

FLIGHT OF IDEAS OR FLIGHT FROM IDEAS?
 A SCHELERIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE
 SYMPTOMATOLOGY OF “FLIGHT OF IDEAS”

Public transport is an environment for condensed social interaction. Ever so often, one might encounter unexpected behavior from which to repel in disconcertment when being in a natural attitude. For psychological scientists, however, who engage with their environment in a different attitude, these encounters may serve as a field for observations unlike the clinical institutions. Some symptoms seem to require circumstances that are not standardized by psychological investigation in order to display the whole range of their expression.

What has been called “flight of ideas” might be one of these symptoms. In public transport, it is conspicuous because of its connection with another symptom, called “pressured speech”. Whenever somebody is talking out loud without any apparent occasion, for example, in grammatically coherent phrases of desultory content, it can be described as “pressured speech” or “pressure of speech”. Busses or trains that impose social exposure are a place where the oppressiveness of thoughts that expresses itself in speech becomes visible. In ICD-10, both symptoms are mentioned in the description of F30, Manic episodes. Symptomatically, however, this classification is quite controversial [see Jeyasingam 2013]. Therefore, it is necessary to ask: What, precisely, is “flight of ideas”?

In the late 19th century, influential psychiatrists like Emil Kraepelin and his scholar Gustav Aschaffenburg argued that the disorder underlying the “flight of ideas” was psychomotor. Kraepelin’s conception of “flight of ideas”, as of the 1899 edition of his popular «Compendium of Psychiatry: For the Use of Students and Physicians» [Kraepelin 1899],¹ distinguished “outward” from “inward flight of ideas”. While

¹ Translations from German or Italian to English throughout the manuscript were made by the author.

the former manifests itself in the association of words by similarity of their sound, such as rhymes, the latter relates to the contentual parts of imagination. The “outward flight of ideas” depends on an «increase of motor irritability» [*ibid.*, 154] and the “inward flight of ideas” is a result of a «lack of the consistent control over the connection of ideas» [*ibid.*, 152]. Yet, Kraepelin separated the notion of “inward flight of ideas” from the hebephrenic symptoms (*Zerfahrenheit*²) of dementia praecox where, «unlike flight of thoughts, the train of thought does not show Ariadne’s thread [in the sense of a breadcrumb trail; the author] but the most different imaginations being aimlessly and abruptly stringed together» [*ibid.*, 155]. With that said, patients who showed the tendency to be talkative, had an accelerated articulation, or expressed themselves incoherently were either seen as lacking the ability to suppress their thoughts or having an increased speed of thought, but they were not diagnosed as schizophrenic.

In both cases, however, so retorted Hugo Liepmann, a scholar of the opposing school following Carl Wernicke, in his seminal article «On Flight of Ideas» from 1904 [Liepmann 1904], there would be no difference between the thoughts of a sane person and of a person with “flight of ideas” in regard to their nature. In other words, the psychomotor conception of “flight of ideas” led to a conflation with the symptom of “pressured speech”: A patient would suffer “flight of ideas” if they were pressured to tell everything they thought despite normal cognition or if their – generally normal – train of thought required hastened expression. Ultimately, “flight of ideas” could be reduced to a verbal association in the sense of logorrhea.

As a conceptual alternative, Liepmann proposed that “flight of ideas” was not a psychomotor disorder but an intra-psychoic disorder. Already his teacher Wernicke had proposed to understand “flight of ideas” as an «intra-psychoic hyperfunction» [Wernicke 1900, 398] in which «the distinctions between different association pathways are drastically blurred» [*ibid.*, 397]. This approach allowed him to establish a classification of the symptom that contains three degrees of severity:

² In Kraepelin, the relation between incoherence (*Zerfahrenheit*) and derailment (*Entgleisung*) resembles the relation between “flight of ideas” and “pressured speech” [see Sass 1992].

orderly, unordered, and incoherent³ “flight of ideas” that could be aetiologically distinguished by the frailty of cognitive associations. Nevertheless, just like Kraepelin’s taxonomy, the criterium for assessing a degree of “flight of ideas” was formal, not contentual. Essentially, this explanation of the symptom remained faithful to the principles of associationism that allowed Wernicke to claim that «all mental illnesses are illnesses of the brain» [Jaspers 1923/1973, 382].

In the light of barely emerging psychology of thought, which had received major attention in the German scientific community throughout the first decade of the 20th century, Liepmann could not adopt the unhesitant associationism of his teacher Wernicke. Thus, he rejected both the psychomotor and the associationist understanding of the phenomenon. Even the expansion of associationist explanations by the concept of constellations, as it had been proposed by Theodor Ziehen, which overcame the classical associationist assumption of one-by-one associations, did not satisfy Liepmann. In view of the apparent structure of expression that is maintained even in cases of incoherent “flight of ideas”, he contended that it was not a deficiency of the singular associative pathways but of the «general continuity [*Zusammenhang*]» [Liepmann 1904, 22] of the thoughts. If, for example, a patient was asked about their day, they successfully produced a chain of one-by-one associations, leading them from the weather to the sky, from the sky to birds, from the birds to the animal kingdom, and so forth.

Liepmann concluded that “flight of ideas” could not be explained as a dysfunction of association but of the «superordinate imagination [*Obervorstellung*]» – or “superordinate idea”, since he did not terminologically make a distinction between “imagnations” and “ideas”. Consequently, he rejects the associationist assumption that “flight of ideas” was a formal disorder: «it is not the rule of a certain formal principle of association or the absence of others, only the consideration of a material principle allows to distinguish the orderly sequence of thought from

³ There is a terminological difficulty in discerning incoherent “flight of ideas” from incoherence as a symptom of schizophrenia. It seems as though Wernicke’s terminology would include incoherence in “flight of ideas”. Yet, this is the result of translation since incoherence (*Zerfahrenheit*) is strictly different from incoherent “flight of ideas” (*inkohärente Ideenflucht*).

flight of ideas» [*ibid.*, 33]. The material principle Liepmann proposes is the order of thought that is established by a superordinate imagination which may be the imagination of a real or ideal context which bestows meaning upon the single imaginations. The rule of this principle, however, depends on attention, making “flight of ideas” a “disorder of attention”:

When I say that all ideas which occur throughout the flight of ideas were equivalent, while in orderly thought, imaginations of higher valence, as it were, hover over the singular imaginations, then, this higher valence essentially depends on attention. It is not a permanent superordination of certain imaginations during the entire life or even periods of life, but it changes over the development of the train of thought. The valence of such a superordinate imagination is but another expression for what the psychologist has in mind when he says: attention stays turned towards the object of this imagination [*ibid.*, 45].

Drawing on Liepmann, Max Isserlin described the attentional quality of “flight of ideas” as «turning the direction of imagination» [Isserlin 1907, 520]. In his experimental comparison between patients that suffered from “flight of ideas” and regular participants, he observed an increased frequency of such turns towards a new topic. What is lacking, thus, is not general directedness of thought but a persistent goal which could preserve a specific direction. Liepmann conceives the *differentia specifica* between “flight of ideas” and orderly thought as the anticipation of a goal-state. Since it is absent for the “flight of ideas”, there is no occasion for persistent attention. However, this principal explanation reveals that Liepmann did only overcome the associationist formalism by establishing a cognitivist one.

From Liepmann onwards, two lines of further development came into being. First, Eugen Bleuler agreed with him on the defectiveness of associationist explanations that claimed an increased velocity of thought. He also concurred with the contention that “flight of ideas” could be characterized as a change of direction.⁴ Nevertheless, he re-

⁴ To be precise, he literally wrote that it was a change of goals, not of directions but

jected the explanation of the symptom as a deficit of attention: «It does not help much, especially since one may inversely explain the deficit of attention by “flight of ideas”» [Bleuler 1916, 52]. Instead, he proposed the explanation that “flight of ideas” was a lack of «inhibition of ideas that do not relate to the topic at hand by virtue of the hierarchy of goals» [*ibid.*]. Briefly speaking, Bleuler explained the symptom by a different cognitive function.⁵ This partly adjusted version of Liepmann’s explanation has been most influential for the psychiatric understanding of “flight of ideas” throughout the 20th century [e.g., Andreasen 1979] – particularly in the context of Bleuler’s taxonomy of formal thought disorders.

The second line of development is less known but more important for a phenomenological understanding of the symptom. Its departure is a critical appraisal of Liepmann’s contribution by Oswald Külpe, the father of psychology of thought, as a part of his 1912 article «Psychology and Medicine» [Külpe 1912]. Despite acknowledging the progress made by Liepmann, Külpe goes as far as saying that the term “flight of ideas” was «unsuitable» since the empirical data obtained by Isserlin would show that essential different types of “flight of ideas” were possible.

More importantly, however, Külpe challenges the notion of the “superordinate imaginations” as the very core of Liepmann’s concept: «what is lacking in Liepmann’s explanation is the consideration of the difference between thoughts and imaginations» [Külpe 1912, 24]. This difference had been the most important subject matter of psychology of thought, especially in the work of Karl Bühler who – on the basis of Husserlian phenomenology – had distinguished intuitive “imaginations”, i.e., states of mind that have sensual content, and “thoughts” that do not have an image or sensual content [Bühler 1907]. Furthermore, Külpe highlights «the necessity to distinguish thoughts and acts of thought» [Külpe 1912, 11], for example:

this deviation can likely be explained with his ignorance about the peculiar distinction of the terms in psychology of thought.

⁵ Lately, the concept of “inhibition” as one of the three “executive functions” has received greatest attention within cognitive psychology thanks to the theoretical framework by Friedman and Miyake [2000].

If a woman says she had thoughts about the whole world, and a different time, the thought would be here and in the next moment over there, if a second patient says: I have a great many thoughts and still not a single one, and a third: the fewer thoughts one has, and the slower one thinks, the more thoughts one has, actually; when I was the emptiest of thoughts, I was thinking the most vividly –, then, these utterances may only be understood in so far as the objective side of the process of thought, the thought in the sense of Bühler, on the one hand was given in great manifold and plethora but on the other a statement of the subject about them, i.e. the activity of thought was missing [*ibid.*].

In other words, Külpe criticises Liepmann for not reaching the actual modification of meaning that occurs during the “flight of ideas”. The explanation by “superordinate ideas” may give a «formal and regulatory meaning» [*ibid.*, 23] but it cannot account for the singular “subordinate ideas”. Giving expression to the pivotal insight of psychology of thought, Külpe contends that only the «content of the superordinate imaginations» [*ibid.*, 26] and, thus, the nature of thought may determine the “flight of ideas”.

Moreover, Külpe rejected Liepmann’s explanation of the symptom as a disorder of attention, giving right to Bleuler’s witty remark that explaining “flight of ideas” by attention invoked its inversion. Külpe adds that circumlocution of attention as an inscrutable preference of certain contents could not suffice since other mental phenomena, such as valuation or selection, could equally serve this purpose. To Liepmann’s assumption that the attention would hold on to a certain content, Külpe replies that the instability of attention in the case of “flight of ideas” must have a different cause which determines whether the attention lets go or holds on. Therefore, Külpe reverses Liepmann’s explanation: «superordinate imaginations do not arise by virtue of attention which is directed at an arbitrary content, but the direction and the permanence of attention depend on a superordinate imagination which guides them» [*ibid.*, 29]. Ultimately, this amounts to a difference in the meaning of the experiences which distinguishes “flight of ideas” from orderly thought. Now, from the standpoint of psychology of thought, “meaning” primarily is a matter of task-consciousness, whereby “task” does not mean

an instruction, such as experimental instructions, but the motivational experience that underlies the goal-directedness of problem-solving.

Despite of his critical advance beyond Liepmann, Külpe did not succeed to propose an own explanation of the phenomenon. In the second generation of psychology of thought, for example, in the case of Otto Selz [1913], “flight of ideas” was only a peripheral topic. Ultimately, psychology of thought did not establish a new approach apart from cursory remarks by Richard Hönigswald who did not pertain to the movement in a strict sense. Its methodological restrictions to introspection prevented the next step which was undertaken by Ludwig Binswanger as a phenomenological psychiatrist.

Explicitly continuing the spadework of Külpe and Hönigswald, Binswanger dedicates himself to an anthropological point of view. He adopts the psychological insight that, «in the phenomenon of flight of ideas, there is no lack of determinant order [*Ordnungsbestimmtheit*] but it is levelled, i.e., its organisation dwindles» [Hönigswald 1925, 68], so that he may ask: «How must the anthropological structure be constituted in which something like a levelling of determinant order becomes possible» [Binswanger 1933/1992, 22]? Put in the context of psychology of thought, Binswanger’s approach amounts to the agreement with Külpe and Hönigswald that “flight of ideas” is a disorder of the organisation of tasks. Affected patients are easily distractible because they lack a clear organisation within the order of their thoughts, an organisation that distinguishes substantial from accidental thoughts. His particular interest, on the other hand, is the form of being-in-the-world under these circumstances. Analysing one case for each, orderly, unordered, and incoherent “flight of ideas”, Binswanger tries to reveal the existential condition of the symptom. For the orderly “flight of ideas” of a patient who had written a letter to the chef of the clinic’s kitchen, he states:

The task of thought in our example is not externally given to the person but given from herself to herself. More specifically, it is not the expression which is the task, but every written or verbal expression essentially entails such tasks. By making herself known as the complaining person to the chef, the task to verbally and mentally express the content, reason, and purpose of the complaint emerges. As we have seen, she prioritized to make herself known

as the complaining person over clearly formulating the objective content of the complaint [Binswanger 1933/1992, 26].

What brings forth the “flight of ideas” is not a lack of order but an impractical order that is in danger of losing social comprehensibility. This danger, however, is only the superficial consequence of the “flight of ideas”. On a more profound level, the way in which a person selects the tasks with which they are occupied is the expression of their existential foundation. Drawing on Paul Häberlin, Binswanger describes the existential conflict which prefigures which tasks somebody will realise as «being-in-the-world [*Dasein*] and the problematic nature [*Problematik*] which are the two “sides” of reality» [*ibid.*, 46]. While, in the philosophy of Häberlin, reality itself is problematic, being-in-the-world is unproblematic. Experiencing “flight of ideas”, thus, originates from dominance of the latter side. The patients dwell in a certain existential attitude, namely the «festive joy of being-in-the-world» [*ibid.*, 49].

This condition explains both why the persons do not notice the incoherence of their expressions and why they are easily provoked to express themselves: «what might appear to us as an “ordinary event” that is issued from an “entirely harmless” person tears the manic person from their festive attitude» [*ibid.*]. The trigger for the “flight of ideas” is the confrontation with the problematic nature of reality, but the patients do not adopt a corresponding attitude but remain in the “festive joy of being-in-the-world”. Hence, the patient who had written the inappropriate letter of complaint dealt with the intrusion of a problem into her sphere of untroubled being-in-the-world. However, she was not able to adopt an actual problem-solving attitude since she was existentially bound to her joyful attitude that could only employ the inadequately playful measures incorporated in “flight of ideas”.

Seen from this point of view, “pressured speech” becomes a «toy for the joy of being-in-the-world» [*ibid.*, 130]. The resulting “confusion” that is characteristic for the “flight of ideas” contrasts with “sobriety” as the regular attitude that is not bound to the “joy of being-in-the-world”. This confusion is not unintelligible to psychiatry but connected with playfulness as an anthropological structure. It is the «ecstasy of playfulness, irresponsibility, being without problems» [*ibid.*, 142]. The most

fundamental characteristic of this existential attitude is being “saltatory” [*Sprunghaftigkeit*] that manifests itself in the patients’ experiential relation to various domains of existence, such as space, where patients tend to show sweeping gestures, or time, since patients are restless or hasty and tend to be repetitive. Yet, whoever suffers from “flight of ideas” does not socially isolate but rather embodies an «immanent dependence on actual utterance of thoughts, precisely speaking, of expectation» [*ibid.*, 225].

Külpe’s argument against Liepmann had been that superordination of a thought alone could not account for the meaning of what patients who demonstrate “flight of idea” actually express. Binswanger’s solution regards the existentially “saltatory” character of the symptom that shapes its sense making. In other words, there still is a certain but dysfunctional order which is peculiar to “flight of ideas”. In contrast to the sobriety of a sane attitude, however, it is levelled since being “saltatory” does not maintain a stable preference. Instead, the affected patients behave playfully in inadequate occasions.

Despite of Binswanger’s seminal contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon, there remains an important difficulty of explaining the reason that prevents patients from the return to an adequate attitude towards the problems that excite their “flight of ideas”. Why are the patients so prone to the penetration of their “festive joy of being-in-the-world” by arbitrary problems? Is it an existential lability? Looking at it the other way around, one may ask what constitutes the relevance of apparently “harmless” occurrences so that they cause the “saltatory” reaction. Just as Bleuler and Külpe emphasized, the answer requires an experiential entity that precedes attention and, likewise, the “saltatory” nature of the “flight of ideas”. More specifically, having a saltatory attitude cannot be a sufficient description of the symptom since there are more existential conditions that can be characterised as “saltatory”, such as creative insight [Graumann 1955] or mind-wandering.

What kept the approaches that describe “flight of ideas” from a deeper understanding about its constitutional structure is intellectualism. Even though psychology of thought had made pathbreaking contributions to the field of motivational [Ach 1905; Lindworsky 1923] and emotional psychology [Orth 1903], the fundamental epistemological approach of investigation considered the psychological phenomena as ver-

balizable entities that belong to a rational sphere. The more open-minded researchers from the school, such as Karl Marbe, August Messer, and Karl Bühler, reached as far as Husserlian phenomenology which is fairly rationalistic in its own fashion. A subtler characterization of “flight of ideas” as an existential attitude requires the consideration of the pre-reflective conditions of thought, in particular for the investigation of the “saltatory” order of experience.

Külpe and Binswanger highlighted that being “saltatory” was reflected in a playful change of preference in the present situation, making the stream of thought difficult to follow when judged from the less instable attitude of sobriety. The critical aspect of this difference is the preference of ever-changing thoughts over an earnest form of facing the present problems. In other words, there is no sufficient reason to believe that the patients were lacking the cognitive capacity to concentrate on a single matter – “flight of ideas” might concern attention but not in the sense of a general attention deficit. On the contrary, Binswanger described how the incoherent “flight of ideas” of one of his patients clearly expressed his continuous emotional involvement with the suicide of his father. Further cases demonstrate that the symptom does not depend on “pressure of speech” or its acceleration, such as the example of a patient with thought retardation described by Schroeder [1910].

The apparent deficits of attention and cognition trace back to a more fundamental condition which alternates the order of preference in the patients. This crucial role of preference is why the Schelerian psychopathology, which has recently been advanced by Cusinato [2018], may help to understand the symptom. It proposes a framework for the functionality of emotional acts underlying motivational or cognitive acts, such as acts of thought and, consequently, “flight of ideas”. The fundamental contention of Schelerian psychopathology is that mental disorders express an aberration of the so-called *ordo amoris*, i.e., the personal order of preferences for values which guides all emotional acts, namely intentional feelings, and, as a consequence, directs all further acts. In Scheler’s words:

The origin of all intellectual acts and the corresponding imaginative or meaningful contents depends not only on the existence of external entities and respective stimuli, but also essentially

and necessarily on acts of taking interest and on attention, which is guided by these acts, ultimately, however, on acts of love and hate [Scheler 1915, 143].

The critical revision of the notion of thought by Külpe was only the first step. In order to comprehend the constitution of intellectual acts, it is necessary to consider the emotional acts which give rise to a sense of order, in the first place. Although it might seem as though, for example, dreaming had a comparable – saltatory – functionality as “flight of ideas”,⁶ the underlying order is essentially different. Most importantly, however, the explanation by differences in the *ordo amoris* can account for the particular nature and content of the subordinate thoughts.

Recognizing that there is a “saltatory” order in the “flight of ideas”, the leading question about the nature of the symptom should be transposed. Instead of asking about what might be lacking, psychiatry can ask about what is failing in the conduct of the patients. Binswanger’s solution was to say that they do not have an adequate attitude towards problems, thereby continuing the consideration about the “task” as it had been proposed by psychology of thought. But what does it mean to have a problem – in the emphatical sense of the word – if not attending the relevance of the subject matter, viz. feeling its value [Wendt 2018]? Giving a spontaneous and arbitrary answer is not “having” a problem but solving it prematurely. This is the core of the “flight of ideas” and its expression by “pressured speech” becomes necessary in order to intersubjectively remove the semblance of a problem. But why does the patient feel the urge to abdicate all problems?

Binswanger’s rather poetic reply is the existential attitude called “festive joy of being-in-the-world”. Yet, this remains an unsatisfying answer without an explanation of its meaning. Schelerian psychopathology can fill the gap: Despite undertaking obvious effort to speak, even feeling pressure to do so, the resulting situations are nothing less than dialogical. This holds true especially for so-called small talk, i.e., communication for the mere sake of social interaction. Drawing on Blankenburg, Cusinato depicts this aspect as a «loss of natural evidence and

⁶In his article, Külpe endorsed this comparison, as it had been undertaken by Hacker [1911].

of the consciousness of the “rules of the game”» [Cusinato 2018, 248]. Even in small-talk, it is necessary to contribute to the participatory sense making. Although it is not required to explicitly understand it, the situation must incorporate a sensible encounter of openness towards a shared situation – and eventually a problem – that is vulnerable to violations, such as inappropriate deviations and, thus, “flight of ideas”.

The root of the disorder, consequently, can be found in a withdrawal from the inter-subjective sphere of sense-making. The “festive joy of being-in-the-world” is a seclusion from the original openness towards fellow human beings: The patients do not feel the value of having a problem because they fail to overcome their «egocentrism» [Cusinato 1999]. Paradoxically, this seclusion is not an omission of communication but an interception of its meaning. A playful paronomasia may be witty, but in an intersubjective encounter it is destructive during the sensible phase of participatory sense-making which establishes a mutually shared problem.

Accordingly, “flight of ideas” does not indulge in the transgression of rules, the free play of creativity. This would be the case if the affected persons actually participated in a pertinent problem. On the contrary, the repudiation of authentic interaction is the expression of a retraction from intersubjective anthropogenesis:

Love and hate, beatitude and desperation, remorse, shame, and the feeling of respect do not only serve the interaction with the environment or the struggle for social recognition, but strive, in first place, to share the hunger to be born completely,⁷ which is the reconciliation with the singularity of the other on a trans-subjective level [Cusinato 2018, 244].

Socially highly regulated situations, such as conduct in public transport, are a challenge and the habitual setting for “flight of ideas”. It is not irrelevant whether or not the patients are by themselves, the cause for their experience is not autism. Yet, other human beings cannot be fellow players in the saltatory play of ideas but must remain referees who monitor the compliance with social rules. Unlike schizophrenia, where

⁷Cusinato takes up Zambrano’s term «hambre de nacer del todo» [Zambrano 1989, 94].

other human beings are perceived as robots [*ibid.*, 223], patients who suffer from “flight of ideas” live on the fringe of intersubjectivity, not in neglect of it. Their “pressured speech” imitates the form of genuine dialogue and employs expressions that might be relevant if uttered in the right context. Yet, they ultimately withdraw. Thus, it is fair to say that it is not only a matter of fugitive ideas but of the patients escaping from ideas, viz. problems, a “flight *from* ideas”.

Overall, the history of psychiatry has revealed that “flight of ideas” results from an aberration of order. The notion of order, however, is not self-evident. It requires a certain experiential structure which bestows order upon the subject. Schelerian philosophy has demonstrated that this order-bestowal is emotional, ultimately founded on acts of love and hate. The aberration, consequently, can be traced back to a certain inter-subjective attitude that corresponds with the “festive joy of being-in-the-world”. However, fellow human beings are a source of problems and life offers a plethora of problems. From the standpoint of sobriety, this is no reason for withdrawal since problems can be valuable, nurturing growth of personality: the growth of the *ordo amoris*. Since «all joy wants eternity», and the patients cannot enjoy problems, they must prematurely solve any problem that might intrude their being-in-the-world by straying from its meaning.

What does this mean for the symptomatology of “flight of ideas”? The formal contention that it pertained to mania should not be mistaken for irrelevance of the symptom itself. Commonly, symptoms are framed to be mere indicators for the disorder which ostensibly carries the entire complexity. Schelerian psychopathology cannot agree. Drawing on Dilthey, Cusinato highlights that expressions are essentially united with vivid experience [«unità di *Erlebnis* e *Ausdruck*»; *ibid.*, 103]. Thus, the complexity of “flight of ideas” shapes the meaning of any disorder which it might express – commonly mania, but not exclusively. This complexity should not be reduced to a formal distortion of language or association. On the contrary, the inability to engage in orderly communication despite considerable effort of articulation is a remarkable phenomenon. When investigating the nature of “flight of ideas”, the absence of what is normally functional confronts psychiatry with a unique gateway to the nature of human inter-subjectivity.

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Keywords

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Abstract

In psychiatric symptomatology, “flight of ideas” is commonly understood as a symptom of a formal thought disorder which is typical for bipolar illnesses. Notwithstanding, there is a historical controversy that preceded this classification. Neither the nature nor the meaning of the symptom is self-explanatory. Psychology of thought, especially in the works of Hugo Liepmann and Oswald Külpe, has tried to grasp its actual complexity. Yet, they could not advance beyond the presuppositions of their own psychological paradigm. The recently proposed Schelerian psychopathology, however, may help to solve these long-lived problems. Instead of investigating thought as a monolithic phenomenon, Schelerian philosophy reveals its pre-reflective constitution. This investigation amounts to the emotional phenomenology of the *ordo amoris* as a structure of primordial affectivity. It plays a decisive role in the formation of the order which underlies thought and, consequently, of the disorder of “flight of ideas”.

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