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UNDERSTANDING AND JASPERS: NATURALIZING THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PSYCHIATRY

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ABSTRACT

In General Psychopathology (1997) Jaspers utilizes phenomenology as a method for investigating "individual psychic experience". investigating psychopathology, Jaspers claims that phenomenology aims at describing, presenting and classifying the psychic states of those with mental illness. However, Jaspers thinks we can know the psyche only via patient reports. He also believes that phenomenology should be "presuppositionless" and should not include what he calls "objective phenomena". This paper considers the following, resulting questions. First, what does he mean by "objective" phenomena? Secondly, if the aim of phenomenology is to grasp the first person experience of a patient, is it obvious that "objective" methods should not play a role? Third: what assumptions about the nature of first person experience are revealed by Jaspers's characterisation of phenomenology, empathy and subjective phenomena? This article will show how we can naturalize the view of mental predicates and phenomenology that is to be found in Jaspers.

Keywords: phenomenology, Karl Jaspers, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, psychiatry, empathy

It seems like something of an understatement to describe Karl Jaspers as a central figure in the philosophy of psychiatry. His contribution to how we explain and understand psychopathology is fundamental. Furthermore, his most important insights, as published in *General Psychopathology* (Jaspers 1997 [1913]) occurred at a time, and in response to, groundbreaking discoveries in the biological understanding of the mind and mental illness by Broca and Wernicke, and the growing influence of the Freudian movement.

For anyone with a background in the philosophy of mind, the distinctions that Jaspers draws appear to prefigure distinctions present in later philosophical discussions. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the similarity between Jaspers's discussion of explanation and understanding and Davidson's seminal discussion of anomalous monism (1963 and 2001). While this distinction has aged well and is relevant to contemporary philosophy of psychiatry, some of the other distinctions Jaspers draws are more problematic. In particular, I will argue that his distinction between subjective and objective phenomena has aged less well and is something that we should now

reject. Nonetheless, the tensions within *General Psychopathology* where he discusses this distinction can be explained if we take into account the influence of Husserl upon Jaspers. In any case, I will suggest that we should read past this difficulty in Jaspers and continue to draw on the great insights he has into psychopathology. While he is often taken to be the preeminent phenomenologist of psychiatry, we need not follow him slavishly about how we work towards understanding the experiences of those who are mentally unwell.

1. Jaspers and phenomenology

Jaspers is, perhaps, most strongly associated with emphasizing the importance of phenomenology in psychiatry and continues to be considered an authoritative figure (Gupta 2002). His description and classification of the phenomenology of psychopathology continues to stand above anything written since and it should be read by all who are interested in understanding mental illness from the patient's perspective. While his phenomenological description and classification is without peer, the way that he characterizes phenomenology is, to some degree, at odds with how many now think of the mind and mental content.

In *General Psychopathology* (1997) Jaspers utilizes phenomenology as a method for investigating "individual psychic experience" which is a narrower sense than that used by Husserl and Hegel (1997, 55). When investigating psychopathology, Jaspers claims that phenomenology has the following tasks:

...it *gives a concrete description* of the psychic states which patients actually experience and *presents* them for observation. It reviews the inter-relations of these, *delineates* them as sharply as possible, differentiates them and creates a suitable terminology. (1997, 55)

These three tasks sit easily alongside the methods of Brentano (1995) and Husserl (1998) and it is hard to deny that these are reasonable aims for phenomenology. However, matters become more complicated when we consider how it is that Jaspers thinks we can know individual psychic experience. He believes that the boundaries of the phenomenological should be drawn around those approaches that involve empathy and what he calls the "presuppositionless stance" and should not include what he calls "objective phenomena".

This position raises a number of questions. First, what does he mean by "objective" phenomena? Secondly, if the aim of phenomenology is to grasp first person experience, or in a psychiatric context, the first person experience of a patient, is it obvious that "objective" methods should not play a role? Third, what assumptions about the nature of first person experience are revealed by Jaspers's characterisation of phenomenology, empathy and subjective phenomena? To delve deeper into these questions we must understand the influence that Husserl had upon Jaspers's conception of phenomenology.

2. Jaspers, phenomenology and the presuppositionless stance

Jaspers says that when we attempt to describe individual psychic experience we must put to one side preconceptions about the nature of the patient's mental illness. This is not restricted to views about the cause or nature of a mental illness but also the way in the patient's experience might fit together as a meaningful whole.

We are not concerned at this stage with connections nor with the patient's experiences as a whole and certainly not with any subsidiary speculations, fundamental theory or basic postulates. We confine description solely to the things that are present to the patient's consciousness. Anything which is not a conscious datum is for the present non-existent. Conventional theories, psychological constructions, interpretations and evaluations must be left aside. (1997, 56)

The aim here is to arrive at an account of the patient's experience that is free from presuppositions about the meaning or structure of their experience. In other words, to find a pure description of what the patient's experience is like to them.

The nature and extent of Husserl's influence upon Jaspers is disputed. Some argue that we should interpret Jaspers in the light of Husserl's earlier phenomenology (Wiggins and Schwartz 1997). Others think that we should not overplay the significance of Husserl's influence (Walker 1994). However, the way that Jaspers requires us to put theoretical presuppositions to one side is very similar to how Husserl thinks we should put the natural attitude to one side when doing phenomenology. Husserl says:

We put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude; we parenthesize everything which that positing encompasses with respect to being... Thus I exclude all sciences relating to the natural world no matter how firmly they stand there for me, no matter how much I admire them. (1998, 61)

While in one way this appears to be an adaptation of Descartes's method in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1911 [1642]), Husserl is not putting theoretical considerations "out of action" in order that we can arrive at certain knowledge. Instead, his aim is to find a method for "pure phenomenology", i.e. a method for describing and classifying first person experience that is not cluttered by metaphysical and scientific preconceptions. Husserl saw himself as engaged in a similar exercise to Brentano who thought that we could have a scientific approach to examining first person experience (1995).

The similarity with Jaspers on this methodological point is striking: like Husserl he thinks we must put all theoretical considerations to one side. Of course, Husserl's methodological stance is questionable and while he would argue that the theoretical terms that he introduces, such as *hyle* and *noema*, are derived from an analysis of first person experience whether or not this is possible is debatable.

These controversies aside, what should we make of the way that Jaspers reapplies this method to the phenomenology of psychopathology? Given that his motivation is to give a complete and unified account of psychopathology, his broader project is fundamentally different to that of other phenomenologists such as Brentano and Husserl. For Jaspers a much more pressing issue is to find a way of incorporating the lived psychic experience of those with mental illness within a broader account of psychopathology and whether this should require putting theoretical considerations to one side is less clear. It might be that this is important because it will be an antidote to the over theorizing and unjustifiable reification that Jaspers identifies in Freud (1959, 537-40). In essence, Jaspers objects to Freud because he pretends to have discovered explanations of psychopathology when all that he really does is to generate new interpretations or understanding. It might also be that by carving out a role of this kind for phenomenology it helps Jaspers to reinforce the point that there is an important domain that is neglected by overly reductionist accounts of the neurological basis of mental illness (see his comments on Wernicke; 1959, 534-7). In essence, Jaspers objects to Wernicke's overly optimistic view that we are on the verge of discovering explanations that will negate our need to understand psychopathology.

While putting to one side theoretical considerations might make sense for these reasons, the restricted methods that he thinks he should use when investigating the psychic life of patients are hard to justify. In particular his insistence that we must equate phenomenology only with those methods that enable us to access "subjective phenomena" implies a degree of privacy about mental states that doesn't sit well with the view that meaningful mental states are answerable to more general, potentially public, constraints. In the next section, I will explain what Jaspers meant by subjective and objective phenomena and the taxonomy of the psyche life that results.

3. Subjective and objective phenomena

The first part of *General Psychopathology* discusses "Individual Psychic Phenomena". This is broken down into four chapters: the patient's subjective experiences, objective performances, somatic accompaniments and meaningful objective phenomena. Of these, the patient's subjective experiences are considered "subjective" and the last three "objective".

While Jaspers thinks that subjective psychic phenomena are the proper domain of phenomenology: what are the objective phenomena of psychic life? When describing these "objective" manifestations he says:

Psychic life as such is not an object. It becomes an object to us through that which makes it perceptible in the world, the accompanying somatic phenomena, meaningful gestures, behaviour and actions. It is further manifested through communication in the form of speech. It says what it means and thinks and it produces works. These demonstrable phenomena

present us with the effects of the psyche. We either perceive it in these phenomena directly or at least deduce its existence from them: *the psyche* itself does *not* become *an object*. We are aware of it as conscious experience in ourselves and we represent the experience of others to ourselves as familiar. (1997, 155)

This passage is difficult and perhaps contradictory. When he says that psychic life is not an object but can become an object via one of the objective manifestations this seems to imply that the psyche becomes observable because it is embodied in these activities. However, he clouds the issue by saying that these phenomena can only provide us with evidence about the psyche's effects. So, which is it? Are these genuinely manifestations of the psyche or signs of its effects?

This becomes even less clear when he says that we can perceive the psyche directly in objective manifestations or deduce its presence but never perceive the psyche as an object in these manifestations. If we can perceive the psyche in objective manifestations why doesn't this amount to seeing the psyche as an object in these manifestations?

It's worth bearing in mind that when Jaspers uses the term "object" in this context he means "intentional object" in a sense similar to that used by Brentano and Husserl whereby all mental phenomena are characterized by the existence in a mental act of an intentional object. Given this, it's even more puzzling that he thinks we see the psyche at work in objective manifestations but can't see it as an intentional object.

As I have already suggested the tension in this passage and elsewhere in *General Psychopathology* is due in part to Jaspers wanting to preserve an essential role for the patient's experience in psychopathology, but is also due to the presuppositionless stance and a view about the nature of sense and the meaning of mental states that he acquired from Husserl and Frege. First, I will consider some of Jaspers's remarks about how we can understand subjective experience.

4. Empathy

If phenomenology involves describing, presenting and classifying subjective psychic experience how can this be achieved in any way apart from in the first person? For other phenomenologists this is not a problem because it is possible for them to proceed by analysing the structure of their own experience. However, given that Jaspers is interested in the phenomenology of mental illness, how is it possible to access subjective psychic experience? His answer is that we elicit descriptions from patients about their symptoms. While these can be more or less fallible depending upon the patient, their account of their illness can provide a means by which we can empathize in order to gain access to the patient's experience of mental illness. Jaspers would consider a patient's description itself as an objective manifestation of the psyche, the step to grasping subjective experience is the empathic, psychological leap to what this must be like for that patient. For example, Jaspers uses Dr Schrebers'

account of his delusions to illustrate the nature of schizophrenic experience (1988). While Schrebers' writings are themselves objective manifestations, they can enable us to make the empathic leap to what life must have been like for him.

Thus, empathy and how we access subjective psychological experience is, at one level, intuitive and not deeply mysterious. Jaspers draws a further distinction between different kinds of understanding, which appears to rest upon his prior commitment to the presuppositionless stance. He distinguishes rational and empathic understanding.

Rational understanding always leads to a statement that the psychic content was simply a rational connection, understandable without the help of any psychology. Empathic understanding, on the other hand, always leads directly into the psychic connection itself. Rational understanding is merely an aid to psychology, empathic understanding brings us to psychology itself. (1997, 304)

For Jaspers, rationality can help us understand the psychic life of another agent. For example, someone who gets up from desk at which they are working and opens a window might be understood as having just "opened the window so as to let in some fresh air". Given the action they have just performed this end makes sense on the basis of what a rational agent would do in that situation if they were too hot and needed some fresh air. However, according to Jaspers, while this is an important aid in figuring out the psychic experience that an agent should or is likely to have, given rationality and a particular state of affairs, this doesn't provide us evidence about the actual psychic state of that person. For Jaspers, it's only when we are given a first person description by the patient that we can, via empathy, understand the psychology of that patient.

This distinction seems quite plausible, given his view about the way in which we can know the psyche. If we cannot be directly aware of the psyche in its objective manifestations then there is always an open question about any method apart from the first person report of the patient. In cases where we infer the experience that a patient must have, irrespective of how compelling the rational connection appears, the truth about the patient's actual psychic experience can only be known by them.

The question remains: is Jaspers right to insist that we can only directly access the psyche via his conception of phenomenology? Answering this question involves stepping back into broader philosophical debates that shaped Jaspers's view about the boundaries of the psyche.

5. Husserl, Frege and psychologism

As I have already mentioned there are many places in *General Psychopathology* where the influence of Husserl on Jaspers is clear to see. One place where this influence

may be less obvious but perhaps more significant is in the view of mental content that is present in Husserl and implicit in Jaspers. Husserl thought that all intentional mental acts involve the mediating action of ideal content which enables mental acts to be meaningful mental acts. His term for this ideal content is the *noema* and it mediates the intentionality of consciousness.

Husserl's concept of the *noema* is not identical with Frege's notion of "sense": for Husserl, noematic content is immanent in all intentional mental content while sense is a property of language. Yet there are some interesting similarities between the concepts. In "Sense and Reference" (1948) Frege argued that a proposition's sense is sufficient for the proposition to be meaningful. This explains how mythical entities such as the winged horse "Pegasus" can be meaningfully spoken about, without the term referring to anything. Distinguishing sense from reference meant that Frege could accommodate the referential opacity of language. For example, it is possible to refer to the same object (the planet Venus) with two distinct senses (the evening star and the morning star) and not realize there is only referent. For Husserl, the *noema* corresponding to evening star and morning star enables us to think of these objects as distinct, while that in fact refer to the same object.

There are historical connections between the two thinkers too. Husserl's first book was called *Philosophie der Arithmetik* and it defends a psychologistic theory of mathematics. "Psychologism" in this context refers to any theory that explains to explain logic, epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics via empirical psychology. Frege wrote a review of the *Philosophie of Arithmetik* that has been described as "highly critical" and "often sarcastic" (Mohanty 1982). Following the publication of this work Husserl revised his position, opting for the view that mathematical concepts are general, logical categories. Mohanty argues that Husserl had already begun to revise his position prior to Frege's review, so it's not possible to state that Frege was wholly responsible for Husserl revising his psychologism. However, it is clear that they corresponded and shared views about the necessarily general and antipsychologistic nature of meaning or sense.

In *Ideas* (1998, [1913]) Husserl demonstrates how the general, logical nature of the *noema* enables consciousness to be aware of different aspects of the same object over a period of time. He says

Perception, for example, has its noema, most basically its perceptual sense, i.e., the *perceived* as *perceived*. Similarly, the current case of remembering has its *remembered* as *remembered*, just as its <remembered>, precisely as it is "meant," "intended to" in <the remembering>; again, the judging has the judged as judged, liking has the liked as liked, and so forth. In every case the noematic correlate, which is called "sense" here (in a very extended signification) is to be taken precisely as it inheres "immanently" in the mental process of perceiving, of judging, of liking; and so forth; that is, just as it is offered to us when we inquire purely into this mental process itself. (1998, 214)

As Mohanty describes psychologism about mathematics is the view that "... the sense of the fundamental concepts of mathematics are sought to be clarified by tracing them back to their origin in intuitive presentations, certain acts of abstraction and combination, and reflection on these acts." (1982, 21)

A puzzle that Husserl does not address is the ontology of noematic content. While it enables him, like Frege, to solve a number of problems such as referential opacity, it raises other questions about how consciousness comes to be mediated by the *noema*. While describing noematic content in this way solves the logical problem of how it is that we are able to think or speak of something and know that another person can think or speak of the same thing it raises a worry about the origin of this idealized conceptual content. Husserl does not address this problem and it matters because of the implications that it has for the meaning of mental predicates. The work of the later Wittgenstein has shaped the way that we now view meaning and his social account of meaning provides a means for us to "naturalize" the ideal content of Husserl, Frege and Jaspers.

6. Wittgenstein, mental events and naturalizing concepts

According to Husserl and Jaspers, being conscious of a mental event involves the mediation of noematic content. Given the importance of others being able to understand what we mean when we use mental predicates such as "pain", "red" or "sad" the meaning of these concepts must be accessible by other agents. The psychologistic explanation (that Frege and Husserl reject) is that the meaning of these concepts is fixed by way of comparison with an individual's experience of these mental events. The problem with this kind of explanation is that makes it very hard to see how it is that we can use these concepts meaningfully if their meaning is determined by something essentially private. In order for mental predicates to be meaningful, their meaning must be grounded in a domain accessible by other persons: an idea that has been called "a publicity constraint".²

It might be objected that mental predicates are meaningful because we are organisms of the same kind and are therefore likely to have similar kinds of experience when presented with the same stimuli. However, even if were the case, it falls into the same psychologistic trap that Frege and Husserl were at pains to avoid: we could not know how to use a concept correctly if all that we have to guide us is our subjective experience.

In his later work Wittgenstein argues for the grounding of meaning in language games. In the *Philosophical Investigations* he says

For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (Wittgenstein 1989 [1953], 430)

So, on a "naturalised" account of language, the ontology of meaning is its use in ordinary language. The use of a word in language depends upon the rules implicit in that language game. Therefore grasping the meaning of a term involves grasping the rules for the application of that term. This suggests that we come to know the meaning of mental

 $^{^2}$ $\,$ Along with Grant Gillett, I have defended the importance of the publicity requirement elsewhere in more depth. (Gillett and McMillan 2001, 99-100)

predicates by grasping the rules that govern their use in language. So, we come to know the meaning of terms like "sad" after mastering the use of this concept in linguistic contexts where it is relevant. The paragraphs in the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein discusses the "beetle in the box" present his views about the impossibility of a private language for the meaning of mental predicates.

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means – must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Now someone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case — Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all; not even as a something: for the box might even be empty. No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. (Wittgenstein 1989 [1953], 293)

The reason why Jaspers thinks we must rely upon patient descriptions of their mental illnesses and empathy is because the psyche is private and cannot be accessed via objective phenomena. If Wittgenstein is right then the problem of accessing subjective phenomena is harder than Jaspers thinks: the mental predicates that a patient uses to describe their mental illness get their meaning from their use in language and are essentially objective phenomena. Of course Jaspers describes patient self reports as objective phenomena and might also say that this is why empathy is needed: we use patient descriptions as an, albeit imperfect, way to grasp what experience is like for another person. However, Wittgenstein's point is deeper than this: if the meaning of mental predicates is grounded in public or in Jaspers's terms "objective" phenomena then private mental states, whatever they might be, cannot be meaningful because they cannot have general conditions for grasping the relevant concept.

While, this makes the idea of a subjective psyche mysterious, it isn't yet a problem for Jaspers's subjective/objective distinction: it could still be the case that the psyche is essentially subjective. However there is a deeper problem that emerges if we follow Wittgenstein's line of thought through to some of his observations about the mind in *Zettel*.

Look into someone else's face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular shade of consciousness. You can see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor and so on.

Consciousness is as clear in his face and behaviour as it is in my own case. (Wittgenstein 1967, 220-1)

While these claims are informed by his views on the meaning of mental predicates and the private language argument, in *Zettel*, Wittgenstein extends this thought and is making, what is in effect a phenomenological point. If we take the private language argument seriously then we either think that the psyche can be directly and objectively observed or we think that it is subjective and something, to quote proposition 7 of the *Tractatus* "Where (or of what) one cannot speak, one must pass over in silence." (2001). The latter option cannot be right because, as Wittgenstein notes, it is an ordinary part of our interaction with other persons to be directly and immediately aware of them as other persons. In ordinary human life we are directly and objectively acquainted with the psyche.

7. Naturalizing the phenomenology of psychiatry

An instance of an "objective performance" that Jaspers mentions is the psychological performance that can accompany a delusion.

A schizophrenic patient (a factory hand, who later became a policeman) experiences typical passivity phenomena; there are movements of his limbs and he hears voices. He thinks of remote hypnosis and telepathy. He suspects and reports someone to the police. He arranges for a private detective to make enquiries and finally convinces himself that his suspicions are unfounded. He writes: 'Since no one can have been influencing me and I am sure I am not suffering from any false perception, I have to ask who can it be? The way in which I am plagued and tortured and the hidden meaning in all these conversations and bodily movements suggest that there is some malicious supernatural being at work.' (Jaspers 1997, 196)

Jaspers thinks that understanding actions and behaviours such as these are essential in working towards an understanding of the patient's psychic life. There's no doubt that when we read about these events we don't directly observe the psyche of this man. However, if we were the private detective, or one of the other people who were directly in contact with this man we might, as Wittgenstein suggests, be directly acquainted with his delusional psyche. It might not be possible to understand why he is doing what he is without a first person account from him and Jaspers is right to insist upon the importance of this. However, this man's psyche is manifested in these actions and behaviours and it is hard to see why we shouldn't consider these as integral to understanding his experience and as part of a phenomenological method.

8. Conclusion

What does this mean for Jaspers's phenomenology of psychiatry and *General Psychopathology*? My main aim in this paper has not been to show that Jaspers is radically mistaken about the nature of the psyche nor that his methods for understanding the mentally unwell are misguided. Instead, I hope that by showing how we can broaden the concept of what is to count as a phenomenology, we can re-

read Jaspers and not pay too much attention to some of the distinctions and claims that are problematic now. The presuppositionless stance can be seen as an unhelpful relic of Husserl's phenomenology and the objective/subjective distinction could be abandoned without any great loss.

Finding ways to read past those parts of Jaspers that don't work and continuing to study him matter, partly because he used to play a key role in training programmes for psychiatry and this is less common than it used to be. One of the reasons why Jaspers continues to be so important is because of his insistence that if we want to understand psychopathology we must listen carefully and openly to patients' first person accounts of their mental illnesses and use these as a springboard for empathy. While understanding mental illness is important for diagnosis and treatment, it's also fundamentally important for the practice of humane medicine. Those who have distressing and frightening mental lives need, among other things, to be understood and this is the reason why Jaspers is so important.

However it would be a mistake to include that this is the full extent of the reasons why we should continue to study him and *General Psychopathology*. His description and categorisation of psychopathology is an amazing feat and his criticisms of Freud and Wernicke continue to be as powerful as they were at the time they were written. Moreover, the way that he provides accounts of understanding and explanation mean that his role should continue to be central to an integrated view of psychopathology.

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