



## The Concept of Understanding in Jaspers and Contemporary Epistemology

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**Abstract:** In the *General Psychopathology* Jaspers famously draws a distinction between the understandable and explainable. Meaningful connections between psychic events, he argues, can only be understood empathetically and cannot be explained causally. The idea behind this distinction, according to some interpreters at least, seems to be that psychic events do not fall under any general causal rules whereas ordinary events do fall under such rules. Also Jaspers distinguishes empathetic understanding of the connection between two psychic events from a mere interpretation of it, which may turn out to be false. Hence, understanding seems to be able to give us the truth about the connection and is factive as well as self-evident in nature. Contemporary epistemologists, such as Linda Zagzebsky, Duncan Pritchard, and Jonathan Kvanvig, for example, distinguish three varieties: propositional, objectual or holistic, and atomistic understanding. They do not agree on factivity and transparency of understanding. What then is the difference between their views and that of Jaspers? This essay compares recent epistemological views of understanding with those of Jaspers and critiques his claims about empathetic understanding as being both factive and self-evident or transparent; to show that empathetic understanding of connections between psychic events needs a public criterion for its individuation.

**Keywords:** Jaspers, Karl; epistemology; empathetic understanding; objectual understanding; holistic understanding; understanding as factive; understanding as transparent.

### Karl Jaspers' Distinction

#### *Basic Specifications*

Jaspers' famous distinction between "explainable" and "understandable" in the *General Psychopathology* is both epistemic and ontological.<sup>1</sup> He draws the distinction in the following way:

1. We sink ourselves into the psychic situation and *understand genetically by empathy* how one psychic event emerges from another.
2. We find by repeated

experience that a number of phenomena are regularly linked together, and on this basis we *explain causally*.  
[GP 301]

From the epistemic perspective we sink into another person's psychic situation and through this empathetic experience grasp what Jaspers calls "meaningful connections" between psychic events (GP 304). This type of experience is obviously different from our experience of regular linkage between phenomena that helps us see the causal connections. Ontologically the object of our empathetic experience of another's psychic situation are the elements of meaningful connections as opposed to elements of causal connections that are grasped through experience of regular linkages.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, trans. J. Hoening and Marian W. Hamilton, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. [Henceforth cited as *GP*]

The idea here seems to be that explanation is focused on uncovering causal connections that are mostly taken as mechanistic in the post-Newtonian era. This same mechanistic model does not apply, in Jaspers' opinion, to the mental life. This is obviously because there are no mechanistic regularities that can be experienced or discovered as governing mental life.

Jaspers distinguishes empathetic understanding not only from causal explanation but also from rational understanding. In his own words:

Rational understanding always leads to a statement that the psychic content was simply a rational connection, understandable without the help of any psychology. Empathetic understanding, on the other hand, always leads directly into the psychic connection itself. [GP 304]

The point of this distinction seems to be that psychic connections are not all of them only rational in their nature. Some of these connections elude rational understanding and can be understood only empathetically by sinking into the psyche of the other. The mental life or consciousness, therefore, is not all of it understandable through discovering rational connections between psychic events. In particular mental patients exhibit or experience psychic events that can be understood not in ordinary rational terms but only imaginatively sinking into the patient's psyche. Does that mean that our empathetic understanding is extra-rational? I think not. Presumably it is creative or inventive reason—as Karl Popper would call it—that comes into play to see these special meaningful connections between psychic events.

Jaspers also takes empathetic understanding to be factive when successful and distinguishes it from what he calls interpretation of a psychic connection. Successful or true empathetic understanding yields an insight that is self-evident. It helps us see the other's experience as it really is. A mere interpretation is when such empathetic understanding fails to expose such experience to us correctly.

In a 1912 article Jaspers draws a distinction between what he calls objective and subjective symptoms of mental disorder and argues as follows:

Objective symptoms can all be directly and convincingly demonstrated to anyone capable of sense-perception and logical thought; but subjective symptoms, if they are to be understood, must be referred to some process which, in contrast to sense-perception and logical thought, is usually described

by the same term, "subjective." Subjective symptoms cannot be perceived by the sense organs, but have to be grasped by transferring oneself, so to say, into the other individual's psyche; that is, by empathy. They can only become an inner reality for the observer by his participating in the other person's experiences, not by any intellectual effort.<sup>2</sup>

This empathy or genetic understanding is what "grasps as self-evident how one psychic event emerges from another; how a man attacked should be angry, a betrayed lover jealous" (PAP 1322).

### *Elaboration*

Given these specifications about empathetic understanding, we need to ask ourselves as to what sense one can make of his distinction between the understandable and explainable? At the first blush the idea seems to be that the distinction is between causal understanding of events that we call their explanation and some kind of an immediate grasp of relationships between mental events that is acquired through immersion into the other's psyche. But the question is, how does one understand the meaningful connection between two psychic events empathetically? Event A leads to event B in the psyche of a mental patient. I imagine myself to be in the same situation as the patient and empathize to see the connection between A and B. In Jaspers' own characterization it comes to me as self-evident that A has led to B. Jaspers considers this to be a personal insight that is not based on any observed regularity between occurrence of A leading to B. It is a fresh intuition every time. Also it can be either genuine understanding or a mere interpretation depending on whether or not it successfully makes the patient's experience visible to me (cf. GP 312-3).

There are two issues that need to be addressed here. First, we need to figure out the way in which event B emerges out of event A. Second, we need to figure out as to what is the public criterion for the veracity of my personal intuition of the meaningful connection between A and B. I will return to the second issue below but as far as the first is concerned, if the connection between the two events is meaningful rather than causal, then how do we construe the nature of this

<sup>2</sup> Karl Jaspers, "The Phenomenological Approach in Psychopathology," *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 114/516 (1968), 1313-1323, here p. 1313 [henceforth cited as PAP]; originally published in *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Neurologie und Psychiatrie* 9/1 (1912) 391-408.

relationship? Jaspers' word "emerge" seems to suggest some kind of a causal linkage between the two psychic events, but if meaningful connection is construed as ultimately causal in nature, then the need for drawing a distinction between the understandable and explainable evaporates. Meaningful relationship between the two psychic events becomes causal relationship and, hence, remains no longer different from the explainable relations. Therefore, we need to resist the temptation to interpret Jaspers' word "emerge" in causal terms.

Causality is understood in terms of regularity of linkage between two events (David Hume's constant conjunction, for example) and that is how Jaspers' text seems to define it when he talks about "phenomena regularly linked together." But the case of psychic events is much more complex. Laws or generalizations of the sort that govern normal causally related, say physical events, do not govern the relationships between psychic events. Since such laws are missing in case of psychic events, the relationship between them needs to be understood in terms of one particular event leading to another. No generality or regularity is expected. We need a fresh personal intuition every time to grasp such relationship. These relationships are meaningful but cannot be interpreted in causal terms because, as some philosophers of science have argued, there are no strict laws or regularities in special sciences of which psychology is one.<sup>3</sup>

What is the sense, then in which one psychic event emerges from another? If there are no strict laws or regularities governing the connections between psychic events, then, perhaps, they get connected with each other rather randomly through new and creative linkages between their meanings for the patient. Jaspers says:

How do we proceed when we isolate, characterize and give conceptual form to these psychic phenomena? We cannot portray them, or bring them before our eyes in any way that can be perceived by the senses. We can only guide ourselves and others by a multiple approach. We have to be led, starting from the outside, to a real appreciation of a particular psychic phenomenon, by looking at its genesis, the condition for its appearance, its configurations, its context and possible concrete contents; also by making use of intuitive comparison and symbolization, by directing our observations in whatever ways may suggest themselves (as artists do penetratingly) and

by demonstrating already known phenomena which appear to play some part in the formation of the phenomenon studied. [PAP 1316]

This passage points, among other things, to the creative/artistic nature of how one understands meaningful connections between psychic phenomena. There are no set rules for working out such intuitive and creative comparisons. It appears, therefore, that empathetic understanding gives us linkages between psychic events that are creative like insights of artists. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Jaspers notes about empathetic understanding that "we can never give it recognition as 'science'" (PAP 1315).

### Understanding in Contemporary Epistemology

A number of leading contemporary epistemologists have started paying attention to the epistemic state of understanding instead of just continuing the focus on knowledge. Jonathan Kvanvig, Linda Zagzebsky, Duncan Pritchard, Stephen R. Grimm and many others have recently explored understanding as an epistemic state. Generally there are three types of understanding that some of these epistemologists talk about, i.e., propositional understanding, objectual understanding, and atomistic understanding.<sup>4</sup> Propositional understanding is where object of understanding is a proposition or referent of a that-clause. For example, "Neil understands that X" or, "Neil understands that the school closes at 4:00 pm."

Objectual understanding is holistic in nature. When we say "John understands bio-ethics," we are talking about objectual understanding. Lastly, atomistic understanding is concerned with understanding the "why" of a situation, for example, "Ruth knows why the school was closed."

As far as propositional understanding is concerned, epistemologists have noted that it cannot be generally distinguished from propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Hence,

<sup>4</sup> For example, Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. [Henceforth cited as VK]

<sup>5</sup> See Duncan Pritchard, "Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value," in *Epistemology*, ed. Anthony O'Hear, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press 2009, pp. 19-43, here pp. 30-1. [Henceforth quoted as UEV] See also Emma C. Gordon, "Is There Propositional Understanding?" *Logos & Episteme* 3/2 (2012), 181-192, here pp. 187-8.

<sup>3</sup> See Alex Rosenberg, *Philosophy of Science: A Contemporary Introduction*, New York and London: Routledge 2012, p. 102.

basically we have two types of understanding that are considered as paradigmatic by recent epistemologist, atomistic and objectual or holistic. Pritchard takes atomistic understanding to be the basic paradigm while Kvanvig and Zagzebsky take the holistic understanding to be so. Let us look at their views.

#### *Linda Zagzebsky's View*

Understanding might be a form of knowledge, says Zagzebsky, but she wants to point to a kind of understanding that is non-propositional in character, like understanding gained from a map or a graph, and so on. Such an understanding is not the same as understanding a set of propositions. She then adds two points that come out of Plato's epistemology and that distinguish understanding from propositional knowledge: (i) understanding is connected with mastery of an art, a skill, or *technê* and, (ii) understanding involves grasping of relations between parts or between parts and a whole. These relations could be spatial, temporal, or causal—what Stephan Grimm characterizes as "dependence."<sup>6</sup>

To these points from Plato she adds a third of her own that similarly distinguishes understanding from propositional knowledge. Zagzebsky argues that while we can, under the right conditions, have propositional knowledge by testimony, we cannot have understanding by testimony. Understanding cannot be conveyed to another person. It is not a matter of conveying the right belief to another person as we do in case of testimonial knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

From these views it can be inferred that Zagzebsky is primarily talking about objectual or holistic understanding. When she says that understanding might be a form of knowledge, she appears to be talking about propositional understanding. So she distinguishes propositional understanding from non-propositional understanding, and takes mastery of an art and grasping of dependency relations as marks of non-propositional understanding. This later type of understanding fits the characterizations of objectual or holistic understanding in literature. So we can take Zagzebsky to be clearly distinguishing between

knowledge and non-propositional understanding. This type of understanding bears resemblance to Jaspers' view of empathetic understanding.

#### *Jonathan Kvanvig's View*

Kvanvig is primarily interested in objectual/holistic understanding, although he does distinguish three types: propositional, wh-understanding (his term for understanding—that answers why, when, where, or what questions), and objectual (VK 5). He says:

To understand is to grasp the variety of such connections. It involves seeing explanatory connections, being aware of the probabilistic interrelationships, and apprehending the logical implications of the information in question. There is, of course, an element of factivity to the notion of understanding, just as there is with the notion of knowledge. But when we move past the alethic aspect of both notions, our attention turns to diverse paths. When the question is whether one knows, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about evidence, reliability, reasons for belief, and, perhaps most importantly, non-accidentality regarding the connection between our grounds for belief and the truth of the belief. When the question is whether one has understanding, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about the extent of our grasp of the structural relationships (e.g., logical, probabilistic, and explanatory relationships) between the central items of information regarding which the question of understanding arises. [VK 3]

These remarks show that Kvanvig is concerned with holistic or objectual understanding. What Pritchard refers to as atomistic understanding seems to be Kvanvig's wh-understanding. The difference between objectual and wh-understanding is that the later focuses on a single wh-question while the former is about understanding a whole through grasping structural connections between its parts.

#### *Duncan Pritchard's View*

Pritchard, while considering whether knowledge or understanding is distinctively valuable, criticizes both Zagzebsky and Kvanvig for their takes on understanding and believes atomistic understanding to be primary or paradigmatic. For example, about Zagzebsky's position he says:

So the transparency and non-factivity claims that Zagzebski offers are false. It is difficult to diagnose

<sup>6</sup> See Stephan Grimm, "The Goal of Explanation," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 41/4 (2010), 337-344, here p. 341.

<sup>7</sup> See Linda Zagzebsky, *On Epistemology*, Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning 2009, pp. 141-5.

why Zagzebski made this mistake. Part of the reason may be that there is a failure to be clear about the type of understanding under consideration. After all, when it comes to the kind of holistic understanding that applies to a subject matter, this plausibly *is* compatible with at least *some* false beliefs about that subject matter, but this sort of understanding is precisely not the sort at issue. Moreover, it would seem that the analogue of Zagzebski's non-factivity claim as regards understanding when it comes to holistic understanding would be that such understanding can be possessed even though one has *no* relevant true beliefs, and that is surely implausible. [UEV 33]

The sort of understanding that Pritchard seems to be taking as primary is *wh*-understanding or what he calls atomistic understanding. He considers such understanding to be non-transparent, factive, and immune to epistemic luck of the environmental variety, though not Gettier-style epistemic luck. He contrasts his position with Zagzebski and Kvanvig in this regard. Zagzebski takes understanding to be transparent, non-factive, and immune to epistemic luck.<sup>8</sup> Kvanvig, on the other hand, takes understanding to be non-transparent and non-factive and immune to epistemic luck (VK 197). He also allows that understanding, unlike knowledge, admits of degrees, meaning that while knowledge (of a proposition, for example) is either an all or nothing affair, understanding (of an art, for example) can be of various degrees.

In Pritchard's view, factivity of understanding entails that, in genuinely understanding something, one attains true relevant beliefs about it. For understanding to be transparent means that there is no distinction between seemingly understanding something and really understanding it. Immunity to epistemic luck means that understanding is not produced by some accidental factors but results from the abilities of the epistemic agent. Pritchard brings out a distinction between two types of epistemic luck: Gettier-style luck and environmental luck. Gettier-style luck can intervene between the ability of an agent to know or understand and success of that agent in reaching true belief. Take the now common sheep-dog example from epistemology literature. An agent is looking at a field and sees a sheep in the distance. In reality, however, she is looking at a rock structure that looks like a sheep. She forms the

belief that there is a sheep in the field. Unbeknownst to her there is a sheep in the field behind the rock structure. So her belief is correct though *gettierized* in the sense that it is true accidentally and not because of her ability. Hence, she fails to have knowledge of the matter. This is Gettier-style luck. Pritchard argues that understanding, like knowledge, is not immune to this type of luck.

Next, imagine an artist who has carved sheep out of several rocks in the field. They all look like real sheep from where the agent is standing. In the middle of these statues, there is a real sheep grazing in the field. The agent looks toward the field and sees a sheep there. By sheer luck her eyes fall on the real sheep and she attains the belief that there is a sheep in the field. Her belief is true and it is true also because of her ability to perceive. Pritchard argues that this type of environmental luck is not compatible with knowledge. The agent in question does not have the knowledge that there is a sheep in the field because she might as well have cast her glance on a sheep statue. It is sheer accident that she has succeeded in reaching true belief.

However, Pritchard argues that this type of environmental luck is compatible with atomistic understanding. He explains the point through the following example: Suppose I ask a fire officer why my house was burning. She tells me that it was because of faulty wiring. This makes me understand why my house was burnt. Now suppose further that, by chance, there were some people dressed as fire officers going to nearby fancy dress party. It was just by sheer luck that I hit upon the real officer in that environment. Do I still understand why my house got burnt? Pritchard says, yes. This type of environmental luck does not undermine my understanding as to why my house got burnt. If faulty wiring was the real cause, I still understand it. The point is that environmental luck undermines knowledge but it cannot undermine understanding. This goes to show that there is a distinction between the two.

### Comparison with Karl Jaspers

Jaspers is concerned with empathetic understanding. He does consider it to be factive, as noted above, and also contends that it comes to us as self-evident. I think that this self-evidence of empathetic understanding of meaningful connections between psychic events is the same thing as transparency of understanding talked about by epistemologists. The reason is that appearance of self-evidence cannot be distinguished from real self-

<sup>8</sup> Linda Zagzebski, "Recovering Understanding," in *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility and Virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

evidence. Both are one and the same. A self-evident truth is justified by one's very understanding of it and is non-inferential or immediate. With this kind of truths, understanding is the same thing as justifiably believing. There is no distinction between appearance of truth and real truth.

This makes Jaspers position on empathetic understanding to be quite unique. None of the three epistemologists discussed above take either objectual or atomistic understanding to be both factive and transparent. For Zagzebsky objectual or holistic understanding is transparent but not factive. For Kvanvig holistic understanding is neither factive nor transparent. Pritchard takes atomistic understanding to be factive but not transparent. So Jaspers is unique in holding empathetic understanding to be both factive and transparent.

Now, contemporary epistemologists look at understanding as grasp of structural relations between parts as we noted above in Zagzebsky. Kvanvig has similar views and says:

When the question is whether one has understanding, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about the extent of our grasp of the structural relationships (e.g., logical, probabilistic, and explanatory relationships) between the central items of information regarding which the question of understanding arises. [VK 3]

Pritchard's position on atomistic understanding is not different. He remarks:

I want to take the paradigm usage of "understands" to be in a statement like "I understand why such-and-such is the case." Notice that this usage is very different from a more holistic usage which applies to subject matters, as in "I understand quantum physics," or even "I understand my wife." I think the holistic usage of "understands" is related to the non-holistic, or atomistic, usage that is our focus, but the former raises problems of its own that we've not the space to cover here. [UEV 31]

Given this take on understanding the question is whether or not Jaspers would agree with this view in relation to empathetic understanding. I think his position is similar on this issue. Empathetic understanding after all aims at sinking into the other's psyche to see meaningful connections between two psychic events. This is obviously an effort to answer the question why an event B is the case? Empathetic understanding, therefore, is atomistic in character.

Can such understanding be both factive and transparent? Pritchard argues against such a position:

[I]f understanding is factive then it clearly cannot be transparent as the factivity of understanding would require there to be a distinction between thinking that certain facts obtain and their obtaining, contrary to what the transparency thesis demands. [UEV 33]

We also know that Jaspers draws a distinction between genuine understanding and pseudo-understanding that is a mere interpretation of it. Therefore, he must be insisting on factivity of successful empathetic understanding and not that of pseudo-understanding or mere interpretation. But then how can he simultaneously take successful understanding to be self-evident. In case of understanding something as self-evident, we cannot apparently draw a distinction between genuine understanding and an appearance of it.

If we assume that empathetic understanding of meaningful connections between psychic events is only factive and not transparent or self-evident, we need to make sense of how we can succeed in sharing the truth (making others see the truth) of our empathetic understanding of connections. Since, my empathetic understanding is a personal intuition (according to Jaspers), and since it is a fresh intuition every time, how can its truth be shared with other people? Obviously it is not a private intuition or understanding in the sense in which only I can understand it. It is not what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a private language that is understood only by one person.<sup>9</sup> The reason is that if empathetic understanding is private in a Wittgensteinian sense, then it will be impossible for it to exist as is the case with a private language. No identity conditions can be thought of for a private language or experience as Wittgenstein's private language argument has shown. Therefore, personal experiences or intuitions are not private in the sense of privacy discussed in the private language argument. They can and must have a public criterion for their existence. Given this need for a public criterion, the question that must be faced is, how truths uncovered by empathetic understanding can be shared? How can I share my understanding attained through empathy by sinking into someone's psyche at a personal level? Given the need for a public criterion, the only possible way is to ask others to sink empathetically

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.

into the patient's psyche as well. Then two or more professionals can share notes and if they agree about nature of connections between two events, empathetic understanding acquires a social criterion for its identity or existence.<sup>10</sup> Without such agreed-upon empathetic

understanding, insights into a patient's psychic events remain private in Wittgenstein's sense. Empathetic understanding, like all other forms of understanding, is sustained by shared criteria or norms of a group or society.

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<sup>10</sup> See Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.