



Karl Jaspers' boundary situations and psychopathology: alike or distinct?

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Summary

At the beginning of the XX century, Karl Jaspers introduced his conception of "boundary situations" (Grenzsituationen). They represent insurmountable difficulties to the individual, but at the same time, they reveal being as such as well as the potential for self-realization of Existenz. Prototypical boundary situations are death, suffering, struggle, guilt, and chance. One is predestined to founder, to fail, to surrender in them. Jaspers introduced the methodology of "existential elucidation" and "existential communication", the first to clarify the experience and the meaning of such situations, the second – to communicate a translated version of the elucidations of boundary situations to other persons with the goal of mutual self-realization of selfhood, namely Existenz. However, as boundary situations, at first glance, bear similarities to certain psychopathological conditions, it is still not clear whether, in fact, the mere boundary situations belong to psychopathology. By the means of comparative analysis between boundary situations and psychopathology, it is concluded that boundary situations can be present in psychopathological conditions, but they are not pathological as such. According to Victor Frankl, only when a psychosomatic element is added to such situations, they can become pathological. In comparison to Frankl, who envisaged a role for psychotherapy in such situations, Jaspers argued strictly that they could only be subjected to philosophical methods such as existential elucidation, which is never final as the elucidation continues throughout one's whole life. Both Frankl and Jaspers, however, agreed that boundary situations should be positioned in the sphere of the spirit and that the latter can never get ill or disordered. Thus, boundary situations and psychopathology are two distinct phenomena. An open question remains the possible medical or philosophical treatment of such situations.

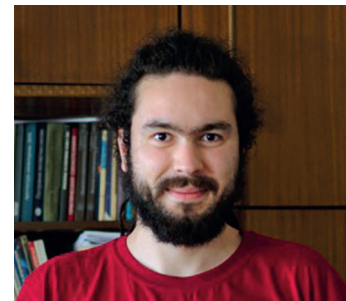
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Introduction

Man's life is often subjected to situations of intrusive and disturbing experiences of dialectical contents into consciousness that shake one's life to its basis. The dialectical nature of such contents consists in the desire to overcome the situation and the insurmountable foundering in it. Such situations were defined as "boundary situations" ^a (Grenzsituationen) by Karl Jaspers ^{1,2}. They touch upon the boundary of existence ^b, which points to something transcendent and to open possibilities for realization of one's authentic self. Boundary situations reveal the true meaning of being ³.

^a Synonyms include: "ultimate situations" ⁴, "marginal situations" ⁵, and "limit situations" ⁶.

^b Immanuel Kant contrasted boundaries with limits: boundaries imply that something does exist outside them, whereas limits represent end-points ⁷.



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Conflict of interest

The Author declares no conflict of interest.

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In Heideggers' "Being and Time," man's life conduct is defined as a continued switching between alertness and succumbing into routines; solely when new and salient features are present to man in his environment, he becomes alert in order to react adequately, only subsequently, to succumb again to his routines^{8,9}. This switching is altered by entering into a boundary situation: the alertness starts to prevail and dominate over routines. Man strives to overcome the situation by rational means, but, nevertheless, he fails. One cannot overcome boundary situations by planning, rationalization, or "calculation"².

Not everyone is subjected to the experience of boundary situations. For example, *das Man* (Heidegger) – the ordinary man in the crowd – will just ignore and shut his eyes as if the situation did not exist. In the same vein, Jaspers conceives of "consciousness-as-such" (*Bewusstsein überhaupt*) as the representative of scientific thinking and rationality, to which boundary situations are simply subjected to avoidance and denial². "There are, of course, people who lack any conscious experience of ultimate situations. They live in the unquestioning security of a traditional world-order, recognizing no form of life except their own"⁴.

One can overcome such situations by a radical change in one's worldview (including the adoption of a religious orientation), by the practice existential communication or via mystical experiences, but this is only a temporary solution^{2,10-13}. Overcoming boundary situations is a constantly ongoing process, which continues throughout the whole life of man. If one does not succeed in temporarily overcoming a boundary situation, he can develop psychological disturbances such as neurosis¹⁴. Moreover, he did not provide any comprehensive discussion on the relation of boundary situations and psychopathology.

Boundary situations

According to Jaspers, man's general condition is that he is always in situations – "Existence means to be in situations"^{2,5,10}. He exits from one situation, only to enter into another. The difference between ordinary situations and boundary situations consists only in the type of appearance. Boundary or marginal situations' definition rests on premises such as: "I cannot live without struggling and suffering," "I cannot avoid guilt," "I must die," etc.^{2,5}. Such situations are "contradictions of life that one cannot remove and can only speciously overcome, and which, in the end, one must simply live with"⁶. According to Jaspers, boundary situations remain hidden in our everyday life conduct. Still, they nonetheless "remain the final sources of what we really are and of what we can become"⁵.

The prototypical boundary situations listed by Jaspers himself are the following ones: chance, death, suffering, struggle and guilt^{1,2}. With respect to death and suffering, I am passive, but with respect to struggle and guilt, I am active. Concerning chance, I am both passive and active as chance is not in my control, but the possibilities it opens

are; however, they are the basis of guilt as such as when one possibility is realized, all other possibilities are lost forever.

Boundary situations are generically inherent to existence as such. Man cannot avoid boundary situations. He is predestined to fail, to founder, to surrender. Nonetheless, boundary situations are potentialities, which allow us the "act of becoming the Existenz we potentially are" and, moreover, to "become ourselves by entering into boundary situations"^{1,2}. Jaspers conceives of the experience of boundary situations as being the same as or identical to Existenz^{1,2}. Boundary situations are non-transparent, inescapable, and uncontrollable. They imply a destruction of values and constraints upon value-formation^{c 4}.

One can only grasp the existential by incessantly illuminating and clarifying boundary situations (through an "existential elucidation") as no complete illumination or clarification is ever reached. Moreover, elucidation cannot be transferred, but rather has to be "translated" to other persons in existential communication².

One gets into boundary situations by the means of leaps². The first leap is from everyday life existence (the world image) to universal knowledge. The second leap is from contemplation to elucidation of potential Existenz. The third leap is from existence as potential Existenz to the real Existenz. Existenz represents the authentic self of man and, as it consists only of potentialities, Jaspers termed it potential Existenz. Being authentic means being whole⁴. However, this search for wholeness or unity is predestined to fail⁶. The real Existenz is the authentic self realized and reached, but it cannot be a direct goal, and it cannot be directly communicated^{d 2}. The leaps, in the end, lead to a solipsistic solitude of Existenz – an "incommunicable wordless mysticism"², which can be dissolved by the anti-solipsistic practice of existential

^c Latzel quotes two passages from *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*: "[boundary situations] do not appear to the individual at first glance as absolutely necessary; they could have been otherwise. No matter how true this may seem to the acting human being, he stands beyond all particular situations in certain decisive, essential situations, which are related to man's being as such, a being which is unavoidably given with finite existence; situations beyond which his vision does not carry, since his gaze is directed upon objective things within the subject-object dichotomy. These situations, which are felt, experienced, conceived, everywhere at the limits of our existence, we call "ultimate situations." What they have in common is that within the objective world as dichotomized into a subject and an object there is nothing firm or stable, no indubitable absolute, no enduring support for experience and thought. Everything is in flux, in the restless movement of question and answer; everything is relative, finite, split into opposites nothing is whole, absolute, essential [...] The process of living thus includes both dissolution and formation of shells. Without dissolution, rigidity would set in; but without shells, there would be destruction. Both dissolution and shells can, however, be detached, in a sense, from the living whole; the result is, on the one hand, nihilistic processes and, on the other, an ultimate crawling into one's shell"⁴.

^d Latzel lists the following difficulties of boundary situations: "1) If I make self-realization my direct goal, I shall be most certain to fail to reach it; 2) The inner performance in which I become my own authentic self are not objectively comprehensible, and hence cannot be directly communicated; 3) These inner performances constitute what is most personal in me. In them I attempt to become myself, not a self as such"⁴.

communication – “We mutually seek our own being in the other”^{2,7}.

Latzel has summarized and listed the main features of boundary situations as follows: “1) It is existentially disastrous to seek out the ultimate (boundary) situation directly; 2) I inevitably find myself in ultimate (boundary)situations; 3) Every ultimate (boundary) situation has a dual aspect: a negative character with respect to my existence, and a potentially positive character for me as potential Existenz; 4) In the ultimate (boundary) situation I achieve myself as Existenz; 5) I can illuminate for myself the “existential” necessity of the ultimate [boundary] situation”⁴. The first feature implies the possibility of a transition to psychological disturbances. The second feature represents the unavoidability and inevitability of boundary situations. The third feature represents the dialectic nature of boundary situations. The fourth feature represents the hidden potentials in boundary situations to achieve one’s authentic self. The fifth feature implies the possibility of illumination of boundary situations and thus allows for the personal growth of the individual.

Psychopathology and normality

Psychopathology rests on the premise that certain personal experiences and behaviors are disturbing for the experiencer, the agent himself, and to other persons in his surroundings. Normality is defined as the absence of such pathological features, and it can vary to large extents; it also does include eccentricities. In between, borderline cases lie. They represent disturbed personalities (abnormally developed psyches) at the end of the eccentricity of normality, and they are usually classified as pathological psychiatric conditions. Jaspers, however, did not believe “in a clear-cut differentiation between the area of normal psychic life and that of psychotic mental life”^{e 15}. He rather conceived of it as a gap rather than a gradual shift. Bleuler and Kahn, conversely, believed that there are perhaps gradations of such states, which can be similar or even identical to the ones observed in the chronic cases of psychosis¹⁶. Finally, according to anti-psychiatry all, eccentric personalities, as well as psychiatric conditions, are just parts of normality, they are just extreme cases.

In the past, Alan Olson warned about the potential possibility of entering into psychological disorders when struggling with boundary situations¹⁴. Jaspers himself did not conceive of boundary situations as psychopathological,

but rather inherent to the nature of man and thus to normality: “[...] the personality disorders (the psychopathies and neuroses) and the psychoses are veritable sources of human possibility [...] The abnormal happening and experience is very often a manifestation of something that is a strictly human concern [...] But we should remember that avoidance of marginal situations does not in itself create illness. We see it carried out quite successfully in perfectly healthy dishonesty and cowardice, without any abnormal phenomena”⁵. He, nonetheless, accepted that neuroses could be conceived of as failures within the struggle of man with boundary situations^{5,6}. Jaspers, however, did not equate existential clarification (elucidation) with psychotherapy: “the clarification of existence is not within the authority of psychotherapy”¹⁸, but in his early monograph “General Psychopathology” he argued that “The goal of therapy has been visualized as a self-realization or as a self-transformation of the individual through the marginal situation, in which he is revealed to himself and affirms himself in the world as it is [...] The practical philosophy of becoming truthful also has a therapeutic effect”⁵.

One of the attempts to relate boundary situations and psychopathology belongs to Fuchs: “[...] the limit situation represents the abutment, so to speak, by which Existenz comes to itself. This is indeed also possible as a reaction to an intense psychic crisis; however, it certainly does not characterize psychopathological states in a strict sense [...] Nevertheless, I want to work out from the thesis that mental illnesses are connected with limit situations”⁶. Fuchs discussed psychic traumas as boundary situations, which cannot be integrated into the psychological unity of man.

Fuchs introduced the term “existential vulnerability” to define sensitivities or dispositions, which can provide easy access to boundary situations⁶. The existential vulnerability of certain individuals makes them prone to experiencing certain situations as boundary situations, which are, however, not such for other individuals: “Persons with sensitivity for existential basic situations can be faced with fundamental and unsettling questions due to the seemingly most trivial events”⁶. The examples, except traumas, which Fuchs lists are the following: “hypochondriac’s sensitivity to the perils of bodily existence; an anorexic’s sensitivity regarding the dependency on a material body; a compulsive neurotic’s or depressive’s vulnerability in relation to freedom and guilt, which above all can turn situations involving decisions into limit situations, and a narcissist’s vulnerability to the limitation of possibilities”⁶.

Victor Frankl also did not consider the extreme conditions of the tragic triad (death, pain, and guilt) as well as the lack of meaning in life (existential vacuum, existential frustration)¹⁹ as psychopathology; rather he asserted that they represent a sign of growth and maturity, and emphasized that they are part of the essence of man¹⁰. The tragic triad is Frankl’s equivalent of Jaspers’ boundary situations.

^e Jaspers introduced the “un-understandability criterion” for delusions. As such, they are different from normal beliefs by their mechanism, and this is a qualitative difference. They are per se not-understandable. Nonetheless, many people have beliefs that are very similar to delusions. The continuum model of belief, for example, postulates that they are not different in mechanisms; rather are based on a difference of the experiences giving rise to the beliefs; this model asserts that delusions as such are treatable, but empirical evidence shows that only half of the cases are treatable with cognitive-behavioral therapy, which points out towards a possibility that after all Jaspers was right about delusions¹⁷.

Comparative analysis of the main features of boundary situations and psychopathology

At first glance, boundary situations bear certain similarities to psychopathological conditions. Fuchs' existential vulnerability linked the two conditions. However, Fuchs excluded psychoses due to the criterion of un-understandability inherent to them. It is true that boundary situations can lead to psychological disorders such as neuroses (anxiety, fear, obsessions). It is also true that psychological disorders such as neuroses can involve characteristics of boundary situations (struggle, suffering, guilt) ¹⁹. Nonetheless, as Jaspers did not involve psychotherapy in the overcoming in boundary situations, they remain in the realm of normality; they are natural situations inherent to the very essence of man. He conceived of psychopathological conditions as searching of man, rather as a manifestation of a disorder of one's personality ³.

It appears that psychopathology can accelerate the appearance of boundary situations, but the two should not be mixed. Boundary situations are "treated" with existential elucidation (clarification) and existential communication, whereas psychopathologies are treated with psychotherapy and medications. What cannot be treated psychotherapeutically is treatable only medically.

In comparison to Jaspers, Frankl considered that psychotherapy could aid man during the tragic triad. He, however, based this on his premise that in psychopathology only the psychosomatic complex gets ill or disordered, whereas the so-called spirit in the spiritual dimension of man or the personality cannot get ill in any circumstances ^{f 10,19}. Jaspers also endorsed this view: "[...] Jaspers and Frankl [...] believe that the spiritual in man cannot succumb to illness" ^{g 18}. Frankl termed such crises of the spirit "noogenic neuroses," neuroses of the spirit ¹⁰. Such neurotic conditions are not spiritual per se, but rather conditioned spiritually ¹⁹.

Frankl considered that for existential crises to become psychopathological, an element of a psychosomatic disorder has to be added ¹⁹. Frankl discussed as well the medical doctors' care of the soul – "[it] is necessary only when psychotherapy in the narrow sense of the word has become impossible" ^{19,20}. However, this care of the soul cannot replace the care offered by priests. The first aims at the remedy of the soul, whereas the second aims at the salvation of the soul. When the medical doctor is not prepared to offer adequate care for the soul of the patient, he rather "virtually tries to sedate the patient with tranquilizers and to drown his metaphysical needs with a cocktail of sedatives" ¹⁹.

^f "The clinical picture is nothing else but the deformed shadow of man himself – an ordinary projection of the patient on a clinical landscape, but a projection only of a dimension of man's being, of what lies outside neurosis and psychosis" ¹⁹.

^g In Jaspers' existential philosophy, the spirit is one of the dimensions of the being of man, along with existence and consciousness-as-such ⁴.

Conclusion

Jaspers considered boundary situations as turning points of human existence. Although one is always predestined to founder in them, they reveal, in fact, the hidden possibilities of human nature and thus are viewed as a prerequisite for the realization of the true self-hood, that is, *Existenz*. Jaspers introduced the methods of existential elucidation and existential communication, through which one is able to clarify boundary situations, without ever reaching a complete understanding. Existential elucidation or clarification is a personal endeavor and, as such, it is incommunicable, whereas existential communication represents a translation, one might say, of the contents of the existential elucidation, which can be subsequently communicated to other persons with the goal of mutual self-realization of their potential *Existenz*. Although Jaspers did conceive of neuroses as failures of overcoming boundary situations and a role of (psycho)therapy for them in his earlier works, later he did not address this issue and held strictly only to philosophical means for an elucidation of boundary situations as potential tools for one's personal growth. In comparison to Jaspers, Victor Frankl envisioned a role of psychotherapy (logotherapy and existential analysis) for neuroses and psychoses as manifestations of the tragic triad (death, pain, and suffering). Both Jaspers and Frankl conceived of boundary situations and the tragic triad, respectively, as non-psychopathological and rather belonging to the dimension of the spirit. They are thus inherently natural elements of the essence of man. According to Frankl, for the tragic triad to become psychopathological, a psychosomatic element has to be added. Thomas Fuchs has attempted, nonetheless, to relate boundary situations and psychopathology (neuroses but not psychoses due to the un-understandability criterion) by introducing the so-called "existential vulnerability." It represents vulnerability towards an easy entering into situations, which can be classified as boundary, but, to other persons, such situations actually do not count as such. In summary, the boundary situations as Jaspers formulated them are not psychopathological per se, but they can coexist with psychopathological conditions. An open question remains the role of psychotherapy in boundary situations – is it possible and applicable, as Frankl suggests?

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