

**SCHIZOPHRENIA,
MINKOWSKI,
& BERGSONISM**

JOÃO MACHADO VAZ

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MINKOWSKI,
& BERGSONISM

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*FOR PROFESSORS SOFIA MIGUENS TRAVIS
AND RUI MOTA CARDOSO*

*Behind the shelter in the middle of a roundabout
The pretty nurse is selling poppies from a tray
And though she feels as if she's in a play
She is anyway*

Paul McCartney in "Penny Lane" (The Beatles)

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FOREWORD

In the last three decades, an increasing interest can be observed for works at the crossroads of philosophy and psychiatry, to the point that a new research field has been formally constituted: the so-called “Philosophy of psychiatry”. The constitution of this field partly mirrors the changes that have occurred in the past twenty years in some areas of Anglo-American philosophical thought, especially due to the implementation of concrete interactions with empirical knowledge such as biology, and particularly neuroscience. In this vein, several attempts are being made, in particular, to renew the phenomenological approach in psychiatry according to the desiderata of this new scientific trend, so that some of the leading ideas of the “founding fathers” of the so-called “phenomenological psychopathology”, such as, in particular, Karl Jaspers, Eugène Minkowski, and Ludwig Binswanger, are now being reassessed in the light of the main epistemological questions raised by contemporary philosophy of mind. This is a perspective that has mostly emphasized up to now the strictly conceptual approach to these authors, with the consequence that the historical dimension of their concerns and theories has been dramatically neglected.

In comparison with this trend, the work of João M. Vaz on Minkowski stands out for the timeliness and the originality of its methodological approach. Indeed, in this book Minkowski’s work is outlined by considering at the same time not only its internal movement—that is, its theoretical and clinical strength, as well as its inconsistencies—but also the articulation of its genesis with its sources and references in the fields of both the history of philosophy and of psychiatry. Special emphasis is given to the role of Bergson’s thought in Minkowski’s psychopathological approach. In doing this, João M. Vaz does not confine himself to simply repeating what the history of psychopathology

has already acknowledged, namely, the general impact of Bergson's *Lebensphilosophie* on Minkowski's "vitalist" approach. The investigation is theoretically deeper and more critical, insofar as it presents the problem concerning "the reasons that underlie Minkowski's choice of using some Bergsonian concepts while disregarding others". More specifically, it questions Minkowski's disregard for one of the most important elements of Bergson's philosophy, that is, memory. This is a very important and interesting point, given the central role that the topic of temporality, in the form of *lived time*, plays within Minkowski's structural approach. Furthermore, it is an issue that has not up to now been taken into consideration by critical literature.

João M. Vaz's analysis of this point is also particularly remarkable because it contextualizes it within the framework of the most influential psychiatric theories worked on in Germany, Switzerland, and France at the beginning of the 20th century. More specifically, it examines Minkowski's thesis as regards Bleuler's work. The final claim is that Minkowski's disregard for memory comes from his synthesis of the ideas of Bleuler and Bergson. It is precisely this synthesis that, according to João M. Vaz, drives Minkowski to defend the central concept of his psychopathological theory, that is, the *loss of vital contact with reality*, in which he identifies the core of schizophrenia.

This methodological perspective seems to be the most suitable for an approach towards the eclectic character of Minkowski's ideas. For this reason, the author has chosen to introduce the thought of Bergson—in the second chapter of the book—together with the outline of the psychiatric theories worked on in Europe between the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century. Chapter 3 focuses on how Minkowski receives, makes use of, and transforms some philosophical concepts emanating from the phenomenological tradition, first of all Husserl's concept *Wesensschau*, but also Scheler's concept of *sympathy*, and Buber's notion of *encounter*. In this respect, the question put by the author as to the way in which the philosophies of Bergson, Scheler and Buber are "relevant to Minkowski's phenomenology" results very suitably from a methodological standpoint. Indeed, it is a question that draws attention to Minkowski's own methodology and that shows how the concepts he borrows from philosophers serve as instruments for the questions and the challenges put by psychopathology. As João M. Vaz clearly states

from the beginning of his work, “it is the methodological premises of Minkowski that will be brought to light and not the philosophical systems on which he relied”. This is the reason why, besides the philosophical and anthropological inputs, Minkowski’s “structural” approach to psychopathological phenomena is ascribed by João M. Vaz at the same time to the influence of the theories of psychiatrists such as Kretschmer, Delmas and Boll, and de Clérambault, as well as the theories presented by von Monakow in the field of neurology. This is a perspective that allows the author to analyze Minkowski’s thought without declaring its “validity” or its defensibility from a strictly philosophical point of view. In my view, this is an effective example of a “history of science” that, although more attentive to the genealogy of the constitution of a theory in its time, does not shrink from demonstrating the problem of its internal consistency.

Therefore, through his investigation into Minkowski’s work, João M. Vaz is able to show how the conceptual tools of philosophy change when used in the field of psychiatry as a historical and clinical knowledge. To put it differently, he gives an example of how philosophy can actively interact with other domains and forms of knowledge without limiting itself to being an instrument of a purely analytical speculation. As opposed to those philosophical readings that still today consider Minkowski’s thought as the example of a vaguely humanistic approach to mental illness, João M. Vaz’s book is able to reassess Minkowski’s contribution to psychopathology and to re-ascribe to the author the place he deserves in the field of “philosophy of psychiatry”. I think this is the only way available for a reappraisal of Minkowski today, to do him justice and therefore to avoid the “slow oblivion” to which otherwise—as the author of this book maintains—he would be doomed.

A further important issue worth pointing out, in this regard, is the emphasis that the author of this book puts on the phenomenon of “pragmatic deficit”, which is at the core of Minkowski’s concept of schizophrenia. It is an important and promising point in the current debate in the field of philosophy of psychiatry, especially since it represents a fertile ground for new forms of interaction between the analytic, and the continental philosophical traditions. One could mention, in this respect, the role that the reflections of the late Wittgenstein on the concepts of “certainty” and “commons sense” play in the phenomenological account

of the “natural evidence” or what has been called the “tacit dimension” of experience. These are topical questions, insofar as they concern at the same time the problem of the process of diagnosis in psychiatry, and a philosophical reflection on the problem of the forms of praxis and rationality.

Berlin, May 2017

Elisabetta Basso