Correspondence

Psychiatry: myth or science?

DEAR SIRS

In his recent article 'Teaching Psychiatry: Scientific Myth', Walmsley[1] adopts a Kuhnian approach to the question of which kind of psychiatry will prevail: 'It may not be necessary to adopt an "eclectic" approach after all. Which view prevails may, in the end, depend on factors quite other than those here mentioned, such as the views of powerful and important teachers of psychiatry—whoever they may be.' In the same edition of the *Bulletin*, King[2] describes just this process as it happens at Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore.

It may be useful at this stage of discussion to focus on the 'contestants' and to investigate whether there is something to choose from, as the word 'eclectic' would suggest. My German upbringing commands me to return to Karl Jaspers' *General Psychopathology*,[3] and I am confirmed in this by Shepherd,[4] who recently reasserted Jaspers' importance for British psychiatry.

Jaspers introduced the dichotomy of understanding *(verstehen)* and explaining *(erklären)* into psychopathology and with it the duality of scientific methods: hermeneutics and scientific explanation. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, was developed from Bible exegesis of the German Protestant tradition, refined by the philosopher Schleiermacher and introduced into psychology (Dilthey), sociology (Weber) and psychopathology (Jaspers), representing the 'idiographic' (Windelband) aspect of these fields of knowledge. It is based on understanding, the German *'ver-stehen'* signifies the 'putting oneself into somebody else's position', and can therefore only be applied to human productions whether they are vocal, behavioural, literary, cultural or historical.

It starts from the always pre-existing prejudice, which is consequently applied to the available data. The resulting contradictions and inconsistencies require a refined version of judgement. This overall judgement will change the contextual meaning of the details, which in turn will lead to a revision of the former. Some dizziness at this point is unavoidable since we just have passed through the famous 'hermeneutic circle'. It is not a true circle, for it leads to a new level of understanding after each round, but like a circle it is never-ending.

Jaspers[3] accused Freud of ignoring this open-endedness by claiming to have discovered causal connections with hermeneutic methods. The same lapse seems to happen regularly in psychodynamic writing (cf. Storr[5]).

Scientific explanations are based on antecedent data and general laws *('explanans')* which with necessity (albeit sometimes statistically) lead to a certain outcome *('explanandum')*. The general law will explain the connection between antecedent data and outcome, while knowledge of antecedent data and general laws will allow a prediction of the outcome. This model, first advanced by Hempel and Oppenheim,[6] clearly shows the logical equivalence of explanation and prediction. The concept of 'nomothetic' sciences, however, is much older (Windelband, 1894) and informs Jaspers' conception of explaining *(erklären)*. Both the hermeneutic and the explanatory method are considered scientific in the German tradition *('Geistes-'* and *'Naturwissenschaften')*, while only the latter would be called science in Anglo-Saxon countries, the former belonging to humanities or arts.

The mastery of nature by the development of explanatory models has certainly been a positive selective factor in human evolution, but man is a social animal and at the moment it rather looks as if mankind's survival hinges on its capacity to increase understanding, which surely would have been a positive selective factor in the past. But is it necessary to consult 'evolutionary epistemology' to decide between 'science' and 'myth'?

The discussion between Kuhn and Popper[7] makes it obvious that one is putting forward an historical, the other a normative argument, both in the Kuhnian sense of the word incommensurate. Few will want to argue with Popper's falsification principle as a scientific norm. Hypotheses will have to be moulded into the explanatory model, so that one can reap the predictions which are the basis for technological progress.

But where, particularly in psychiatry, do these hypotheses come from? Will not even the most 'biological' psychiatry have to measure up to experience to give meaning to its results? Is not even psychopharmacology dependent on phenomenological concepts like hallucinations or depressed mood to show its efficacy? In particular, are psychiatric hypotheses not mostly derived from a hermeneutic, always preliminary, understanding?

I do not think, either, that an 'eclectic' procedure is legitimate. Both explaining and understanding, as already understood by Jaspers, are necessary to psychiatric theory and practice.

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