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## reflection

### Jaspers and the first edition of *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*

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Karl Jaspers has the dubious distinction of being more often quoted than read. John Hoenig, one of the translators of *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* into English, tells that he once saw the book in the office of a famous US psychiatrist and ‘asked him whether he liked it. He replied half jokingly, nobody reads it, but it is obligatory to have it seen on your shelf’.

*Allgemeine Psychopathologie* has been sacralised as the *fons et origo* of all psychopathology. Very few bother to distinguish between the small first edition (1913, 332 pages) and the very large 7th edition (1959, 748 pages), the one rendered into English, Spanish, and Italian. (The French version is a translation of the 3rd edition, 1922.) The sad part of this is that Jaspers is not idolised on account of his main contributions, which are: a) the articulation of a moderately (Kantian) constructionist view of mental symptoms and disorders, and b) scepticism against their full naturalisation. Instead, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* is cherry-picked on his views on delusions, understanding, morbid jealousy, pseudohallucinations, process, personality, etc., etc., most of which, in fact, were already available in the literature since before his time.

*Allgemeine Psychopathologie* cannot be understood without knowledge of its historical background. When the book first appeared in 1913, there were already in circulation substantial works on ‘psychopathology’: *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (Emminghaus, 1878) – which provided the name for Jaspers’s book; *Manuale di Semeiotica delle Malattie Mentali* (Morselli, 2 Vols. 1885; 1894); *Vorlesungen über Psychopathologie* (Störing, 1900); *Éléments de Sémiologie et Clinique Mentales* (Chaslin, 1912); *Traité International de Psychologie Pathologique* (4 vols) (Marie, 1910–1912), etc. Although the term ‘Psycho-pathologie’ had been introduced by Feuchtersleben in 1845, the discipline it came to name took the best part of a century to be put together. Moulded on French medical *séméiotique*, descriptive psychopathology was meant to configure (or capture) the phenomena of madness and other mental afflictions and soon became the official language of psychiatry.

Representing a complete synthesis of the psychopathological knowledge available at the time, the works mentioned above were available at the Library of the Department of Psychiatry in Heidelberg and offered the young Jaspers a model on which to base his own work. It is not widely known that *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* was not meant to be a book on ‘psychopathology’. In the autumn of 1910, Ferdinand Springer invited Wilmanns (then Head of Department at Heidelberg) to write an ‘Introduction to Psychiatry’. A forensic psychiatrist, Wilmanns turned down the invitation and this was eventually passed on to the young Jaspers. ‘Seized by enthusiasm’, Jaspers saw his task as bringing ‘order at least into the factual data’. He did just that: the first edition of *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* is therefore a cento of clinical information (well known at the time) linked together by Jaspers’ own version of Kantian constructionism and Diltheyian ideas on understanding and ‘descriptive psychology’. Of Husserl there is far less, in spite of what is claimed by some Jaspersian exegetists. The book fell almost flat. Journal reviews saw it as yet another introduction to psychiatry and some criticised its theoreticism.

In 2013, it is not a bad idea to ask what else of value would Jaspers have bequeathed to psychiatry had he completed his training and stayed in the profession. Alas, like in the case of Störing, Ziehen and other great men who left psychiatry for philosophy, we shall never know. Be that as it may, there is no better homage to a writer than actually reading his work. *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* does need deeper analysis not starry-eyed contemplation. All seven editions must be collated so that the non-Jaspersian contributions to the latter ones may be identified.

When this analysis is completed, I suspect, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* will still be considered as important but its value will reside neither in its ‘clinical content’ nor in its ‘phenomenology’. It will endure because it demonstrates that descriptive psychopathology is not an ‘objective and eternal’ algorithm built to capture ‘clinical’ facts but instead it is a metalanguage through which culture is able to govern the presentations and experiences of madness. Let 2013 be the year when this new approach to Jaspers’ work truly begins.

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