Karl Jaspers' Philosophical Narrative: Historical Process Structure

Narrativa filosófica de Karl Jaspers: estructura del proceso histórico

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ABSTRACT

This article studies cognitive mechanisms underlying the creation of the worldwide historical master narrative. The material taken for the study is the concept of the Axial Age introduced by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. The narrative theory supported by the works of such researchers as Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Arthur Danto, JurijLotman, David Herman and others has been selected as a methodology. The purpose of this study is to define the role of a collision (conflict) as a cognitive mechanism in the creation of a master narrative plot and in the formation of a history-philosophical concept.

Keywords: Collision, conflict, Karl Jaspers, narrative, philosophy of history.

RESUMEN

Este artículo estudia los mecanismos cognitivos que subyacen a la creación de la narrativa maestra histórica mundial. El material tomado para el estudio es el concepto de Edad Axial introducido por el filósofo alemán Karl Jaspers. Se ha seleccionado como metodología la teoría narrativa sustentada por los trabajos de investigadores como Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Arthur Danto, Jurij Lotman, David Herman y otros. El propósito de este estudio es definir el papel de una colisión (conflicto) como mecanismo cognitivo en la creación de una trama narrativa maestra y en la formación de un concepto histórico-filosófico.

Palabras clave: Colisión, conflicto, filosofía de la historia, Karl Jaspers, narrativa.

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209

INTRODUCTION

History philosophers repeatedly emphasized that building the historical narrative is definitely the creation of a mental construction that is something more than just a reflection of empirically perceived reality (Danto: 1965;White: 1973; Munslow: 1977;Jenkins: 2003; Peet:2019, pp.63-98; Matuštík: 2020). The principles of creation of this mental construction can be perceived by authors to a greater or lesser extent, but never completely. At the same time, these principles are essential when we want to understand what actually happened in a particular age. Cognitive mechanisms underlying the creation of the historical narrative became the subject under study several decades ago in the philosophy of history (Torpey: 2017, pp.1-4;Peet:2019, pp.145-219; Howard: 2020, pp.45-48).

In this article, we apply the principles of the narrative philosophy and narratology to the concept of the great German philosopher of the 20th century Karl Jaspers, which is described in his book "The Origin and Goal of History" (Jaspers: 1965). This concept ranges among substantive philosophy theories created by Augustine, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx and Oswald Spengler.

According to Jaspers, history development complies with a particular logic and, if we follow it, we can have better understanding of the goals and opportunities currently facing humanity. In this work, we study the cognitive mechanisms which help the philosopher to schematize, simplify the structure of the historical process and reach the effect of its completeness and meaningfulness (Cotesta: 2017, pp.217-240;Cusack: 2020, pp.335-338).

METHODOLOGY

Any narrative is a scheme. A human deals with the models of reality which he receives in the process of its rational understanding rather than with boundless and unlimited reality whose completeness is impossible to comprehend. Not only the narrative but also the whole rational thinking is based on simplification and schematization of reality when a human deals with not a complete object but one of its aspects or a system of several aspects.

When the comprehension of abstraction is simplified, we may have an illusion that we deal with the reality parts and objects which already exist and which seem to be waiting when we make use of them. In fact, the basis of abstraction is the creative constructive efforts to make new constructs. As for narrative thinking, Hayden White emphasizes that its underlying element is construction, "prefiguring", more than just a reflection of what it is (White: 1973).

Seymour Chatman asserts that history in itself does not have a definite structure where it would be possible to identify the beginnings, middles and endings of various stories (Chatman: 1978). The story about history acquires this structure because the author applies a certain plot scheme to the material. According to White, the same event can become the beginning, high point or ending for different stories (White: 1973). Paul Ricoeur believes that the plot is the basis for creating a story as a whole, "a synthesis of the heterogeneous" (Ricoeur: 1984). The material complies with the selected plot. The historical narrative puts the focus on the unity and coherence of history diminishing the role of disruptions and contradictions (Cohen: 2000, pp.99-113; Jenkins: 2003).

Describing Jaspers' approach, Ingolf U. Dalferth makes valuable remarks on the simplification of history while creating the complete narrative:

First, to write history is to simplify and select. We cannot give a descriptive account of all aspects of all cultural phenomena in a given reference range but have to select and reduce the complexity of the phenomena under study by useful simplifications… (Dalferth: 2012, pp.127-146).

The same author rightfully mentions that in this case history can only be simplified by the distinction of some problems regarded as most important in the course of the material study (Dalferth: 2012, pp.127-146).

Certainly, Dalferth's statement can be rightfully applied to the mechanisms of historical cognition in general, not only to that particular concept which it is referred to.

In order to build a history scheme, it is necessary to find binary oppositions in it. For the division of the historical process into stages, these oppositions have to appear on the time scale in the form of presence or absence of any characteristic or component and, therefore, it is necessary to fully emphasize the inhomogeneity of the history. A really valuable cognitive tool for this purpose is marking a historical event. JurijLotman thinks that the distinction of a narrative element is only possible in case of the distinction or differentiation of semantic fields, in this case an event will be considered as crossing the boundary among these fields (Lotman: 1977).

Quite long ago narrative theorists found the principle which organizes the structure of any story. Any plot is based on some collision, conflict, tense or disequilibrium. Plot development is the development of its underlying collision (Hegel: 1975). Among basic narrative characteristics, David Herman mentions the existence of events that "introduce some sort of disruption or disequilibrium into a story-world" (Herman: 2009). It is the collision that has become the foundation for the selection of material included into the narrative in fiction. In nonfictional historical narrative a sort of collision has to be created. Outstanding history philosophers claim to have discovered their own variants of what should be considered an underlying collision in the world history. As for example, Augustine attaches primary importance to the collision of the City of God and the Earthly City, while Marx gives the highest priority to class struggle. Depending on what is considered to be the driving forces and principal parameters of history, material selection criteria for creating the narrative will be also varied.

RESULTS

Karl Jaspers divides the past of humanity into four large periods: prehistory, the ancient civilisations, the Axial Period, the scientific-technological age. Every period seems to have its own "semantic field" (according to Lotman's terms), and the transition from one stage to another has the traits of a momentary event. Even this shows simplification achieved through schematization.

The "Axis" metaphor underlying the phrase "Axial Period" is based on the creation of a marked spot in the history which divides it into "before" and "after" along with the disregard of ambiguous, intermediate aspects or those beyond this scheme. The distinction of key spots is the derivate of marking what Lotman describes as "semantic fields", they're also responsible for the construction of the collision.

In Jaspers' work the simplification of the historical process follows two main directions. First, Jaspers chooses only a small part among numerous characteristics of the complicated historical processes. For instance, Andrew Smith mentions two main changes essential for the axial age in Jaspers' concept: transcendence and criticism of the tradition (Smith: 2015, pp.315-334). According to Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock (Arnason et al.: 2005, pp.1-14), the key innovations of the Axial age are "the discovery or upgrading of reflexivity, historicity and agentiality".

Second, the philosopher ignores the ambiguity in the question when a particular innovation exactly emerged. Some authors have been criticizing Jaspers for being blind to the elements of the Axial age which preceded the period that he took interest in. For example, as early as in the period of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten's reforms (the 14th century B.C.; according to Jaspers, more than 500 years before the beginning of the "Axial Age") it is possible to see the tendencies of the axial age (Assmann: 2005, pp.133-156; Bellah: 2005, pp.69-89). On the other hand, in some cultures the similar changes occur later, which can be exemplified by the emergence of Islam. Therefore, according to Peter Wagner, it is more accurate to mention various axial periods for different civilizations rather than a single interval of the axial age (Wagner: 2005, pp.87-106).

Jaspers gives an extremely clear description of the development stages for the key collision in the world history. Jaspers' text is full of binary oppositions of ages. The author is attentive, above all, to the differences

leaving out halftones. This, for example, occurs when Jaspers compares the axial age and preceding ancient cultures (Jaspers: 1965), modern and antique science (Jaspers: 1965). Jaspers emphasizes similarities of different phenomena dated back by him to the same period and distinctions among different periods. As a consequence, his book gives the reason to be criticized, e.g. when in Ancient China such an axial age feature as the criticism of the tradition has not been found (Smith: 2015, pp.315-334). The opposition of the axial age and the preceding epoch of great ancient cultures is too radical and reminds the opposition of the world before and after the Advent of Christ typical of the philosophy of Christian history (Assmann: 2012, pp.366-407).

Jaspers says:

The history of mankind visible to us took, so to speak, two breaths. The first led from the Promethean Age via the ancient civilizations to the Axial Period and its consequences. The second started with the scientific-technological, the new Promethean Age and may lead, through constructions that will be analogous to the organization and planning of the ancient civilizations, into a new, second Axial Period, to the final process of becoming-human, which is still remote and invisible to us (Jaspers: 1965).

This extract distinctly formulates the essence of the conflict which makes the basis of history. The essence is demonstrated by the phrase "becoming-human": the conflict consists in the competition of factors that promote and hinder the process of becoming.

Despite the fact that the Axial Period seems to be inherently the key period in history, Jaspers writes that in fact, the history is just starting (Jaspers: 1965). The most important milestones of the plot development including the culmination are still ahead. The history is something that happens "between origin and goal" (Jaspers: 1965). The goal lies in the future and thus it is not specific. Nevertheless, Jaspers calls its essence "Everlasting Realm of Spirits" (Jaspers: 1965).

DISCUSSION

Transformations of the axial age are described by Jaspers as a complete project where the participants pursued special goals as if they had an arduous breakthrough to something new. The result is characterized by Jaspers as partial success. But did these people actually have these particular goals? They might have perceived their goals, activities and outcomes as well as the circumstances of their activity quite differently. Here we are witnessing clear attributes of the teleological approach: in the master narrative the outcomes of the historical process are described as the goals of earlier historical figures, although they might not have had them (Van Alphen&Carretero: 2015, pp.512-530). Consequently, the core of the collision is the achievement of these pseudo-goals. According to Björn Wittrock, Jaspers refuses from explicit teleology typical of the Christian philosophy, but implicit teleology keeps playing an important role in the axial age concept (Wittrock: 2005, pp.51-86).

The idea of a key collision brings a certain structure of the historical process plot. Anyway, it is only possible to create the narrative of the world history which would be complete and unified, when the author prioritizes one aspects over others and subordinates the latter to the former. In Jaspers' concept the collision can be defined as an opposition of factors promoting and hindering a human becoming human. This collision relates not only to humanity in general but also has a level comparable to an individual: the solution to fundamental existential problems.

The conflict taken by Jaspers as the basis for the history is relevant not only to the past, but also to the present and future. The future is also becoming the realm of binary oppositions and as far as we have no empirical material describing it, this tendency is actualized there much easier. The future plays a major role in Jaspers' master-narrative. It can be described by what Steven G. Crowell said: "Narrative constitutes meaning by "coming to an end" and is thereby "redemptive" in two senses. First, it redeems or "idealizes" reality, salvaging (or forming) a meaning out of chaos. Second, it redeems the names and dates it mentions as one

redeems a promissory note, gives them a fixed identity by fitting them "proleptically" into a completed context of significance" (Crowell: 1998, pp.220-244).

Jaspers' teleology, which is implicit as applied to people of the distant past, becomes explicit when it comes to the goals and objectives of present-day people. The German philosopher is having his narrative not only to understand the past but most significantly to know what people have to do now. The narrator invites the audience to join the large battle, project, adventure that he is narrating about –becoming-human in the course of the world history. Thus, collision as a narrative way to organize the material and comprehend past events smoothly passes to projectivity of a present day human including the author and reader. They find themselves among characters of the book who create the plot at the moment and will continue creating it further.

This transformation serves as a good confirmation and development of the idea which is important for the concepts of Paul Ricoeur and David Carr and generally for the phenomenological approach to the narrative: the comprehension of human experience material in a narrative is closely related to the ability of human consciousness to organize the experience material around the projects of its own activity (Ricoeur: 1984;Carr: 1986). In case of Jaspers, these aspects merge into one.

CONCLUSION

A philosopher who creates the worldwide historical master narrative needs history schematization mechanisms. The analysis of Karl Jaspers' concept allows us to demonstrate that a collision (conflict) is one of these mechanisms. The theorist explains how he understands what the most important key aspects of the world history are. This is the way the collision is built as it is related to the development of these key aspects. The collision constitutes a whole system together with other important characteristics of the master narrative such as marking out history subjects, finding key events and stages of history as well as with the question of what the history goal is. The collision is involved into the whole principle of creating binary oppositions which allow dividing history into periods and interpreting particular periods and tendencies through the system of binary characteristics.

The present is described by Jaspers as an arena where the collision keeps going, and the final settlement of the collision belongs to the future. This allows Jaspers to transform the world history collision into the imperative addressed to contemporaries. The fact that a part of the plot development in Jaspers' master narrative is placed in the Future makes this text type different from those traditionally studied narratives where all events occur before the beginning of narration. However, like in such narratives, collision remains the central significant aspect of material structuring.

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213

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