

Karl Jaspers and Matthew Ratcliffe's Approaches to Empathy and the Understanding of Primary Delusions

Introduction

In his article from 1912 “The Phenomenal Approach in Psychopathology” the German philosopher and psychiatrist Karl Theodor Jaspers emphasized the role of phenomenology in psychiatry. He described the unique possibilities as well as the limitations he saw in this approach (Jaspers 1968, 1313ff). In his book *General Psychopathology*, originally dated from 1923, in the section “Subjective Phenomena of Psychic Life” in the chapter “Abnormal Psychic Phenomena” in paragraph 4 “Delusion and Awareness of Reality” Jaspers claimed that 'Delusions proper' (Jaspers 1962, 95) could not be sufficiently understood in this phenomenological empathetic way, but can only be understood with non-phenomenological methods.

Matthew Ratcliffe 2013 in chapter 15 „Delusional Atmosphere and the Sense of Unreality“ of the Stanghellini/Fuchs book *One Century of Karl Jaspers' General Psychopathology* questions the boundaries of intelligibility that Jaspers claimed. With his approach of 'radical empathy' (Ratcliffe 2012) he wants to stretch the boundaries of phenomenological understanding of primary delusions. In this essay I first explain Jaspers view on the role of a phenomenological approach in psychiatry and especially its possibilities and limits regarding primary delusions. I then show Ratcliffe's critique on Jaspers claim of the phenomenological unintelligibility of such experiences, and his approach of radical empathy, with which he expands the limits of phenomenological and empathic understanding. I conclude by comparing their views of empathy and and discussing the general intelligibility of others experiences and its consequences.