

Lacan's Critique of Jaspers: Understanding and The Problem of Meaning in Psychoanalysis

One recurring feature of Jacques Lacan's teaching in the 1950s is a certain polemic against what he calls "the fundamental misunderstanding brought about by the relation of understanding."¹ Taking aim primarily against the influence of Karl Jaspers and his phenomenologically informed psychopathology, Lacan calls understanding a "mere mirage,"² a "nauseating category,"³ something constitutively "ungraspable;"⁴ he links understanding to a "vacuous personalism"⁵ and a "liberal heart-to-heart."⁶ As Lacan says in his essay on "The Direction of Treatment . . ." the preface "You understand . . ." is an introductory phrase by which someone who has nothing to convey thinks he can impress someone who understands nothing.⁷ While it is obvious that there is indeed something coercive in the use of this preface, "You understand . . ." a phrase which strong-arms one's interlocutor into compliance with the terms and assumptions of the discussion, Lacan's point is actually much more profound, attacking not only the conceit of the preface, "you understand . . ." but the very foundations upon which the possibility for understanding as such is built: that is, Lacan calls into question the very category of meaning.

Jaspers' formulation of understanding does claim a pretense to the immediate comprehension of meaning. That is, understanding, as Jaspers himself defines it, is "the perception of meaning,"⁸ the apprehension of meaningful, or understandable, connections (*Verständliche Zusammenhänge*). According to Jaspers, understanding "grasps as self-evident how one psychic event emerges from another; how a man attacked should be angry, a betrayed lover jealous...»⁹ These are Jaspers' quick and oft repeated examples: rage due to being attacked and jealousy due to betrayal. He sees these as the most visceral kinds of affections and so therefore the most immediately understandable. Jaspers' idea is that understanding implies a direct psychic connection between the self and the other. As he says, "understanding of meaning impinges on myself in the other and on what is closest to me in the other.»¹⁰ It is precisely because of the intimate psychic relationality made possible through understanding that Jaspers hinges the entire project of psychopathology on the faculty of understanding as the special, characteristic mode of investigation in questions of the psyche as opposed to the questions of the other sciences. For Jaspers, «the expression <understanding> [is to be used] solely for the understanding of psychic events <from within>." The expression will never be used for the appreciation of objective causal connections, which can only be seen <from without>. "For these," he says, "we shall reserve the expression <explanation.>"¹¹ Whereas all other sciences depend upon the relation of "explaining" [*erklären*], Jaspers establishes psychopathology on what he calls "the relation of understanding" [*verstehen*] as psychopathology's privileged domain. It is through the special tool of understanding that one apprehends causal connection in the domain of psychopathology.

According to Lacan, Jaspers' position ...

... consists in thinking that some things are self-evident, that, for example, when someone is sad it's because he doesn't have what his heart desires. [To this, Lacan retorts] Nothing could be more false. There are people who have all their heart desires and are still sad. Sadness is a passion of quite another color.¹²

To relate to someone's sadness as if one can *understand* it *empathically*, or, as Jaspers calls it "*genetically*," is to resort to the realm of imaginary identifications through which one can simply imagine oneself in the place of the other, "walk a mile in their shoes," as the saying goes, and

through this understand the other. For Lacan, this idea is patently false. He says: “Everything that in human behavior belongs to the psychological order is subject to such profound anomalies and constantly presents such obvious paradoxes...”¹³ that the link between not having what one’s heart desires and sadness, or the link between betrayal and jealousy, or the link between being attacked and anger, is far from self-evident. Through Jaspers’ emphasis on “understanding meaningful connections” he covers over the most striking disparities in patterns of human experience, and in doing so he pretends to explain them while ignoring the key insights of Freud’s discovery altogether. Lacan writes:

If psychoanalysis teaches us anything, if psychoanalysis constitutes a novelty, it’s precisely that the human being’s development is in no way directly deducible from the construction of, from the interferences between, from the composition of meanings.¹⁴

In short, meaning is not made on the basis of direct causal connections. Lacan goes on to insist on this point with the following example:

When you give a child a smack, well! it’s understandable that he cries-without anybody’s reflecting that it’s not at all obligatory that he should cry. I remember a small boy who whenever he got a smack used to ask-*Was that a pat or a slap?* If he was told it was a slap he cried, that belonged to the conventions, to the rules of the moment, and if (he was told) it was a pat he was delighted.¹⁵

This example illustrates two basic and important points of Lacan’s thought: Firstly, it demonstrates the role of the signifier over the signified because it shows how the meaning of the smack is determined by the signifiers “pat” or “slap.” That is, even in an example from what is a direct and simple, physical gesture- that of a good smack- we find the predominance of the signifier over the signified and not the other way around. Secondly, if we think through the example a little further than does Lacan, the example also demonstrates Lacan’s point that “no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification.”¹⁶ That is to say, if we imagine what actually happens in the situation when the child is compelled to ask, “Was that a pat or a slap?” depending on the context of the episode, several possibilities come to mind: the child might genuinely be asking for clarification

“was that a pat or a slap?” or the child might be trying to lighten the mood with a sense of humor, making a joke in order to avoid more punishment after what he very well knows was a slap, or (what seems to me a more sinister possibility) with this question, the child could be taunting the parent: “Come on, is that all you can do? Was that a pat or a slap?” The point is that the signification of the pat or the slap or even of the question itself is sustained only by reference to another signification, that is, to its context, to what it was that evoked the pat or the slap in the first place and to what the child offers up with this response. “In other words, signification comes about only on the basis of taking things as a whole.”¹⁷ As Lacan says:

When one gets a smack there are many other ways of responding than by crying. One can return it in kind, or else turn the other cheek, or one can also say— *Hit me, but listen!* A great variety of possibilities offer themselves, which are neglected in the notion of the relation of understanding as it’s spelled out by Jaspers.¹⁸

But it is not simply that Jasper’s notion of the relation of understanding fails to account for the multiplicity of possible responses that one can have to any given psychological event, it is rather more fundamentally that Jaspers uses this notion of understanding to cover over what is precisely at issue and in question even in Jaspers’ own discipline, in that of psychopathology.

Jaspers begs the question when he comes up against it: understanding can only explain what is already understandable on his terms. He writes: «Understanding by itself does not lead to any causal explanation except in indirect fashion, when it happens to come up against *the understandable*.»¹⁹ Each causal connection made through the use of the understanding establishes a cause that always refers back to understanding only that which is already understandable. Jaspers develops his own account of a hermeneutic circle in order to make this point, writing:

We achieve understanding within a circular movement from particular facts to the whole that includes them and back again from the whole thus reached to the particular significant facts. The circle continually expands itself and tests and changes itself meaningfully in all its parts. A final <terra firma> is never reached. There is only the whole as it is attained at any time, which bears itself along in the mutual opposition of its parts.²⁰

What this particular way of thinking the hermeneutic circle does not account for is the radical difference to the whole that a part can make. That is, without an account of the discrepancies, gaps, and ruptures within a whole that the part can often indicate as a kind of hole within the whole, Jaspers' understanding serves only as a plug, a corking up of the very ruptures, which psychoanalysis came into being in order to explain. That is, Lacan's return to Freud is precisely a return to what he sees as a forgotten question in the various inheritances of Freud's discovery, discourses born out of the fact that the neurotic symptom does not abide by the logic of understanding or any clear causal chain. It is for this reason that Lacan insists: "Don't try to understand!" and "...leave this nauseating category to Karl Jaspers and his consorts."²¹ In response to this decree, I'd like to pose a few questions: What exactly would it mean to leave the understanding behind? One finds oneself in the dilemma of even posing the question: How are we to understand, no, to *think*(?) the alternative to understanding? It seems to me that one of the biggest challenges to developing the philosophical implications of Lacan's thought lies in responding to these questions and in situating his thought *vis a vis* the problem of understanding. To this end, in what follows, I will parse three versions or aspects of Lacan's critique of understanding.

In the first and weakest version, Lacan's critique of understanding is a warning against understanding too quickly and not against understanding all together. In *Seminar III*, Lacan advises "Begin by thinking you don't understand. Start from the idea of a fundamental misunderstanding. This is an initial attitude, failing which there is really no reason why you should not understand anything and everything."²² Here, ultimately, one will be able to understand but the concern is really with understanding too quickly. Lacan is wary of the traps into which understanding can lead if one does not proceed slowly and with caution. We can find this version of the critique particularly in what Lacan says about the role of understanding in the training of analysts:

You will observe in the training we give to our students that this is always a good place to stop them. It's always at the point where they have understood, where they have rushed in to fill the case with understanding, that they have missed the interpretation that it's appropriate to make or not to make.²³

The problem with understanding too quickly is that the analyst's understanding gets in the way of her ability to hear what the analysand actually says. Lacan explains:

This is naively expressed in the expression – *This is what the subject meant* – How do you know? What is certain is that he didn't say it. And in most cases, on hearing what he did say, it appears that at the very least a question mark could have been raised which alone would have been sufficient for the valid interpretation, or at least the beginnings of it.²⁴

In this first version of the critique of understanding, then, the main concern is the quality of the analyst's attention. Understanding is a problem because it gets in the way of hearing. Lacan advocates for this kind of non-understanding hearing. Responding to Theodore Reik's claim that analysts should listen to their patients intuitively, with a kind of "third ear," Lacan scoffs:

But what need can an analyst have for an extra ear, when it sometimes seems that two are already too many [...] May one of your ears become as deaf as the other one must be acute. And that is the one that you should lend to listen for sounds and phonemes, words, locutions, and sentences, not forgetting pauses, scansion, cuts, periods, and parallelisms...²⁵

Lacan's claim is that the understanding should be suspended in the case of analysis; that to achieve what Freud called the "free floating attention" or the "*Gleichschwebende*," one must be trained not in understanding but precisely in *not* understanding. The import of this first version then seems to be primarily clinical. As Bruce Fink puts it in his book *Against Understanding*:

We need not affect analysands' understanding or self-understanding to change how they experience the world, life, relationships, and their own impulses²⁶ [...] Part of the analyst's job is to take meaning apart, to undermine understanding by showing that far from explaining everything, it is always partial, not total, and leaves many things out.²⁷

Ultimately this is a critique of understanding but it is not a ruthless critique of all understanding. That is, it leaves the possibility for understanding outside of the realm of clinical analysis, understanding in the realm of philosophy, or more specifically, in the ontological determination of understanding, wide open, and indeed even within analysis it promises the possibility of understanding even if it is necessarily a limited understanding, an understanding deferred.

The second version of the critique of understanding is a much stronger version than the first. It is that understanding “is evoked only as an ideal relation. As soon as one tries to get close to it, it becomes, properly speaking, ungraspable.»²⁸ Here, Lacan suggests not only that we should not force an understanding too quickly, but that understanding never occurs in the way we think it does; that understanding is only ever imaginary. It really only covers over a certain gap. Lacan says:

We always understand too much, especially in analysis. Most of the time, we’re fooling ourselves. [...] And from the moment one doesn’t demand extreme conceptual rigor of oneself, one always finds some way to understand.²⁹

The work of understanding is thus a kind of covering over. We can only “understand” precisely where we do not. Understanding in this sense is merely a failure of rigor in the concept.

In this second version of the critique of understanding we find a harbinger of what Lacan will articulate later on in *Seminar XI* as the gap in the function of cause. Just as we find understanding where our conceptual rigor has failed, where it has served to plug up a hole or a kind of gap, we find in the function of cause a certain gap. As Lacan says: “. . .there is cause only in something that doesn’t work.”³⁰ The discovery of the Freudian unconscious emphasized precisely the failure of the notion of cause with respect to psychological phenomena. Lacan explains that “the Freudian unconscious is situated at that point, where, between cause and that which it affects, there is always something wrong.”³¹ However, Lacan does not limit this discovery about the gap of cause to the domain of psychoanalysis. He goes on to explain that the problem holds true for the notion of cause as such, for the notion of causality in science and philosophy. He says:

Whenever we speak of cause [...] there is always something anti-conceptual, something indefinite. The phases of the moon are the cause of tides– we know this from experience, we know that the word cause is correctly used here. Or again, miasmas are the cause of fever– that doesn't mean anything either, there is a hole, and something that oscillates in the interval.³²

In short, Lacan's claim is that the notion of causality in itself is not sufficient to explain the relation of cause and effect, that it often covers over precisely what is in question.

Cause is a concept that, in the last resort, is unanalysable - impossible to understand by reason – if indeed the rule of reason, the *Vernunftsregel*, is always some *Vergleichung*, or equivalent– and that there remains essentially in the function of cause a certain *gap*.³³

Lacan's discussion of the gap within the notion of cause is indexed to Kant's *Attempt to Introduce Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*. In this pre-critical text, Kant was responding to debates surrounding the skepticism of David Hume in which Hume raised similar concerns about the notion of causality. In *Negative Magnitudes*, Kant attempts to respond to Hume and to explain specifically “how one thing issues from another.” Kant poses the problem like this:

I fully understand how a consequence is posited by a ground in accordance with the rule of identity; analysis of the concepts shows that the consequence is contained in the ground [...] But what I would dearly like to have explained to me, however, is how one thing issues from another thing, though not by means of the law of identity.³⁴

Kant's solution to this problem involves the introduction of the concept of *negative magnitude*, which introduces a principle of what Kant calls “real opposition.” The basic idea is that we can articulate the relation of things by identifying their opposing forces so that the causal power of anything names the degree to which it is the ground for some effect or influence on something else.³⁵ For Kant the concept of a negative magnitude provides an explanation for causal connection because it provides a framework for thinking the relation of force

between things by defining them in terms of their effects upon each other. Kant goes through a host of examples, explaining how debt is merely negative profit, falling is just negative rising, and pain is negative pleasure. In each case, identifying the negative magnitude of one thing in relation to another allows for an explanation of a causal relation. However, in Lacan's reading of this text Kant's solution does not succeed in identifying an explanation for the notion of cause at all. Lacan says,

we can see how closely Kant comes to understanding the gap that the function of cause has always presented to any conceptual apprehension[...] For cause - any modality, even if Kant inscribes it in the categories of pure reason - to be more precise, he inscribes it in the table of relations, between inherence and community - cause is not any more the rationalized for this.³⁶

Similarly, what is in question with the function of understanding is a kind of gap within conceptual apprehension. In understanding, as in cause, there remains a certain relation to a rupture in the attempt to either cover over or to plug up a certain gap in conceptual apprehension. In short, the point of the second aspect of Lacan's critique of understanding is that it has the tendency to cover over precisely what is in question.

The third version of this critique takes aim against a notion of understanding as a relation to the whole. In the French, understanding is *comprendre*, so we might note that it carries the sense of a comprehension, an apprehension of the whole. Whereas understanding aims to give us the whole, that is the hole with a w, the truth as revealed by psychoanalysis depends on the hole without it, the ruptures, splits, and breaks as revealed by the structures of the unconscious. Lacan emphasizes the fact that the subject is always already constituted by an understanding of her world, and her place in it. It's just that understanding is precisely this constitution that is to be called into question in the context of an analysis. As Lacan says in the very beginning of *Seminar I*, what is involved in analysis is a reading of how the subject represents "...what is in himself? no, not only of himself -of himself and of everything else, that is to say of the whole of his system."³⁷ It's not that Lacan is without a certain conception of the whole, but for Lacan, the whole can only be thought from the place where it is split.

In technical terms, it is split between the dimension of the imaginary and that of the symbolic, the name he gives to this is “the Real”.

It is clear that understanding is always within the realm of the imaginary. The point is that, as Fink puts it:

Working in the imaginary register [...] involves trying to understand other people as if they were just like myself, as if they thought the same way, or felt the same way about things, as I do. The imaginary involves looking at others and seeing myself, believing that others have the same motives, hang-ups, and anxieties I have.³⁸

This is precisely the notion of understanding that we get with Jaspers, for whom understanding meaning is what “. . . impinges on myself in the other and on what is closest to me in the other.»³⁹ What understanding does is reduce what is foreign to what is familiar. This operation takes place in the realm of the imaginary because it takes place as a confirmation to given mental schema, a kind of imaging that preforms any given encounter. At this level, Lacan insists that the analyst cannot remain at the level of the imaginary but must emphasize the dimension of the Symbolic. The symbolic “is beyond all understanding, [and it is that] which all understanding is inserted into.”⁴⁰ While the Imaginary is centered on understanding meaning, the symbolic is centered on non-meaning and non-sense. The imaginary allows a certain image of the whole but the symbolic draws our attention to the holes within it. And it is for this reason that Lacan emphasizes the importance of listening to the words over and above the meaning of an analysand’s discourse. In this third version, Lacan’s critique of understanding illuminates the distinction between the imaginary and the symbolic and reminds us to attend to the hole within the whole.

To resist the desire to understand, the analyst must in some sense position the other who is the analysand, as one with whom the analyst stands related, not as the same as the analyst but instead as radically other. The presupposition of the analyst is that one can never be the same as the other precisely because one is never one – one is never same with oneself. This is perhaps what is offered by Lacanian theory in place of understanding, it is the truth of analysis. What I have suggested here is that it is precisely this dissonance, the ring of being not the same with oneself, for which Lacan’s psychoanalytic discourse is calling us to listen. In other words, the analyst does not listen to the

other but listens instead to It... Lacan writes in his essay on “The Freudian Thing”:

It speaks [this is “the key to Freud’s discovery” and IT speaks precisely where it was least expected] namely, where it suffers. If there ever was a time when, to respond to it, it sufficed to listen to what IT was saying (for the answer is already there in hearing it), [...] Let us thus calmly return and spell out with the truth what it said of itself. The truth said, “I speak.”⁴¹

And when it does speak, I hope to have shown, we precisely do not understand. Or rather, when we are struck by the truth, we can only really ask: was that a pat or a slap?

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- 35 For an extremely helpful and clear analysis of this text see: Zinkin, Melissa "Kant on Negative Magnitudes" *Kant-Studien* 103. Jahrg., S. 397–414
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