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Thomas A. Ban: Psychopathology- unedited notes from the 1990s

### **Leonardo Tondo's commentary**

#### **Three giants**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, from 1913 to 1926, three giants of psychiatric thinking worked at a distance of only a few hundred kilometers one from one another. All of them were German-speaking: Freud in Austria and both Kraepelin and Jaspers in Germany. Their views were rather distant and there was little direct communication among them. Emil Kraepelin and Sigmund Freud were both born in 1856, and Karl Jaspers in 1883. Psychopathology is their main interest and each studied it with dissimilar personal visions.

Kraepelin's main work is described in nine editions of his textbook (*Lehrbuch der Psychiatrie*), published between 1883<sup>1</sup> and an incomplete final edition that appeared in 1927, a year after his death, following an academic career mainly based in Heidelberg and Munich. He viewed psychopathology as a categorical description of major or psychotic illnesses which he divided into categories of manic-depressive insanity, dementia praecox, paranoia and paraphrenia. He found major differences among these four nosological categories in symptoms and, more notably, in their course. In fact, the main distinction between manic-depressive illness and dementia praecox is that the former was characterized by recurrent episodes of illness—depressive, manic, hypomanic or mixed. Dementia praecox, instead, was considered to present with an irreversible tendency toward a chronic course, often with functional deterioration that justified use of the term *dementia*. Kraepelin espoused a scientific view of psychiatry which is shown by his use of psychological testing and various experimental substances used to treat patients in the pre-psychopharmacological era. This orientation was encouraged by his work with Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920), the “father of experimental psychology”, who founded the first laboratory devoted to its study in 1879, in Leipzig. Kraepelin's deep interest in research was counterbalanced—as it often happens—by an apparent lack of empathy for his patients, since he deemed it more important to observe than to listen.

Listening to patients, instead, was Freud's primary interest. It was not the only view that placed him at Kraepelin's antipode. Freud's psychopathology was based mainly on his own ideas which could not be substantiated by experimental designs (a critique that remains valid). For this alleged flaw, he received an important critical evaluation by Karl Popper (1902–1994) on the grounds that psychoanalysis is not falsifiable and therefore cannot be considered science. Nevertheless, Freud produced many highly influential books and essays on psychoanalysis and addressed a wide range of topics, including art, civilization, death, science, war and others. Psychopathology in Freud's main work<sup>2</sup> is associated with some mechanisms which find their origins in a subconscious repository of the mind. Following his train of thought, symptoms derive by the actions of the subconscious material which arrive at the conscious surface in ways that are not easily understood. In fact, it is necessary to follow long years of treatment in order to find a meaning in individual symptoms, driven by hope that finally the negative force of the subconscious material will be neutralized.

The subconscious is not mentioned by Jaspers in his main book *Allgemeine Psychopathologie (General Psychopathology)*, which he published at the age of 30 in Heidelberg. In disagreement with Kraepelin, he stated that symptoms are more important than the course of the disease. It is also surprising that such deep insights into the human mind came from a psychiatrist who refrained from seeing patients after the publication of his book as he turned to psychology and eventually to philosophy. Unlike Kraepelin, he was mainly involved with people's lives and his main contribution was the search for meaning of symptoms, which lay beyond their appearance. In Tom Ban's essay, the main issues of Jaspersian psychopathology are well summarized: psychopathology as a science to improve knowledge of general principles that rule mental mechanisms, nosology as the synthesis of mental illnesses, nosography when history is determined by symptoms and biography when it is determined by life experience, and mental illness to result from a "process" and abnormal personality following a "development."

Freud, Jaspers, and Kraepelin have in common the same strong passion to understand the human mind and to explain mental dysfunctions. For a modern psychiatrist, who likes to be a competent clinician as well as a successful researcher, a well-dosed admixture of the knowledge of these three great thinkers would seem to be mandatory. Some of the problems encountered in psychiatry regarding nosology,

anthropology, ethics, epistemology and methodology may be better understood with a careful reading of their texts. To counter prevalent trends in current clinical psychiatry we should learn the importance of spending time with patients in order to learn more from them about their illnesses and about ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition of his textbook was *Compendium der Psychiatrie: Zum Gebrauche für Studirende und Aertze* (*Compendium of Psychiatry: For the Use of Students and Physicians*). It appeared in 1883.

<sup>2</sup> *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (*Psychopathology of Everyday Life*) was published in 1901 and was based on errors (parapraxes) in memory, speech, or acts which are not voluntary but supposed to originate by the interference of unconscious mechanisms.