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.

Karl Jaspers

Jaspers Phenomenological Approach

In the constitution of delusions and the awareness of reality Jaspers saw one of the major problems of psychopathology. He did not reject objective accounts on delusions, but emphasized a need to adopt an empathetic attitude towards patients, whose descriptions he saw as best sources for phenomenological understanding of the delusional atmosphere they experience as well as their monothematic delusions.

He believed the phenomenological approach to add qualitatively different kinds of certainties about psychic processes in human beings (cf. Jaspers 1968, 1314).

The phenomenological approach tries to understand human experience in the world, as it is the underlying base of everything we can understand, and reproaches natural science for applying a presupposed concept to the world.
Statements of early Husserl, but also of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and others take phenomenology as a descriptive method only, that is not concerned with problems of genesis and causation (cf. Sass 635). Louis Sass, following later statements of Husserl about motivational causality, in his article “Phenomenology as Description and as Explanation” finds explanatory relationships in phenomenological perspectives, that involve “[...] at least quasi-causal significance” (Sass 638).

Jaspers saw the phenomenological approach as uniquely important for psychiatry, since with it alone the psychiatrist “[…] can gain an essential, personal, indefinable and direct understanding [...]” (Jaspers 1968, 1315). Conceding that psychology can never reach the scientific ideal of full conscious understanding of mental processes, he strove to systematize the phenomenological approach to make it useful for scientific comprehension.
Since mere sympathetic understanding of individuals cannot be discussed or verified, it cannot be given recognition as a science. The ideal of a fully conscious understanding of mental processes cannot be reached by any form of psychology. With the systematisation of the phenomenological analysis Jaspers wanted to engage in one of many promising approaches. He saw limits of understanding for objective psychology as well as for phenomenology. (cf. Jaspers 1968, 1315).

He therefore developed a method for isolating phenomena to find “[---] a real representation of what the patient is experiencing [...]” by avoiding “[…] to supply any basic constructs or frames of reference”. Phenomenologists “have to train themselves in “representing data to oneself', 'understanding', 'grasping' or ' actualizing'” . Their “[…] seeing is not done through the senses, but through understanding” . The goal of phenomenological analysis is the finding of “Irreducible Phenomena” like “red, blue, colour, tone, […] spatial awareness, object awareness, perception, imagery, thought, etc.”. These ultimate characteristics are expressed

with words like "'[…] seeing', 'viewing' [...], feeling".
Phenomenological understanding of what others are experiencing is realized by empathetic actualization, "'[…] feeling oneself into it ', […], 'understanding'[...]" . which Jaspers characterized as not ultimate phenomena themselves. The reliability of its contribution to our knowledge remains uncertain and has to be improved by "[…] comparison, repetition, and verification [...]" (all quotes Jaspers 1968, 1316f).

He described three methods of phenomenological analysis:

1. by immersing oneself in the gestures, behaviour, expressive movements of others
2. by exploration, by direct questioning of others
3. by written self-description of others

Phenomenologists focus on the subjective psychic experience and try to "capture and delimit some particular item and by depicting it to form a conception of it, of which we and others can make a permanent use" (Jaspers 1968, 1318).

He believed that with this method three groups of phenomena can be distinguished:

1. Phenomena known to us all from our own experience
2. Phenomena that can be understood as exaggeration, diminutions or combinations of our own experiences
3. Phenomena that are completely inaccessible to any empathetic understanding. "We can only get closer to them by means of analogies and metaphors" (Jaspers 1968, 1318)

Jaspers View of Delusions

For Delusions proper Jaspers claimed to belong to the third group, for which empathy is not possible because it has no connection to the experience of the second person. He did not seem to consider the possible analogies and metaphors as such a connection.

Jaspers stated that delusions are not only mistaken beliefs that cannot be corrected, but aberrations of the underlying structure of the experience of reality (cf. Jaspers 1962, 93). This experience of reality he called a primary phenomenon which can only be conveyed indirectly, because it can be pathologically disturbed.

According to Jaspers, experiencing reality is connected with concrete perception of something (in contrast to imaginations or memories) and the awareness of being, both of which he saw as primary phenomena that cannot be further reduced. Experiences of reality are rooted in the practical world, which shows for example in the resistance of objects against our aims (cf. Jaspers 1962, 94).

Jaspers claimed, that conceiving delusions principally in terms of beliefs were beside the point. Approaching delusions as mistaken beliefs would lead to an inadequate understanding of the underlying perceptual changes. While the content of such beliefs may be rather accidental, there is a an all-enveloping change in the form of experience that leads to a *delusional atmosphere* featuring a *sense of unreality*. „The special delusional contents are symptomatic of this more general shift in 'mood' or 'atmosphere'.“ (Ratcliffe 2013, 230)

Jaspers term Delusional Atmosphere

Jaspers distinguished delusional beliefs, which are deduced in understandable ways from experience, from primary delusions or delusions proper. Delusional beliefs arise as secondary judgements in the context of the more primary delusional experience.

He believed these primary delusions can only be understood in the context of a shift in the overall structure of experience, which is described by patients in sentences as: 'Everything gets a new meaning' while basic perception is described as unchanged. “Red things would still be red, squares would still be square” (Ratcliffe 2013, 231f) but the *sense of reality* is changed. This sense of reality appears not merely as a matter of cognitively taking things for real or not real, but as an integral part of the perceptual experience itself. Perceiving things as *there, present, part of the same world as the perceiver*, the *that it is* seems as incorporated in perception as the *what it is*.

Jasper claimed that if this fundamental experience of reality is changed, this leads to judgements and beliefs that lack conviction. The grasp of reality as an experience cannot be made up for by thoughts about reality.

Furthermore besides beliefs there are many other intentional acts like imagining, remembering, anticipating, doubting, … that depend on the sense of reality and which are altered as well when the basic sense of reality is altered. The experience of something as unreal alters the experience of the thing as well as the thoughts deriving from it.

The sense of reality seems so basic and constant that it is easily overlooked and only brought to awareness by permutations reported by patients. This is the same with other forms of reality experiences like for example derealization. Delusional atmosphere, as Jaspers described it, is not clearly distinguished from such other forms. We do not know whether it is supposed to be less or more intense or of defined different quality, but Jaspers made clear that delusional beliefs are symptoms of an underlying shift in the structure of experience. He claimed that the content of such beliefs may be accidental and therefore putting emphasis on specific beliefs would be misleading.

Jaspers view on Delusions and Unintelligibility

For people experiencing a delusional atmosphere it is difficult to describe it from a first person perspective. Jaspers believed that also empathetic understanding of a second person reaches its limits in trying to understand *primary delusions* phenomenologically.

> "If we try to get some closer understanding of these primary experiences of delusion, we soon find we cannot really appreciate these quite alien modes of experience. They remain largely incomprehensible, unreal and beyond our understanding." (Jaspers in Ratcliffe 2013, 234)

For Jaspers the transition to beliefs seems understandable, but the core experience that underlies them remains incomprehensible.

He claimed that primary delusions cannot be sufficiently understood in terms of the personality or the situation. In his view, they can only be grasped in a non-phenomenological way in terms of a disease process, as symptoms accompanied by other disease symptoms as well. So turning to studying psychological performance and meaningful connections (cf. Jaspers 1962, 104f), Jaspers saw an account for the role of a delusional atmosphere in the resistance to change of delusional beliefs. Whereas usually beliefs are compared with the common sense of a shared social world, in a delusional atmosphere the consensus reality is at least partially lost and therefore it cannot be distinguished, what is imagined by me and what is part of the public world, but formed without the constraining influence of that world (Ratcliffe 2013, 233).

Interestingly and not understandable for me, Jaspers sorted out metaphysical delusions, for which he claims that: "Religious experience remains what it is, whether it occurs in saint or psychotic or whether the person in whom it occurs is both at once" (Jaspers 108). Does this indicate that he did judge these delusions as empathetically understandable?

Matthew Ratcliffe's Approach of Radical Empathy

Ratcliffe's réplique on Jaspers

By applying Jaspers claims to more recent research on monothematic delusions like Capras and Cortard, Ratcliffe sees the need of additional factors beside a delusional atmosphere to form their specific delusional content, although he states that even with these very rare delusions perceptual changes are often experienced in a more basic way and are not exclusively pointed towards these contents.

Since Jaspers described delusional atmosphere and distinguished it from delusional belief, Ratcliffe concludes that there must at least be some possibility of phenomenological understanding and phenomenological comprehension cannot be as limited as proposed. He points out, that despite Jaspers claimed unintelligibility, he himself showed at least some phenomenological insight by describing delusional atmospheres and delusion-like experiences: “Whenever we find ourselves depressed, fearful or at a loss, the sudden clear consciousness of something, whether true or false, immediately has a soothing effect” (Jaspers in Ratcliffe 2013, 234).

Ratcliffe states that Jaspers did not make clear where exactly the claimed limits of phenomenological understanding are. He suspects that the attempts of phenomenological understanding, which Jaspers claimed had been made, may have overlooked that empathetic understanding is usually based on an underlying sense of belonging to the same existing world, and suggests that Jaspers may have given in early. Ratcliffe claims further phenomenological understanding of delusional atmospheres to be possible, which which he believes to open a way to empathy of delusions proper.

He sets out that experiential changes of the way we find ourselves in the world are difficult to understand, since 'mundane empathetic understanding' (cf. Ratcliffe 2012, 477) usually overlooks that it is based upon “[...]a sense of the world's existence [...]” (Husserl in Ratcliffe 2013, 235) and the underlying feeling of sharing the same world. These are not beliefs but are “[…] comprised of a bodily, non-conceptual, habitual sense of practical dwelling [...]” (Ratcliffe 2013, 235). Such changes of experience do not have to be seen quite as exotic as Jaspers suggests, but happen “in a range of different and often subtle ways, not just in psychiatric illness, but throughout the course of everyday life” (Ratcliffe 2013, 236). Existential feelings like for example feeling “[…] alive, dead, […] detached, […] estranged, […] suffocated, cut-off, […] out of touch […]“ (cf. Ratcliffe 2008,

60), and so on are common themes of first-person accounts, if they suffer from psychiatric illnesses or not. Ratcliffe describes many anomalous experiences that involve changes in that fundamental experience and are therefore qualitatively different and more difficult to understand. Even more he finds changes in the form of experience also in many non-pathological situations of everyday life: Examples are sentences like: 'Things just don't feel right', 'I'm not with it today'. He suggests to take delusional atmospheres not so much as unfamiliar phenomena, but as subtly different kinds of existential feeling. This reframes the happenings formerly characterized as alien and moves them from Jaspers 3rd group of completely inaccessible phenomena to the first or second group of commonly known phenomena (see p. 3). Ratcliffe's approach expands the limits of intelligibility of such happenings (cf. Jaspers 1962, 96) and shows that further empathetic understanding of delusions proper is possible.

Phenomenology of Possibilities

Ratcliffe refines the understanding of delusional atmospheres by turning to the phenomenology of possibility. Taking in the phenomenology of possibility can bring us to recognize the variability of a formerly unacknowledged presupposed world.

As Husserl proposed, we do not only see objects as they actually appear to us at a time, but more so connected with possibilities, that are actually or potentially available to ourselves as well as to other people. The structured system of these possibilities he called the object's horizon.

Ratcliffe elaborates that our bodily possibilities are the basis of experiencing the world and experiences incorporate practical and perceptual possibilities, such as potential actions or potential happenings. These present themselves in different forms of significance such as usability or graspability.

He suggests that shifts in existential feeling, as in delusional atmospheres, can be understood as changes in the kinds of possibilities incorporated in experiences. Anticipation of possibilities, as Husserl stated, ordinarily take the form of habitual certainty.

So even if actual properties such as colour and shape remain unchanged, a change may be experienced, that concerns the kinds of possibilities that frame the experience.

If we do not take for granted that another person has access to the same possibilities as we do, we need a kind of empathy that acknowledges the usually presupposed world as a phenomenological achievement and recognizes its variability.

Ratcliffe's Account of Belief

Ratcliffe then turns to the term belief and states that its limits are unclear. For example a doubt of the worlds existence maybe the proposition 'it is possible that the world does not exist' or the practical experience of lost confidence in the reality of the world (cf. Ratcliffe 2013, 240).
He questions if the term belief applies to changes in the form of experience at all, and therefore if delusional beliefs can sensibly be understood as beliefs.
In a state of altered experience not only the contents but also the form of beliefs are changed. For example in a state of overall uncertainty a belief maybe less convincing. Furthermore there are forms of double reality, where things can be real and unreal at the same time. This means that believing something would in that case not be the same as taking it for true or knowing it as true.
Ratcliffe concludes that the question if delusions are beliefs is not only secondary as Jaspers already pointed out, but the question itself is formulated in a too simplistic way.

By applying these insights Ratcliffe believes we can approach seemingly alien experiences of others in a radically empathetic way and increase the possibilities of phenomenological understanding of otherness.
He claims openness to kinds of possibilities to be a phenomenological achievement, not a given certainty. By suspending the assumption that both parties share the same modal space, “[…] we can begin to understand changes in the structure of experience that would otherwise elude us” (Ratcliffe 2012, 483).
Jaspers did not consider this possibility, but meanwhile similar approaches are used by several authors (cf. Ratcliffe 2013, 239) to illuminate forms of experiences that he claimed incomprehensible.

Ratcliffe's Characterization of Delusional Atmosphere

Ratcliffe supposes that delusional atmosphere is heterogeneous and consists of subtly different changes in the form of experience. To comprehensively characterize it he names three features that are often described:

1. a change of inhabiting a shared, public world, which involves a loss of interpersonal experiences and possibilities
2. a practical disengagement and passivity with a more voyeuristic relationship to the world, since its objects are less experienced in regard to one's own agency and less

inviting to activity

3. an all-enveloping sense of novelty or surprise

Interestingly two of these three features focus on an experienced change. If this is taken as result from phenomenological scrutinization of first person experiences, it seems to indicate, there was a for the person distinguishably different time before the delusional atmosphere. This characterizes delusions as passing phenomena. I wonder, if this temporality is seen as a necessary or purely as an incidental feature of delusions? If persons were a delusional state permanently, they could not describe such changes, since they could not distinguish a delusional experience from a non-delusional experience themselves. This could only be judged from the view of a second person.
Ratcliffe criticizes Jaspers emphasis on the uncanniness of delusional atmospheres ans sees the need for further phenomenological investigation (cd. Ratliffe 2013, 240).
Overall he acknowledges Jaspers work with his first person descriptions and insightful remarks as a valuable starting point, but criticizes that based on his too restrictive concept of empathy he gave up early on the possibilities of phenomenological understanding.

Non-phenomenological Understanding

There has always been interaction between phenomenology and the natural sciences, since Husserl wanted to find a solid ground for science to be based on. Jaspers stated “Nevertheless, those who claim to be purely objective investigators do quite frequently make secondary use of subjective psychic phenomena to further their interpretations of objective performances and make comparisons possible – and, of course, they have every right to do so” (Jaspers 1968, 1314).
Phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and others rejected a primacy of natural sciences, because they saw their relation to the world as that of geography to the countryside (cf. Merleau-Ponty 5). Science in their view is oblivious of many things, especially to its own limitations.

Both Jaspers and Ratcliffe take into account other approaches.
Jaspers is highly critical of an objective psychology, which “[…] by eliminating everything

psychic, transforms itself into physiology" (Jaspers 1968 1314). Yet he sees phenomenology in psychopathology as only one point of view amongst other forms of psychological understanding, like the study of psychological performances as disturbance of thinking, as a mental creation or as motivated dynamic content in meaningful connection (Jaspers 1962, 97f).

Ratcliffe points out that Natural Scientists will have to acknowledge their groundedness in an experienced world, which cannot be compared with other phenomena as if it were one amongst others. Science presupposes a sense of reality that consists in part of an inhabited possibility space. The world at least in parts consists of that sense of reality. We experience objects not only as separate objects but in connection with possibilities. We experience what it is in its horizon (Husserl), and even more underlying, that it is there. We can discriminate, what is the case what isn't. This ability constitutes our sense of reality (cf. Ratcliffe 2011, 17:46 – 21:17).
Ratcliffe takes the stance of a possibly fruitful future mutual information of both, the scientific and the phenomenological approach.
As an addition in "Delusional Atmosphere and the Sense of Unreality" he introduces the neurobiological predictive coding approach, which claims that on a subpersonal level the brain is sensitive to mismatches between what is expected and what actually occurs. Compatible with Jaspers view delusions here are interpreted as tension relieving constructs that try to explain odd experiences, produced by inappropriate prediction error signals, possibly as a consequence of dopamine disregulation.
Ratcliffe here sees potential for mutual enrichment, but also the need to further clarification in both phenomenological and non-phenomenological levels.

What does Ratcliffe's approach add to the possibility to empathize with persons with primary delusions?

Jaspers wanted to point out that there is a significant difference of intelligibility and understanding of other's experiences and delusional experiences. He actually considered the difficulty to empathize as distinction mark between neurotic and psychotic diseases. Seen as that, empathetic unintelligibility is treated as an aspect of the delusion, and not a limitation in

the communication between two persons.

Ratcliffe's approach brings the second person to make a step towards the experienced world of the first person, by attempting to bracket very basic, previously unattended own presumptions. He shows that atmospheres and feelings belong to a shared world, which makes empathy possible, even if the delusional contents and the connection in which feelings appear may remain unintelligible in this approach.

Jaspers idea of empathy corresponds with simulation theory, where understanding is gained "[…] by transferring oneself, so to say, into the other individual's psyche […] (Jaspers 1968, 1313).
Ratcliffe's term empathy builds on a 'hybrid account' (Ratcliffe 2012, 477) that combines explicit as well as implicit simulation with a distinctive kind of attitude towards the other person, which distinguishes it from remaining a first person experience. "In the absence of that attitude, simulation would not amount to empathy, as the experience would not be other-directed" (Ratcliffe 2012, 477). Furthermore he points out that interpersonal experience is also self-affecting, we do not stay untouched by the other (Ratcliffe 2012, 488).
In radical empathy, imagining how it possibly feels to have a different sense of reality with different possibilities and beliefs connected to it, is thought as a new way of engaging with the other. This approach may lead to new intellectual insight through theoretical understanding of presupposed basics of communication, but more so to better empathy in the other's experience.
It seems to me, that if any basic communication is possible, there must be an at least partially shared common world. Of course even in a shared world, we never know for sure what the other experiences. If however we expand the problem of uncertainty of understanding the experience of others from delusional to all experiences, we lose the possibility to talk about the discrimination of delusional and non-delusional experiences. This may be problematic, since at least some delusional states lead to serious difficulties for individuals to take part in the commonly accepted living-world.

As both Jaspers and Ratcliffe state, it is difficult even for patients themselves to find words or expressions for delusional experiences (cf. Jaspers 1962, 98 and Ratcliffe 2012, 474).

Language of course also is a means of a common ground, learned and developed in social interaction in and about the world. This is the same for all other means of communication as for example gestures or images. These have been learned and developed in communication, their understanding and meanings are highly influenced by agreement with others on interpretations.
It seems to me that if there were experiences that are beyond the limits of this agreed on world, any communication about it can only concern parts that correspond with experiences of the shared world. Any attempt to communicate such extraordinary experiences by means of language will have to use comparisons or metaphors to make it at least a little bit understandable. So images of shared experiences are used, e.g. a vision of god is described as a pillar of fire. Sometimes logically contradicting propositions are used to describe the indescribable: “I was simply there, only in that place, but without being present” (Blankenburg in Sass 641). In another place Blankenburg sets out: “The patient's stammering and struggle for words need not merely be seen as the expression of a thought disorder. It could be caused by the incapacity of our colloquial language to provide ways of expressing what, as it were, lies beneath such a disorder, that is, a prepredicative, nameless understanding and communicating” (Blankenburg 308).

If there are atmospheres and feelings, that do not belong to our shared world, it would not be possible to describe them in an understandable way, which is what seems to be tried in many first person descriptions, like 'it is there, but not there' and “[…] 'everything is strange or everything is somehow different'” Sass in Ratcliffe 2013, 234).
So, as with people who experience delusions proper, in any contact with others something may remain unrecognized, that is beyond our understanding. Emanuel Levinas describes the appearance of otherness as generally beyond our ideas of the other (Lèvinas 64), only noticeable as traces, in the disturbance of the expected without being fully graspable.

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