should give us pause. The underlying insight might come to be that

we may open a door fully, as to become altogether positively and existentially receptive, but, unfortunately, just precisely no thing and, thus, nothing may come into view nor arrive into that open threshold we have engendered. This waiting and the concomitant creation of a receptive space is something that I have labeled "thresholding" in my various writings.³

Let me end with a fitting quote from Jaspers:

We can do nothing to plan the future realities of faith. We can only be ready to receive it. And live in such a manner that this readiness increases. We cannot make our own transformation the goal of our wills; it must, rather, be bestowed upon us, if we live in such a fashion that we can experience the gift. With this, it seems proper to keep silent about the faith of the future. [OGH 223]

³ Stephen A. Erickson, *The (Coming) Age of Thresholding*, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.