



Jaspers, Psychoanalysis, and the Contexts of Understanding

Roger Frie

Simon Fraser University, Canada

rfa11@sfu.ca

Abstract: The essay contextualizes Karl Jaspers' relationship to psychoanalysis in the changing historical and political events of his lifetime. While Jaspers was initially supportive of psychoanalysis, his critique became ever more narrow with time, to the point that his later criticisms were focused on an ossified stereotype that had little bearing on actual clinical theory or practice. I submit that Jaspers' relationship to psychoanalysis mirrors the changes in his personal and professional life, which was inalterably effected by the rise of National Socialism in Germany. Jaspers is rightly known for his principled anti-Nazi stance, particularly his role in the denazification process. At the same time, important questions can be raised about Jaspers' apparent support of the infamous Göring Institute, which excluded Jewish psychoanalysts. Jaspers' relationship to psychoanalysis appears to contain contradictions and contrasting images: a critic who is at once intellectually inclusive and reductionist, open to the breath of individual existence and increasingly narrow in his perceptions of others, and whose ideas range cross disciplines yet are dominated by the contexts of the time.

Keywords: Arendt, Hannah; Freud, Sigmund; Heidegger, Martin; Göring Institute; National Socialism; Psychoanalysis.

Introduction

Let me begin by stating how much I have enjoyed reading Matthias Bormuth's (1996) book and how appreciative I am of his scholarly work on Jaspers' critique of psychoanalysis.¹ Bormuth has done us all a service by examining a relatively neglected topic and thereby providing much insight into this chapter of philosophical history in general and Jaspers' intellectual development and relationship with psychoanalysis in particular. Psychoanalysis and philosophy teach us that understanding always occurs through the lens of our own experience. With this basic precept in mind, and

in full acknowledgement of my own perspective on the subject matter, my objective is to examine Jaspers' critique. I am one of those professionals whom Jaspers, seemingly without any hint of irony, refers to as "lost." I am, in other words, a practicing psychoanalyst (though I favor the interpersonal psychoanalytic tradition instead of a Freudian approach). Bormuth reminds us that "Jaspers' rejection of psychoanalysis is radical" and he quotes Jaspers, "I look upon every physician who takes this path as lost if he does not use the substance left in him to one day see clearly" (*LCM* 128). Well, in full honesty, I am not sure I have ever seen clearly. Nor have I ever known where the path Jaspers describes might lead. Indeed, when it comes to my professional identity, I fully admit to being lost. I came to my clinical work by way of an earlier academic career in philosophy and the history of science, having studied and written

¹ Matthias Bormuth, *Life Conduct in Modern Times: Karl Jaspers and Psychoanalysis*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2006. [Henceforth cited as *LCM*]

a good deal about Jaspers' Swiss psychiatric colleague, Ludwig Binswanger.² From there I became a clinical psychologist, then a psychoanalyst, and for much of the past fifteen years my primary academic affiliation has been in departments of psychiatry. Today, my research focuses on the topic of Germany memory related to the Holocaust. These experiences enable me to reflect on what Jaspers says and to develop a critique based on my knowledge of the profession.

Perhaps one of the most illuminating passages in Bormuth's book is when Jaspers describes the possibilities for psychological knowledge:

To get to know the individual is comparable to a sea-voyage over limitless seas to discover a continent; every landing on a shore or island will teach certain facts but the possibility of further knowledge vanishes if one maintains that here one is at the center of things; one's theories are then like so many sandbanks on which we stay fast without really winning land. [LCM 86]

Jaspers is, in effect, asking us to "hold our theories lightly" and to acknowledge that there is always more than we can know, that we need to remain open to the possibility of learning and to encounter the Other on his or her own terms. At the same time, a careful reading of Bormuth's book suggests that when it comes to the history and practice of psychoanalysis, Jaspers had difficulty following his own counsel. Jaspers' critique of psychoanalytic theory and practice becomes ever more narrow with time. In this book we encounter contrasting images of Jaspers: a critic who is both intellectually inclusive and reductionist, open to the breath of individual existence and surprisingly limited in his perceptions of others, whose ideas range across disciplines yet are thoroughly dominated by the contexts of their time.

By the 1960s, as the end of his life is approaching, Jaspers' arguments against psychoanalysis bear less on the actual practice of the psychoanalytic profession than on an outmoded stereotype. Given these observations, I might just as easily turn the tables, which is the prerogative of any critical reader, and state that where Jaspers loses me, indeed, where he himself appears to be fundamentally at sea is in the increasingly intolerant tone of his critique. Most puzzling of all is the parallel

² For example, Roger Frie, "A Hermeneutics of Exploration: The Interpretive Turn from Binswanger to Gadamer," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology* 30/2 (2010), 79-93.

Jaspers draws between psychoanalysis and National Socialism.

Historical and Political Contexts

Bormuth tells us that Jaspers, in a letter written to the German psychiatrist, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker in 1953, makes the strangest of all possible parallels between psychoanalysis and National Socialism. Referring to psychoanalysis, Jaspers states:

It is analogous to the discussions on National Socialism in 1933. "It has some good aspects, it succeeded in eliminating unemployment, [...] it effected national restoration"...As the opposing view goes, it is of the devil, and for this reason it must be rejected completely, and the appeal to the individual must be: be aware that you are dealing with the devil; you are ending up in realms in which you do not want to be. [LCM 128]

The statement baffles me; which devil is Jaspers referring to? Freud? The entire psychoanalytic profession? As any practicing psychoanalyst will admit, the profession has been called many things. Given the state of the field today, what comes immediately to mind is "out of touch," "dinosaur," "a waste of resources," but "the devil?" Well, this moniker is new to me. What is Jaspers saying, indeed, what is going on here? One cannot make sense of such statements, written a mere eight years after the end of the war and in full knowledge of the Holocaust.

It is one thing to criticize psychoanalysis, and as I will point out in a moment, I think that Jaspers makes some excellent points, particularly early on. It is quite another to converse in this manner, even if it occurs in a private rather than public correspondence. And who is Jaspers' interlocutor? As Bormuth tells us in a footnote (referring to the German psychoanalyst, Alexander Mitscherlich), von Weizsäcker was

the one to throw Freud's work, *The Future of an Illusion...* into the fire in May 1933 in the framework of book burnings organized by the National Socialists, calling it "self-glorification of doubt" and moreover feeling the necessity to knuckle under political coercion by demonstrably severing his ties to Freud. [LCM 93]

Although Freud had been awarded the esteemed Goethe Prize only three years earlier to recognize his contributions to German culture, his books were prominently and publically burned, not only by Nazis, but evidently by German intellectuals as well. From

Freud's biographer, Peter Gay, we know that Freud's response at the time was dryly ironic yet portent: "What progress we are making. In the Middle Ages they would have burned me. Now, they are content with burning my books."³ With the Nazis in control, psychoanalytic work in Germany essentially came to an end. In 1938 Austria was annexed by Nazi Germany and Freud's daughter, Anna, was arrested and detained by the Gestapo. A short time later, after paying a large ransom, Freud and his family fled for London, though personal tragedy was not averted. Three of Freud's sisters were deported in 1942 to meet their fate in the gas chambers of Treblinka.

Denounced by the Nazis a Jewish science, little remained of psychoanalysis after the infamous policy of Aryanization was implemented in 1933. Many Jewish and left-leaning psychoanalysts fled Germany in the years that followed. Others were imprisoned and murdered during the Holocaust. In 1935 the remnants of psychoanalysis were incorporated into the Göring Institute named after its founder, Matthias Göring, the nephew of the high-ranking Nazi military leader Hermann Göring. According to Bormuth, the centralization of psychotherapy in the new Goering Institute was

in Jaspers' eye a quite fortunate development, especially considering the fact that in his view the establishment of a centralized institution increased the changes of setting up a scientifically standardized psychotherapy considerably. [LCM 82]

Recognizing the questionable implications of such stance, Bormuth continues that Jaspers "did not even problematize the fact of its having been the result of political coercion demanding the fusion" (LCM 82). Perhaps even more disconcerting is the fact that Jaspers made this statement about the Goering Institute in 1955.

Much as Bormuth describes Jaspers' growing disillusionment with his intellectual hero, Max Weber, I admit that Bormuth's narrative left me feeling increasingly disillusioned with Jaspers. Perhaps this is unfair. After all, we cannot assess an esteemed intellectual such as Jaspers on the basis of a few statements from his correspondence with a colleague. I also readily admit that I do not know enough about Jaspers and this chapter in his life to stand in judgment of him. One cannot grasp what Jaspers was thinking at

the time when he made these statements. Nonetheless we can try to empathize, to put ourselves in Jaspers' place and ask what his motivation may have been for making these highly curious remarks. I believe there is some worth in doing so, and indeed, using empathy in this way goes to the heart of the psychoanalytic process.

Any attempt to empathize with Jaspers will point us to his imperiled personal situation during National Socialism and his principled political stance in the postwar years. I first learned of Jaspers through his important critique of Martin Heidegger and his long, if strained relationship to Binswanger. After 1933, Jaspers grew increasingly distant from Heidegger given the latter's embrace of Nazism. In 1937, Jaspers was removed from his philosophy professorship at the University of Heidelberg. Jaspers and his German-Jewish wife were under threat of arrest and deportation until the city of Heidelberg was captured by the Americans in 1945. After World War II Jaspers refused to exonerate Heidegger's political actions during the Nazi years. During the denazification process he recommended that Heidegger be suspended from his university teaching responsibilities. Jaspers' stance toward Heidegger appears ever more prescient as the full extent of Heidegger's anti-Semitism and support for Nazism becomes known, most recently through the publication of Heidegger's *Black Diaries*. Yet recognition of these historical facts makes Jaspers comments from this period all the more puzzling to me. I am left feeling unsettled, wondering how to make sense of it all. Being unsettled is a familiar sensation—it is something I often experience in the course of my work on German memory of the Holocaust.⁴ The ambiguity between what is said or not said, known or not known, remembered or forgotten colors much postwar German discourse on the subject. I am hesitant to draw any conclusions, but Bormuth's historical research leads me to wonder whether Jaspers' personal distaste for psychoanalysis had become so strong as to be dissociated from his principled political stance.

Later Critique of Psychoanalysis

There seems to be a closing of the ranks as it were, an inability for Jaspers to see beyond a stereotype of psychoanalysis that had become firmly lodged in his

³ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, New York: Norton 1988, p. 593.

⁴ Roger Frie, *Remembering and Forgetting: A Journey through German Memory and the Holocaust*, New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2017.

mind. Above all, Jaspers' developing viewpoint suggests an unwillingness to acknowledge facts that did not already support his image of Freudian orthodoxy. To be sure, there is much in psychoanalytic orthodoxy that is open to criticism: Freud the misogynist, whose theories of gender influenced an entire generation of analysts; Freud the empire-builder, who jealously guarded psychoanalytic doctrine; Freud the autocrat, who would have no truck with opposition; Freud the reductionist, who failed to fully demonstrate his theories. Ironically these critiques were formulated by psychoanalysts themselves as they struggled with the legacy Freud left behind. Binswanger, for example, offered a trenchant and nuanced critique of psychoanalytic reductionism. Yet he remained on cordial terms with Freud until the latter's death in 1939 and even late in life Binswanger (1957) stated that his entire career was devoted to providing psychoanalysis with a theoretical and scientific basis, free of Cartesian constraints. In other words, there is surely more to be gained by taking a critical stance towards psychoanalysis without simply dismissing it out of hand as Jaspers increasingly did.

Perhaps most importantly, and we can imagine, much to Freud's chagrin, psychoanalysis was not a singular enterprise. It grew more varied with time. Jaspers failure to engage with the contexts of post-Freudian psychoanalysis is illustrated in his dependence on Hannah Arendt's accounts, particularly of psychoanalysis in the United States. As Bormuth tells us, "Jaspers fears that psychoanalysis will exert a devastating influence on society's elite. His dread is primarily fed by reports from Hannah Arendt on its wide dissemination in North America" (LCM 134). At the same time, Bormuth points out:

It is difficult to say whether Arendt intensified Jaspers' verdicts on psychoanalysis or merely confirmed them... Arendt's influence on Jaspers' political perspective was considerable, for she supplied him with much of the information on the world which he had become quite out of tune with while leading a withdrawn existence in Basle. [LCM 137]

But even during its heyday of the 1950s and 1960s, psychoanalysis in the United States was not a monolithic entity.⁵ There was considerable controversy

⁵ See Roger Frie, "Contemporary Psychoanalysis: The Post-Cartesian Turn in Theory and Practice," in *The Wiley Handbook of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology: Methods, Approaches, and New Directions for*

within the field about what constituted psychoanalysis, what its purpose was, who might practice it and how its role and impact on society might be understood. Although the American Psychoanalytic Association and the International Psychoanalytic Association controlled the main body of institutional psychoanalysis, there were many independent institutes that challenged, if not entirely rejected mainstream Freudian and post-Freudian ideas. These challenges ranged from theories of mind, to practice techniques, human development and the expression of gender.⁶

With the benefit of hindsight, we might wonder to what extent Jaspers' understanding of psychoanalysis in the postwar period was directly influenced by Alexander Mitscherlich's attempts to reestablish the profession in Germany. Bormuth's descriptions of the interaction between Mitscherlich and Jaspers are illuminating. Following the departure in the mid-1950s of alternative psychoanalytic viewpoints represented by Binswanger and his followers,⁷ institutional psychoanalysis in Germany embraced Freudian orthodoxy with a relish that was hardly seen elsewhere. The German postwar embrace of Freud has often been seen an explicit reaction to the treatment of Freud under National Socialism before the war. The actions of psychoanalysts like von Weizsäcker provide a good illustration of this logic. Bormuth tells us that despite having thrown Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* into the flames of the Nazi bon fires, von Weizsäcker purchased Freud's collected works for the Department of Psychiatry in Heidelberg after the war (LCM 93). One can only speculate if this was a sudden conversion and change of heart or merely political expediency.

While the decimation of psychoanalysis in Nazi Germany was achieved in the space of a few years, the rebuilding process took considerably longer. The

Social Sciences, eds. Jack Martin, Jeff Sugarman, and Kathleen L. Slaney, London: John Wiley & Sons 2015, pp. 441-57.

⁶ Full disclosure: I trained at the William Alanson White Institute in New York, which was founded in 1943 by Harry Stack Sullivan and Erich Fromm and became a hotbed of psychoanalytic opposition to the Freudian mainstream.

⁷ Werner Bohleber, "The Journal *Psyche* – Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse und ihre Anwendungen: A Historical Overview," *International Forum of Psychoanalysis* 22/4 (December 2013), 199-202.

attempt to reestablish psychoanalysis and rejoin the International Psychoanalytic Association proved difficult. Mitscherlich was instrumental because he was one of the few members of the first generation who appeared untainted by any affiliation with National Socialism. Many others in the postwar psychoanalytic establishment had been complicit with the Nazis.

The confrontation with first generation German psychoanalysts who lived and worked through the Nazi period did not occur until the early 1980s, when second-generation German psychoanalysts began to ask questions and demand answers.⁸ The lack of any discussion about the Nazi period among German psychoanalysis in the intervening decades speaks not only to the inherent power of an institutional organization to silence protest, it is fundamentally a reflection of postwar German society, a period described by the German-Jewish journalist, Ralph Giordano, as Germany's second guilt.⁹ Giordano is referring to the fact that many Nazi perpetrators and their supporters lived openly and unhindered in postwar Germany, often ascending to the highest levels of politics and academia. Indeed, it was not until German psychoanalysts openly challenged the involvement of their own profession in National Socialism that German psychoanalysis was reinstated in the International Psychoanalytic Association. It is important to note that Jaspers' critique of psychoanalysis occurred before these changes in German society or psychoanalysis took place. It is also worth asking whether, or to what extent, knowledge of this process may have impacted and lessened Jaspers' critique.

Ultimately, it feels to me that Jaspers is making more out of the situation than there is. Having identified reductionist flaws in psychoanalytic theory, Jaspers turns to the institutional structure of the psychoanalytic community and imbues it with an almost hegemonic power. By expressing concern about how Freud's paradigm appealed to the societal elite, Jaspers further indicts both Freudian psychoanalysis as well as its less-direct offshoots. The particulars of psychoanalytic theory and practice seem to fall away in favor of a full-

scale rejection that becomes more ill tempered with time, a characteristic described by Mitscherlich as "frenetic disdain" (LCM 78). To my mind, Jaspers' critical stance and his avowed support of Malvin Laskey evoke the reductionist sentiments of Karl Popper whose book, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, not only labels but dismisses the works of Plato, Hegel, and Marx as wholly totalitarian.¹⁰

There is a veritable strain of suspicion and mistrust at work in Jaspers' reading of psychoanalysis, an ever more stringent perspective on a set of ideas and practices that were, in fact, fluid and dynamic, not static in nature. Even Jürgen Habermas' move away from Freud, which Bormuth points to at the end of the book (LCM 144-8), was not a rejection of psychoanalysis *per se*. Rather it might better be seen as a reflection of the changing nature of psychoanalysis itself: instead of a traditional focus on instincts and the intrapsychic mind, many psychoanalysts now study the nature of intersubjectivity and the contexts of human experience. To do so, they may turn to the works of thinkers like George Herbert Mead rather than Freud. Similarly, Bormuth mentions the well-known critique of psychoanalysis by the philosopher of science, Adolf Grünbaum (1985). Yet this forms only part of the story. The fact that Freudian psychoanalysis once claimed to be a science is surely of less interest than the fact that the Freudian underpinnings of contemporary forms of psychotherapy have survived the debunking of those scientific claims.

Conclusion

Psychoanalysis can only be rejected in the way Jaspers proposes when it is reduced to a stereotype that has little relation to a century of evolving theory and practice. While I find the history of Jaspers' interactions with psychoanalysis fascinating, they are obviously highly anachronistic when read from today's perspective. Contemporary psychoanalysis is an embattled profession—but not for the reasons Jaspers would have us believe. Rather, this state of affairs is because psychiatry and the mental health profession as a whole have radically reinvented themselves since Jaspers' day. The totalizing effect of psychoanalysis feared by Jaspers pales in comparison to the biologically grounded, psychopharmacological edifice of much current day

⁸ See Regine Locket, *Erinnern und Durcharbeiten: Zur Geschichte der Psychoanalyse und Psychotherapie im Nationalsozialismus* [Remembering and Working Through: On the History of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy in National Socialism], Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1985.

⁹ Ralph Giordano, *Die Zweite Schuld oder Von der Last Deutscher zu sein*, Hamburg: Rasch und Röhring, 1987.

¹⁰ Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944-1969.

psychiatry. Moreover, the consumerism of today's mental health profession makes Jaspers' worries seem truly quant.

Contemporary psychoanalysis is a therapeutic approach that seeks to maintain a link with mind rather than brain, nurture rather than nature, and environment rather than neuroscience. Psychoanalysis considers problems in living, not only symptom reduction; it offers a healing relationship not just a set of techniques. So what is it that compelled Jaspers to engage in this level of critique, particularly in his later

years? I certainly cannot find the answer and it seems to me that there is something unequivocally reactionary in Jaspers' stance toward psychoanalysis over time. After reading Bormuth's excellent scholarly study I found myself wondering what kind of world we would be living in today if the worries Jaspers expressed about psychoanalysis still had some merit. It would likely be a world in which the experience of the patient would be honored, rather than reduced to pathology, physiology, and pharmacology. And surely that would not be such a bad thing.