



On the Importance of Applying Jaspers' Concept of Understanding in Psychopathology

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Abstract: In times of increasing recognition of mental health challenges along with significant progress in neuroscientific research, applying Karl Jaspers' usage of the concept "understanding" to the field of psychopathology promotes a pivotal tool that allows for a closer examination of biological and interpretative psychiatry. Jaspers has given to this concept a central, flexible, and encompassing position within the science of psychopathology in an effort of upholding the humanity of psychiatric patients.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; *General Psychopathology*; understanding; causality; meaningful connections; phenomenology; behavioral expression; empathy; interpretation.

Karl Jaspers' scholarly contributions to the description and operationalization of psychopathology has transcended time and guided generations of psychiatrists in providing effective care to their patients. The psychopathological world challenges the clinical observer with the experience of facts that are difficult to understand, since these experiences deviate from the norm. It proves to be difficult while at the same time being important to assess and disentangle as to what extent the depth of patients' experiences is related to mental "illness as to themselves as individuals with their own historical truth."¹ In this light, Jaspers has formulated the fundamental distinction between the causal clarification of mental disease and the understanding

of expressions that reflect psychic phenomena. In order to identify the causal origins of a mental illness, both the rigorous methods used in the natural sciences and an objective demonstration of the connections between psychic events by applying the ruling principles of quantification for events "which by their very nature have to remain qualitative" (*GP* 302). Importantly, arguing for this stance Jaspers makes room for a biological hypothesis regarding mental diseases, although given the state of knowledge in the natural sciences of his time, he could offer only limited support to this hypothesis.

Jaspers explains that an understanding of the mental meanings and connections that lead to determinate behavioral expressions requires careful observation of the objectively visible phenomena. Fundamentally, such observation allows for a self-evident appraisal of observed behaviors and, eventually, for an interpretation

¹ Karl Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, transl. J. Hoenig and Marian W. Hamilton, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 1963, p. 309. [Henceforth cited as *GP*]

according to the clinician's inner representations of the patient's experiences (GP 27). Comprehending how psychic events emerge following each other requires to recognize the meaningful genesis of phenomenological experiences which in and by itself relies considerably on empathy. However, empathy can interfere with understanding, due to the observer's preconditioned psychological appraisal. The psychopathologist can transcend this limitation by accepting further existential potentialities and by being constantly aware that this mode of understanding is "the *midway* between the objective facts...and the spontaneous freedom of Existence itself" (GP 311). The greatest value of applying Jaspers' conceptualization of understanding to psychopathology is the relevance of the "intermediate status of our understanding" (GP 312). Jaspers advises to keep the balance between a meaningful psychology and the unlimited possibilities of human selfhood. One can reach this balance following what Jaspers calls "hermeneutic round" (GP 356), which is a movement that eventually completes the understanding of the person, including the psychopathologic event under consideration. Despite being extremely important for psychopathology, this mode of understanding "cannot be methodically developed" (GP 256) and generalized; it is and must remain specifically tailored to the individual.

Jaspers develops a dual conceptualization of understanding psychopathology by recognizing different levels of understanding. The complexity of mental illness is more approachable when adopting this multiaxial approach with a concomitant awareness of all the modalities of understanding psychological and psychiatric situations. The behavioral expression is only one dimension of it and can only be understood in relation to what does not become expression of a mental illness (GP 312). Attempting to understand the patient's reasoning serves psychopathology in so far as it fosters a desire to maintain openness and explore its limits and the inherited capacity of existential becoming. By way of describing the duality of the psychopathologist's stringent desire to elucidate the causal origin of mental illness (*Erklären*), but also by way of understanding the individual suffering resulting from the mental illness as a whole (*Verstehen*), Jaspers has reconciled the interpretative and the biological strands of psychiatry. In the preface to the first edition of his *General Psychopathology*, Jaspers offered a model to psychiatrists by aiming to "analyse and think in psychopathological terms" (GP x). In this issue, prominent scholars from different areas of specialization have integrated Jaspers' conceptualization of understanding into their work. Their remarkable contributions to our conference have decisively enriched this field.