



A Tale of Missed Opportunities

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Abstract: My contribution to this forum seeks to enter a dialogue with Matthias Bormuth's important study of Karl Jaspers' critique of psychoanalysis. Bormuth's analysis can and should be read as a story of missed opportunities. First, there is the progressive narrowing of Jaspers' intellectual engagement with psychoanalysis from an early, firm, yet multifaceted rejection of Freud to what I suggest is polemical caricature in the postwar period. Second, fully acknowledging Bormuth's demonstration of the importance of Jaspers' reading of Weber for his critique of psychoanalysis, I see Jaspers as having failed to pursue Weber's political account of value pluralism as the basis for a vigorous public sphere. Finally, I see the third missed opportunity in Jaspers' failure to confront either the contradictions in Freud's project or the increasing panoply of post-Freudian psychoanalytic perspectives. In my conclusion, I pose the question of how we are to view these missed opportunities in light of the remarkable decay in the consensus surrounding the importance of psychoanalysis in recent decades.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Bormuth, Matthias; Weber, Max; Mitscherlich, Alexander; psychoanalysis; value pluralism.

Matthias Bormuth has given us a marvelous study of Karl Jaspers' sustained and evolving critique of psychoanalysis across his entire career. *Life Conduct in Modern Times* is extraordinary in the patience and discernment with which it disentangles and pursues the multiple strands of Jaspers' reservations.¹ It is also unmistakably clear about the line of march: beginning from an early, although brief and qualified, sympathy for Freud's early practice with patients presenting with hysterical symptoms, Jaspers gained increasing confidence in categorically rejecting any positive engagement with psychoanalysis. As Bormuth shows, he rejected it for at least three distinct sets of reasons:

first, on epistemological grounds; second, because he saw it as inferior to the European philosophical tradition's repertoire for self-reflection; and finally, for what he saw as its advocacy of a crude and indefensible critique of bourgeois sexual morality in the name of a this-worldly salvific doctrine of erotic liberation. By 1931, the emergence of Jaspers' own existence-philosophical concept of rigorous life-conduct then hardened this critique into what can only be called hostility. Bormuth's central and highly illuminating thesis is that Jaspers' appropriation of several of Max Weber's central principles provided the lodestar for his case against psychoanalysis. Here Bormuth gives us a rich and sophisticated reading of the three relevant, interconnected aspects of Weber's work: his sociological theory of Western modernity as the disenchantment of the world; his methodological reflections on the role of

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

values and the possibility of objectivity in social-scientific inquiry; and the conception of life-conduct Weber put forward in his so-called "Intermediate Reflections" on his studies of the world religions. Importantly, Bormuth is very much alive to the ways in which Jaspers may have misread Weber. Finally, his reading shows us how Jaspers later deployed his critique—in effect, an outright rejection—of psychoanalysis in later debates with Alexander Mitscherlich, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, and others who sought to give psychoanalytic concepts and culture a central place in the public life of the postwar Federal Republic.

Overall, Bormuth has given us an exemplary intellectual history of this important chapter in Jaspers' intellectual biography. His account is both discerning and scrupulously even-handed. So even-handed, in fact, that I found myself wondering how he would have us evaluate this extended episode in Jaspers' intellectual biography. Above and beyond the analytical dissections, it is not clear whether there is a narrative emplotment, a story line. My comments are intended to suggest one. In what follows, I want to argue that in several ways we should read Bormuth's narrative as a tale of missed opportunities, and I would like to ask whether or not he, too, sees it in these terms.

There is, first, the remarkably stubborn persistence with which Jaspers upheld the rejection of psychoanalysis that was codified by the time of his *Zur geistigen Situation der Zeit*, published in 1931.² As Bormuth tells us, an exasperated Mitscherlich—with whom Jaspers maintained a sometimes close and respectful personal relationship—later characterized this rejection as "frenetic disdain" (LCM 78). One of the things that Bormuth's study makes clear to us is that this rejection, though persistent, evolved over the course of his intellectual career. In his early engagement, Jaspers' critique was differentiated and multifaceted; but with the passage of time, there was a hardening of the fronts, leading to what can only be called a replacement of intellectual engagement with polemical caricature. What else are we to make of his postwar condemnation of psychoanalysis as being the moral and intellectual equivalent of a cluster of totalitarian ideologies that includes race theory—not even stopping short of an analogy with National Socialism (LCM 128)? In his contribution to this forum, our colleague Roger Frie has cited the relevant passages and posed penetrating

questions about the oddness of this comparison.³ Perhaps even more puzzling, Jaspers made these comparisons in a broader postwar conjuncture when, as in *Die Schuldfrage*,⁴ he was arguing for a public coming to terms with the past—just as, in their own, very different ways, Mitscherlich, Adorno, and others would come to do in the 1950s. One can only imagine a productive dialogue among the existence-philosophical, social-psychoanalytic, and critical-theoretical approaches to this task. Jaspers declined this dialogue, retreating instead into the construction of a *Feindbild* of psychoanalysis. It does not help the case that Jaspers originally presented some of his denunciations of psychoanalysis in forums supported by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which later turned out to have been funded by the CIA (LCM 135). This is the first sense in which I see the hardening of the fronts as a story of missed opportunities.

A second lost opportunity concerns Jaspers' reading and appropriation of Weber. With Weber's crucial influence, we touch on the heart of Bormuth's argument; most of chapters three and four are devoted to an exposition of the Weberian ideas that became so fundamental to Jaspers' critique. Again, I want to emphasize the discernment with which Bormuth expounds both Weber's position itself and the specific way that Jaspers interpreted it—including what he failed to understand about it.⁵ One of Bormuth's central findings is that Jaspers simply overlooked an important, radical shift in Weber's later work: his turn toward a consequential value pluralism, and moreover one that argued not only for a scientifically irresolvable plurality of ultimate values in the world but even for the possibility of a conflict of such values within the individual her-or himself. (It is worth considering that here Weber may at least in part have been following the lead of his sociology colleague, Georg Simmel.) This was a place to which Jaspers could not and did not follow Weber. However, I would contend that Weber drew implications from radical value pluralism

² Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1951.

³ Roger Frie, "Jaspers, Psychoanalysis, and the Contexts of Understanding," *Existenz* 10/2 (Fall 2015), 11-16.

⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000.

⁵ Bormuth makes intriguing observations about the specifically Protestant character of the ethical rigorism they shared (LCM 51), and I would have loved to hear more about this.

which went beyond the possibility of conflicts within the individual. Bormuth's interpretation of Weber leans heavily on those moments of his later thought which imply that in modernity, the search for the fulfillment of ultimate values has retreated from the public sphere into the intimacy of the aesthetic and erotic private spheres; the economic and political spheres are governed by the instrumental logic of Weber's *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (better known in English translation as the "iron cage"). This is no doubt part of Weber's vision, which he articulated particularly clearly in the famous conclusion to the *Protestant Ethic* and in the "Intermediate Reflections."⁶ But this reading of Weber, which I believe Jaspers and Bormuth share, still omits something: the compelling vision of politics as a conflict of values in the public sphere more generally, which Weber most vigorously and famously presented in "Politics as a Vocation."⁷ While I am not a Jaspers scholar and cannot speak to whether he was familiar with this text—and, if so, how he read it—we do know from the testimony of many in the intellectual generation after Weber that it was widely known and highly controversial. Here lies the core of the second missed opportunity, having to do with the role of value conflict in the public sphere. As Bormuth relates, Karl Löwith criticized Jaspers in 1940 for the "main apolitical tenet" of *Man in the Modern Age*, reproaching existence philosophy for what Bormuth himself characterizes as its "privatizing tendencies" (LCM 51). But had Jaspers read the later Weber less selectively, he would have confronted the possibility that precisely the polytheism of the modern age demands a reading of the public sphere as a contestatory realm where conflicting values collide and engage. That is, Jaspers' reading of Weber was even more selective than Bormuth indicates. And on this point, Jaspers' selectivity was very much to his own detriment. By missing this point in Weber, it may be that Jaspers' missed an opportunity to enrich

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, transl. Stephen Kalberg, New York: Routledge 2012, pp. 123-4. See also, Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, pp. 323-59. The original German title, *Zwischenbetrachtung*, is also translated as "Intermediate Reflections."

⁷ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, New York: Oxford University Press 1946, pp. 77-128.

his own conception of the public sphere.

Finally, there is the matter of what I would call Jaspers' failure to perceive the internal contradictions of psychoanalysis and its panoply of varieties. As I have already emphasized, Bormuth rightly draws our attention to the several strands in Jaspers' critique. Jaspers' case was multifaceted. But his overall vision of the object of his critique can only be characterized as monolithic. This is curious, because Freud himself—let alone the psychoanalytic movement and its offshoots—was richly complex and diverse. To begin with, there are Freud's own confusions about the explanatory and hermeneutic dimensions of psychoanalysis. In the so-called "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895),⁸ Freud attempted to force his own insights into a positivist, mechanistic framework despite the fact that his own work was in the process of vastly expanding the realm of what we must construe as meaningful behavior. Indeed, throughout his career, Freud wrestled with the consequences of his refusal to give up his unreflective positivism. The historian Gerald Izenberg shows that Ludwig Binswanger and others noticed this central contradiction in Freud's self-understanding and exploited it to create varieties of a psychoanalytically-informed existential therapy.⁹ The broader point was made by Jürgen Habermas, who has argued Freud was prone to what he called a "scientific self-misunderstanding";¹⁰ however, this did not make his insights worthless—though it did entail that those insights could be made more productive in a different, non-positivist framework. If making such distinctions was possible, and often productive, for others starting from the general premises of an existence-philosophical approach, then why does Jaspers appear to be so

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 1, transl. and ed. James Strachey London: The Hogarth Press 1966, pp. 295-343. The title of the essay was added by the editors of the Standard Edition rather than by Freud himself, who left the piece untitled.

⁹ Gerald N. Izenberg, *The Existentialist Critique of Freud: The Crisis of Autonomy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, "The Scientific Self-Misunderstanding of Metapsychology," in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, transl. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press 1971, pp. 246-73, here p. 246.

persistently uninterested in noticing them?

The puzzle only becomes more perplexing when one attends to the fact that, despite Freud's best efforts, the psychoanalytic and (if you will pardon the coinage) para-psychoanalytic movements were already so diverse by the time that Jaspers was formulating the main arguments of his Weber-inspired critique. One wonders whether there is evidence of Jaspers' response to Binswanger, who figures only briefly in Bormuth's book (*LCM* 78). The problem is more general, though: could Jaspers have failed to notice the emergence of varieties of psychoanalysis that were not prone to the often-cogent objections he had raised? Bormuth shows us that Jaspers was curiously fixated on one early instantiation of psychoanalysis, propounded by Otto Gross and his circle (*LCM* 74-5). One understands why, for biographical and generational reasons, Weber may have fastened on Gross as revealing something essential about psychoanalysis. And of course, Weber did not live to read interwar works by Freud, such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*,¹¹ which left no room for doubt that Freud himself had any sympathy with pleas for erotic liberation based on the authority of psychoanalysis. Bormuth notes that it is unlikely that Jaspers ever read that book. But he also observes, quite trenchantly, that one of Freud's texts that was foundational for Jaspers' interpretation already left no room for illusions about the liberation of the passions.¹² Here I do not want to

put too much weight on the counterfactual question I might seem to be implying — "what might have changed if Jaspers had noticed these things?" — but rather to emphasize what I cannot help but call Jaspers' blinkered view of the varieties of psychoanalysis. Taken together with his failure to notice and exploit the possibilities created by the positivistic self-misunderstanding of some psychoanalysts, we have what I would call the third missed opportunity in Jaspers' encounter and critique.

In conclusion, let me observe that these missed opportunities are all the more poignant given the contrast between the current state of psychoanalysis and the one that Jaspers perceived, or feared. Jaspers worried that psychoanalysis would take on — or, indeed, had already achieved — an almost hegemonic position in the culture of German elites in the postwar Federal Republic. In fact, Bormuth makes this point with all desirable clarity in chapters seven and eight. But from a present-day perspective, the story turns out to have had quite a different ending. These days, psychoanalysis is nothing if not diverse, fractured, and on the defensive. One may legitimately wonder whether psychoanalytic culture ever really played such a large role in the intellectual field of the Federal Republic in the 1950s and 1960s. But even if it did, particularly in some quarters, it has now been quite thoroughly dethroned. My final question for Bormuth, then, is whether he thinks the disarray of contemporary psychoanalysis vindicates Jaspers' critique — to be blunt, that psychoanalysis has gotten its comeuppance — or whether it tells us that Jaspers simply overestimated the threat it allegedly posed, particularly in the postwar period.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, transl. Joan Riviere, London: Hogarth Press, 1930.

¹² Bormuth (*LCM* 75) refers to Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, London: Allen, 1923.