

Suicide Is Painless: Naphta, Settembrini, and Jaspers

Paul Boshears, European Graduate School

In his novel *The Magic Mountain*, Thomas Mann, situating his novel in a sanatorium in an isolated mountain village in the Alps, offers a harrowing account of modern life. While the inhabitants of the sanatorium by and large seem banal, as does their lifestyle, something alien begins to blossom in the mind of the reader: time has escaped us. In the unremarkable protagonist Hans Castorp we find, if not exactly ourselves, then at least a self not too impressive, not too insipid – a self perhaps close to ourselves? Hans Castorp is no Odysseus, no stylized hero; he is “perfectly ordinary,” a man of no great learning but a polite youth, perhaps with promise as an engineer. Hans has no specific quality that is particularly grabbing, but nonetheless he reaches out to us as he watches his fellow patients, as he tries to make sense of “the world up here,” that is, the Western world. In this attempt, the novel's perhaps most engaging character becomes time.

The time “up here,” in Modernity, is curious. Hans arrives for his casual visit at the hospital before he believes he has. The three-week visit with his cousin dissolves into seven years. The passage of time becomes for Hans a merit. Initially, Hans seems to believe that with this passage of time will also come an appreciation of his own worth—that he will become like those patients who are unable to ever leave the International Sanatorium Berghof. This appreciation becomes sensible if we consider the profound alienation of a mountain community, “Space... gives birth to forgetfulness... by removing an individual from all relationships and placing him in a free and pristine state....”¹ This forgetfulness evokes anxiety in the individual, rendering one a vagabond. In response to this phenomenon one is always seeking some kind of domesticity, a relationship to not only the physical environs but also a social network. In the dissociating effects of time, the inability to ground meaning and relationship in the enduring, the

existential crisis is revealed.

The nobility of the sick—that those with a sickness have a special access to the truth of the human condition,² or some dignity by virtue of this alone—becomes the constant source of interminable dialog between Hans Castorp, Herr Settembrini and Herr Naphta. Their unceasing back-and-forth underscores an even more profound source of anxiety: that a fracturing of reality has occurred. Mann seems to be suggesting, in the perennial debates between Settembrini's humanism and Naphta's Jesuitical bent, that our sickness is a symptom of an even more insidious illness—the sickness of freedom. Where Mann will present a more Nietzschean, aesthetic ordering of the modern world in his novel, Karl Jaspers, in his *Philosophy of Existence* seeks to position philosophy as an activity in which one can engage to overcome the sickness of freedom by way of Reason.

Here it is necessary to qualify Jaspers' account of Reason by distinguishing it from the reason of either Settembrini or Naphta. From Settembrini we are offered an account of Enlightenment-style discourse on reason. His is a determinate reason; its advances are progressive and toward the eradication of all that is not reason. It is the triumph of the bodily limits of the human being and the triumph of the categorizing of all reality as things. In Jaspers' terms,³ Settembrini offers an understanding of truth as *consciousness-in-general* which is proved by evidence. Wherever Settembrini turns he sees the triumph of oppressed peoples over suffering of all kinds; he is, in fact, working with the League for the Organization of Progress to publish a multi-volumed work entitled *The Sociology of Suffering* in which

[H]uman sufferings of all classes and species will be treated in detailed, exhaustive, systematic fashion. You will object: What good are classes, species, and systems? And I reply: Order and classification are the beginning of mastery, whereas the truly dreadful enemy is the unknown. The human race must be led out of the primitive stage of fear and long-suffering vacuity and into a phase of purposeful activity.⁴

To Settembrini's Enlightenment discourse is the flip-side of the coin, represented in Naphta.

It cannot be said that Naphta is the foil of Settembrini, tempting though such a classification is. Naphta is a hideous looking man in comparison to the always-fetching Settembrini. Where Settembrini is always enrobed in his simple clothes, Naphta is never seen without the most luxurious finery. Naphta is a former Jesuitical student, Settembrini the product of humanist-revolutionaries. But the two share a home. Naphta has a den on the first floor with silks and richness, Settembrini has a simple garret with a water carafe. Both seem to enjoy their arguments, finding a certain pleasure in seeming to overcome the other's arguments. Settembrini relies upon empirical evidence and dreams of the unity of all mankind in the International State; Naphta, on the other hand, has faith:

My good friend... there is no such thing as pure knowledge. The validity of ecclesiastical science – which can be summarized in Saint Augustine's statement: “I believe, that I may understand” – is absolutely incontrovertible. Faith is the vehicle of understanding, the intellect is secondary. Your unbiased science is a myth.⁵

From these lines drawn a seeming camaraderie seems to be borne-out. And then something truly ponderous occurs, a duel to the death.

The two pedagogues meet in a field of snow. Hans futilely attempts to diffuse the situation, imploring to no avail that the two not be hasty. Settembrini and Naphta line-up at paces and draw their pistols. A shot cracks and resounds through the mountains. Settembrini has shot into the air. Naphta demands that Settembrini fire again, this time taking aim at him. Settembrini, the pacifist, insists that it is Naphta's turn to fire. Naphta declares Settembrini a coward and shoots himself in the head, collapsing face first into the snow.

It is from this curious outcome that our present discussion takes its inspiration. What does this suicide communicate to Settembrini? It is after this moment that Hans Castorp renews his relationship with Settembrini as the pair attempt to make sense of the news coming from “down

there.” Over the previous nearly-four hundred pages, the novel develops as an allegorical tale: the patients in the Berghof International Sanatorium reside in their Olympian mountain retreat, free to bicker among themselves and without concern for those down below, those more concrete and less figurative, less cerebral, less abstract. Apparently a war is preparing throughout that Europe “down there,” a condition that requires the novel “be told with verbs whose tense is that of the deepest past.”⁶ Naphta's death has fundamentally confounded Settembrini; his *elan* has been reduced. He is, in fact, hobbled by the death of his verbal sparring partner.

[He] was seldom seen on his feet these days. Naphta's crude end, *that terrorist deed*, committed by a caustically desperate antagonist, had been a terrible blow to his sensitive nature; he had been unable to get over it, had been frail and subject to fainting spells ever since.⁷

We learn that not only has Settembrini been unable to maintain his vertical state, but that he has also had to reduce his contribution to the Organization of Progress to just oral reports. His mental faculties are observably debilitated.

Prior to Naphta's suicide attack, Hans was consistently audience to this autodidact's calls to a bold future where the revolution of bourgeois democracy was toasted as an idea with the mildness of the dove and the boldness of the eagle. Now, though, we find Settembrini unable to reconcile his vision of reason leading to a lasting peace.

He had behaved very humanely in his duel with crude Naphta; but more generally, whenever his enthusiasms blended humanity and politics for the ideal of civilization's ultimate victory and dominion, whenever the citizen's pike was consecrated on the altar of humanity, it became doubtful whether, on a more impersonal level, he remained of a mind to hold back his sword from shedding blood. Yes, Herr Settembrini's own inner state meant that in his world of beautiful views, the element of the eagle's boldness prevailed more and more over the dove's mildness.⁸

There is a chilling similarity in this movement to our own contemporary situation: how will we understand and respond to terrorism and the fundamentalism that seems to underwrite the suicide

bomber's actions? It is here that Jaspers seems to provide a sign post that may point us toward some workable peace.

Existentialism is a response to the non-convergence of truth in the modern condition.⁹ The movement of Enlightenment-style discourses has been to celebrate, unquestioningly, the advances of science to the point of a naive faith in science as the sole arbiter of what is true and truly beneficial to humanity. For this to occur there had to be a fracturing of reality. In one sense, science is capable of providing all the answers to all our concerns; in another, these are addressed by religion, or perhaps art, or still again philosophy, and these divisions continue *ad nauseum*. These could be innocuous intellectual pursuits, but as we see throughout the history of the 20th Century, an ever-increasing violence proceeds from this fracturing of truth and reality. It is this concern for reducing violence by humans against other humans that Jaspers' text addresses. He is successful in this task by re-situating the place of philosophy as the ground of science, and drawing out a distinction between the faith of philosophy and the faith of religion.

Fundamental to the task of situating philosophy as the ground of science is to understand how knowledge is generated. It is the product of historical moments and the truths of these moments are responses to and investigations of historical circumstances. Jaspers calls this the horizon and the total of these horizons is the encompassing. In this way, philosophy must always grapple with the problems of subjectivity in its epoch. This is to say that while Plato's philosophical pursuits may be of interest to us today, for his ideas to be appropriated today his ideas must be reworked to respond to contemporary concerns. Philosophical inquiry tended throughout the 19th Century to attempt to become like science, to provide empirical evidence for how the world is. As a result of this attempt, philosophical inquiry became more and more attenuated.

The encompassing is the totality of modes of understanding possible in an historic

moment. The horizon is the conceptual limits of a particular historical moment and there are activities that are capable of generating knowledge in these moments, such as science or religion, and they are in tension with one another.¹⁰ This conflict occurs because of the modalities of access to the truth of the encompassing: existence, consciousness-in-general, spirit, and *Existenz*. Existence is here understood as “always particular, and wills *to preserve* and extend *itself*; *Truth* is what furthers existence (life), what works; falsity is what harms, limits, paralyzes it. Existence wills *its own happiness*: *Truth* is the satisfaction of existence resulting from its creative interaction with its environment.”¹¹ This position is perhaps what best describes Hans Castorp's position throughout *The Magic Mountain*. As he searches for the truth of life in the medical and technical (in the form of Behrens), or the rational (per Settembrini), or the religious (Naphta), we can ascertain what Jaspers states: “*Truth* is what produces wholeness.”¹² Thus it is possible to translate Naphta's terrorist deed from dumb or mute action to “[t]ruth of the spirit [which] exists by virtue of membership in a self-elucidating and self-contained whole. This whole does not become objectively knowable; it can be grasped only in the action of the membership which endows it with existence and knowability.”¹³ Restated, Naphta's suicide establishes religious truth, which Settembrini cannot refute not only because the words cannot be heard but also by virtue of Naphta's being a member of a community of believers which affirms his truth. Naphta gains everything in this respect by annihilating himself. It must be noted, however, that Naphta's actions do not confirm the notion of religion as outlined by Jaspers; while they may have the same name, the nuanced difference is crucial.

If existence is the will to preserve and extend itself, then Reality cannot be apprehended in any way other than by believing perception.¹⁴ The shortcoming of both Settembrini's rationalism and Naphta's fanaticism is well discussed by Jaspers.

In its remoteness from religion... philosophy *cannot attack as false*
a religion that remains true to its own source. In philosophizing,

we recognize religion as true in a way we do not understand, recognize it in a continuing readiness and questioning will to understand. To be constantly perplexed anew by religion belongs to the very life of philosophy.¹⁵

Settembrini's debilitation is the literary expression of Jaspers' warning corollary to the above. Without philosophy acting as the antipode, religion disappears. The failure of both Settembrini and Naphta is due neither to an inadequate vocabulary nor to a retardation of their ability to hear one another, but is rather the natural result of determinate knowledge-production.

What both parties fail to grasp is that there are discontinuities between the modes of being due to the fallacious belief in the possibility to “correctly” order the world into a unity, as well as the illusory faith in a subjectivity that could support such a faith in unity. Selfhood in this way should be understood as fragmentation and ultimately every mode of fragmentation of being is a demand upon us *not* to see reality itself in the fragments. The tragedy of Naphta's death is not that it has left Settembrini alone and shaken but the mutual failure of both Naphta and Settembrini to recognize that, “Reason seeks to bring everything back out of the dispersion of mutual indifference to dynamic interrelatedness.”¹⁶ Said another way, the tragedy of Naphta's suicide is that Settembrini must now see himself as autonomous and alone and may no longer rely upon Naphta, his polar opposite, for the supporting arguments that made Settembrini's deterministic world bearable. The narrator of Mann's novel asks pointedly if in this “festival of death, this ugly rutting fever that inflames the rainy evening sky all round—will love someday rise up out of this, too?”¹⁷ And it is to this question that Jaspers seems most capable of offering a response that truly shakes the fatalistic tendencies of our age.

Reason is the steady advance toward the Other.... it is an open and receptive concern.... it remains a questioning that is like a wooing. Reason never turns into possessive knowledge which necessarily limits and fixes itself, but remains an unlimited openness.¹⁸

This reasoning-in-receptivity, this way of loving, does not cease the splintering, the

fragmentation. It does not encase the world in a crystalline homogeneity. This receptivity does, however, act to secure a positive conception of peace. Jaspers sees this as a peace that is not “a paralyzing malaise in the presence of facticity without possibility,” but our finding peace in the tension of difference.

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- 1 Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*. John E. Woods, trans. New York: Vintage, 1995. 4.
 - 2 The premise of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*.
 - 3 Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. Richard Grabau, translator. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995.
 - 4 *Ibid.* 242
 - 5 *Ibid.* 390
 - 6 *Ibid.* xi
 - 7 *Ibid.* 700 (italics added)
 - 8 *Ibid.*
 - 9 Stacy Keltner, lecture notes to her PHIL 4420, Existentialism, Kennesaw State University, 2006.
 - 10 Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. 41.
 - 11 *Ibid.* 37
 - 12 *Ibid.*
 - 13 *Ibid.* Jaspers' work is today being echoed by researchers as they try to explain why terrorists do what they do. See Max Abrahms' "What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategies," *International Security*. 32:4. 2008.
 - 14 *Ibid.* 84
 - 15 *Ibid.* 91
 - 16 *Ibid.* 55
 - 17 Mann, Thomas. *The Magic Mountain*. 706.
 - 18 Jaspers, Karl. *Philosophy of Existence*. 57.