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Books Reconsidered

Karl Jaspers: *General Psychopathology*

To begin with, a few facts. Karl Jaspers' *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (*General Psychopathology*) was first published in 1913 (1). The author was then barely 30 years of age, working as a physician in the psychiatric hospital at Heidelberg. Two years later he moved away from medicine towards first psychology and then philosophy, the field in which he was to emerge as one of the outstanding figures of the twentieth century. He continued, however, to retain an interest in psychopathology, revising and expanding his book in several later editions. Within the German-speaking world it was at once recognized by leading psychiatrists as a unique achievement, a mountainous landmark in the history of the subject. If Jaspers' reputation was to decline in Germany between the two world wars, this is attributable chiefly to his outspoken, uncompromising resistance to national socialism. Philosophy for him was a public as well as a private concern, and it was his courageous political stand which led Hannah Arendt to describe him as a contemporary successor of Immanuel Kant.

Here, then, was a rare bonus for psychiatry. One of the foremost thinkers of the day, a trained physician, had spent a long enough period in the practice of the subject to write a major volume on its foundations. Nonetheless, half a century was to elapse before an English version appeared (2), during which time countless inferior books had been translated from the same language. With some exceptions, furthermore, its reception in the anglophonic countries has been respectful rather than enthusiastic, and in some quarters downright hostile. Here, for example, is the verdict of one influential British textbook:

> "It is all over-simplified and though the phenomenology of psychiatric illness is described with great accuracy and detail, Jaspers fails to see that much of it is dependent on the institutional milieu in which the patients then lived. He therefore is unaware of some of the meaningful links, and 'real causes' like genetics which were considered proven at the time the first edition appeared are no longer tenable. This work has however greatly influenced German psychiatric thinking and some who are unhappy over the logical inconsistencies of Freudian psychopathology or who would wish to subscribe to anything but Freud will find in Jaspers an adequate intellectual exercise. It will not help towards an apparent understanding of the apparent illogicalities and contradictions of emotionally toned behaviour and is therefore very dated and out of touch with modern advances in psychiatry".

As a former co-examiner of the author of this egregious assessment I can testify to its impact on would-be members of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

There would seem to be three principal reasons for the luke-warm response to the anglicization of *General Psychopathology*. In the first place, it is not an easy work to read, concentrated in argument and diffuse in form, difficult enough in the original German and often understandably opaque in another language despite the heroic efforts of the translators who were faced with what the late Professor E. W. Anderson acknowledged as "the difficulty and at times impossibility of rendering the author's subtle thought into concise and comprehensible English". Without persuasive advocates it was never likely to appeal to a wide readership.

A second obstacle to the ready acceptance of the text is embedded in the passage cited above. By 1963, when the English translation was published, the word 'psychopathology' had become heavily coated with psychoanalytical encrustations. In contrast, the term is employed by Jaspers in a much wider sense. Its essence, he maintains, can emerge only from a composite framework constructed with "the viewpoints and methods that belong to the world of the Humanities and Social Studies . . . since the methods of almost all the Arts and Sciences converge on psychopathology". Further, in the later editions of his book Jaspers became increasingly critical of psychoanalysis which, he concluded, is a pseudo-faith, "an enormous process of self-deception conditioned by the age we live in, which bewitches its victims, who find in it the satisfaction of their lives". Not surprisingly, so negative a verdict has not endeared his views to the majority of psychoanalysts, whose powerful influence on psychiatric theory has rarely

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been challenged directly by so informed and penetrating a critic.

But perhaps the principal difficulty posed by the book for the reader is that of fitting it into a recognizable and familiar mould. *General Psychopathology* cannot be classified as a textbook. Rather, it should be regarded as an intellectual map, a guide to a series of separate but related areas of knowledge identified in the list of contents as Individual Psychic Phenomena, Meaningful Psychic Connections, Causal Connections of Psychic Life, the Conception of the Psychic Life as a Whole, the Abnormal Psyche in Society and History, and the Human Being as a Whole. Within this broad topography there are large uncharted territories, and the contours of the map are undergoing constant revision. The primary purpose of the work, however is to furnish not an ordnance survey but a general overview designed, in Jaspers' words, "to develop and order knowledge guided by the methods through which it is gained—to learn to know the process of knowing and thereby to clarify the material". The attainment of this objective depends primarily on the clarification of a host of concepts which are traditionally either ignored or over-simplified in the psychiatric literature. To do justice to such themes as the mind-body relationship, the role of scientific inquiry, the principles of classification, personality, the subjective-objective dichotomy, or the notions of health and disease calls for a familiarity with the history of ideas in other disciplines. It is here that Jaspers comes into his own, bringing a massive tradition of philosophy and social theory to bear on these perennial problems in relation to psychopathology.

To grasp the full significance of the achievement, however, the reader must be aware of the sources and the ways in which they have been adapted. The views of Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietsche, Max Weber and Jaspers' own later theorizing are as central to the construction of *General Psychopathology* as the work of Griesinger, Wernicke, Kraepelin or Kurt Schneider; and some of the better-known specific concepts are openly borrowed from German thinkers, e.g. the emphasis on phenomenology derives from Husserl and the distinction between 'understanding' and 'explanation' from Dilthey. For this reason I always found extensive background reading essential when conducting seminars on the book.

General Psychopathology contains a complex admixture of exposition, psychological description, critique and, especially in the later editions, philosophical speculation. While the whole text is impregnated with Jaspers' holistic approach to his subject-matter, the neophyte is probably best advised to sample the text in fragments. He could, for example, profitably begin with the sub-section on "Delusion and Awareness of Reality" (pp. 93–102); move on to "Pathological Psychogenic Reactions" (pp. 383–93); and, after contrasting the chapter on the "Psychology of Meaning" (pp. 301–13) with the "Characteristics of Explanatory Theories" (pp. 530–34), examine the use made of this distinction in the assessments of Kretschmer (pp. 40–41), Wernicke (pp. 534–37), von Gebsattel (pp. 540–46) and Freud (pp. 537–40). Then, lest he should regard Jaspers as a distant, impersonal figure, he should turn to the important sections on psychotherapy, which have been published separately in book-form (3), in order to appreciate Jaspers' clear-headed humanism and his concern for the doctor-patient relationship, well illustrated in the following paragraph:

> "There are no scientific grounds for determining what kind of psychotherapist one will become nor the type which will be considered ideal. Certainly a psychotherapist should have a training in somatic medicine and in psychopathology, both of which have to be scientifically based. If he has no such training, he would only be a charlatan, yet with this training alone he is still not a psychotherapist. Science is only a part of his necessary equipment. Much more has to be added. Among the *personal prerequisites* the width of his own horizon plays a part, so does the ability to be detached at times from any value-judgement, to be accepting and totally free of prejudice (an ability only found in those who generally possess very well-defined values and have a personality that is mature). Finally, there is the necessity for fundamental warmth and a natural kindness. It is therefore clear that a good psychotherapist can only be a rare phenomenon and even then he is usually only good *for a certain circle of people* for whom he is well suited. A psychotherapist for everyone is an impossibility. However, force of circumstance makes it the psychotherapist's usual duty to treat everyone who may ask his help. That fact should help him to keep his claims to modest proportions".

To grasp fully the development of Jaspers' leitmotivs, however, it is necessary to become familiar with the structure of the whole text. One key example, which I have attempted to examine in detail elsewhere (4), is the complex relationship between general psychopathology and the sciences. For Jaspers "natural science is indeed the groundwork of psychopathology and an essential element in it but the humanities are equally so and, with this, psychopathology does not become in any way less scientific but scientific in another way". The psychopathologist must, he claims, employ the scientific method and the scientific attitude, even when dealing with subjective

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experience or meaningful connection, but then he goes on: "Only when the biological aspects have been clearly distinguished can we proceed to discuss what essentially belongs to man. Whenever the subject studied is Man and not man as a species of animal, we find that psychopathology comes to be not only a kind of biology but also one of the Humanities". From this springboard he elaborates the need for 'metaphysical understanding' as a philosophical position.

So, to conclude, an opinion *General Psychopathology* remains the most important single book to have been published on the aims and logic of psychological medicine. Its scope and clarity, as Kurt Kolle has observed, provide nothing less than "the criterion by which the qualification for psychiatry is tested". For this reason alone it should be studied and assimilated by all psychiatrists in training. And by their teachers.

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