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**PHENOMENOLOGICAL PSYCHOPATHOLOGY  
(INTERVIEW WITH PROF. DR. GUILHERME MESSAS)**

*PSICOPATOLOGIA FENOMENOLÓGICA  
(ENTREVISTA COM PROF. DR. GUILHERME MESSAS)*

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The current interview has occurred in november between the interviewers Victor Portugal and Andre Fukuda with Prof. Dr. Guilherme Messas. The dialogue tried to explore coming from basic questions concerning phenomenological psychopathology to contemporary debates and opinions present in the literature. In general, Prof. Messas sought throughout the interview to define and defend phenomenological psychopathology not as the only hegemonic option in the field, but as an interesting path which maintains itself close to human experience, which analyzes the structures of subjectivity and carries a high clinical value. Prof. Messas has in various moments highlighted that phenomenological psychopathology is not contrary to the studies in biology or pharmacology, an erroneous opposition which is frequently lifted in theoretical and practical contexts, but that it is actually possible to have a mutually beneficial relationship. What does phenomenological psychopathology is in fact opposed is to what the Professor called 'philosophical operationalism' and 'cerebrocentrism', fundamental pillars for the DSM's current psychopathology. Besides, Prof. Messas highlight his position regarding the relationship between phenomenological philosophy and psychopathology. According to him, as a historical result of the application of phenomenology to psychopathology, phenomenological psychopathology became independent, i.e. it has a life of its own regarding that fundament who originated it in the first place. It would not be the case, then, that it should always be necessary to return to classical authors of phenomenological philosophy in order to validate what phenomenological psychopathology performs. Lastly, the interviewed affirmed that he believes in the existence of a very bright future for phenomenology in psychopathology, specially for the brazilian one. This future demands in one hand reading the classics, but on the other hand it also demands audacity to be thrown in contemporary debates which occur worldwide, enabling that the brazilian contributions to the field, which is of excellent quality, develop itself even more. This interview represents an attempt to introduce but also to clarify and structure the subject of phenomenological psychopathology in Brazil with one of its leading authors.

**INTERVIEWERS:** To begin with, could you comment on your academic education until the present day?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I am a psychiatrist, I've followed all steps of the regular career: three years residence, master and doctorate studies, and I have academically specialized myself in chemical dependency and I've been dedicating myself to phenomenological psychiatry, what helps me a lot in the clinic. I am a university professor and I divide my life between the academy and the patients. I consider myself upon everything a clinician and I would even say that this can be linked to the second question of how the phenomenological psychopathology came into my life assisting me as a clinician.

**INTERVIEWERS:** And this interest came already from the university or from the practice as clinician?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** Right, the interest came from a disconnection between what existed in the university and the clinical needs. I would say that the residence education was a very detailed one, but I felt in the occasion that every scientific knowledge that showed up and was developed could only partially be of use for clinical purposes. For a more detailed clinical comprehension, another type of knowledge was necessary. And I got in touch with this knowledge by accident through old books of phenomenological psychopathology that were in the library, so it was actually by visiting the university's library in the Psychiatry Institute that I could find some of those old books. By that time there was not much interest in phenomenological psychopathology, and in the class and lunch breaks I could read those books, and they enlightened me with everything that was necessary in order to know something about the clinic. I was more and more passionate about that and started to understand that it was impossible to carry out a very good clinic without knowing in more detail that literature. Once again, it was such a literature that was taught in those times as something classical, more or less like listening to Beethoven. People would dedicate themselves to it by dilettantism, for intellectual sophistication, but it had little to do with daily needs. I did not agree with this, but by that period I remember that psychiatry was very isolated regarding this contact with human sciences, and in Brazil even more, brazilian psychiatrists were very isolated. Those were the years in which I already saw the need of better attending patients and was enchanted by this classical literature. And what is interesting is that the world turns around and in current psychiatry one can see a renewal of interest for phenomenological psychopathology and even for phenomenology, and many young people have been getting

interested about this, developing certain threads that were left by the old generation and therefore making that phenomenology in psychiatry and psychopathology become now a current topic, recognized as necessary for the clinic. It is very interesting how this appears in the younger generations.

**INTERVIEWERS:** We are talking about phenomenological psychopathology as if the reader already knew something about it. Could you tell us what do you understand by phenomenological psychopathology and also why this psychopathology and not other classical or contemporary existing proposals?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** The definition of phenomenological psychopathology is no simple thing, just as psychoanalysis could be thought in this way. But the approaches which are connected to it have many references of how it should be performed. I understand phenomenological psychopathology in two ways, there is a wider meaning, which was introduced in psychiatry by Karl Jaspers who understood phenomenology as a description of subjective experiences, this understanding still exists, that of a descriptive psychopathology. But there is another understanding, which is more restrict, in which one understands phenomenological psychopathology as the founding science of psychiatry and psychology which tries to understand the structures of subjectivity. Subjectivity is then not the ultimate goal of understanding. Knowledge goes a step beyond and tries to understand those structures that enable subjectivity in the first place such as intersubjectivity, embodiment and spatiality. For me, that is what I understand by phenomenological psychopathology. It is evident that there is no psychopathology that can claim to be the best, there is none that can say that the others are worse or that should pretend being hegemonic. I think that phenomenological psychopathology can be seen as an alternative, but I give priority to it because it is very close to experience, and staying close to experience is fundamental for the demands of current sciences, both human and biological sciences. I think that phenomenological psychopathology is an instrument which, in the way I see it, opens more perspectives for establishing dialogue with the biological sciences, and they are still beginning, much has yet to be done.

**INTERVIEWERS:** Could you talk a little bit more about your preference for phenomenological psychopathology over a more organicist, biologicist, still predominant approach in psychiatric and psychological scene?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I would like to begin by putting some words into things in order for us to understand where do I consider phenomenological psychopathology relevant. I don't think that phenomenological psychopathology is opposed to the biological model. The word 'organicist' remits us more to a certain style of understanding mental diseases from the XIXth century that we could call braincentrism or something like this. I think that phenomenological psychopathology does not fight with brain studies. Much on the contrary, phenomenological psychopathology opposes itself to the dualism that puts brain as the cause of experiences by one side, and by the other side behaviorism, not Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) which is very welcome, but those who understand that the only object of science is human behavior. Phenomenological psychopathology can contribute to contemporary neuroscience in order to show exactly what is the function of existence as whole for the brain, how it participates, to use the terms of Thomas Fuchs, as a medium between the individual and its context. Phenomenological psychopathology, and even phenomenological philosophy provide elements to enrich existing biological science, and biological science is very welcome, pharmacology is very welcome, and all of those are fundamental elements for a psychopathology. The great problem is when this is poorly understood in an operational fashion, which is the philosophy that lies in the foundation of DSM. Therefore, philosophical operationalism is the opposite of phenomenology in psychiatry and psychopathology. This is very interesting to say in order to really show, in order to avoid false oppositions in which the biological model is a model to be repudiated. I think that it needs to be incorporated in a way which takes into consideration the global meaning of what is it to exist, what is it to relate, what is it to experience the world subjectively. It is a great field of research yet to be explored and I think that it is a great challenge in the XXIth century and that it is actually of interest for many people in the basic neuroscience, not operationalist and non-positivist.

**INTERVIEWERS:** If we return to Spiegelberg's book "Phenomenology, psychology and psychiatry" we see that an attempt to draw a map of influences of phenomenology in psychiatry and psychology of the XXth century. This debate has seen in recent years a revival in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and even nursery, in which one questions the relationship between phenomenology, originally thought as a transcendental enterprise, and then from that psychopathology. We can observe different positions in this matter, for an example that it is a relationship of application or of mutual enlightenment, or even that this is an improper

relationship that ends by naturalizing phenomenology itself. What is your position in this debate in what refers to phenomenological psychopathology?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I think that to cast doubt on the possibility of an empirical phenomenological science is impertinent, it does not make much sense. There is philosophical phenomenology, which keeps to evolve by many authors and that belongs to a certain field of society which is philosophy. From that moment were derived sciences, namely, human scientific applications such as phenomenological sociology, phenomenologically inspired architecture and also psychopathology. I defend that for an empirical science, for a human science, once initiated, has a life of its own, it does not owe anything of its internal connections and internal logic to those who conceived it in another philosophical field and provided its main concepts. What psychopathology did was to import words, concepts, worldvisions from philosophers so to give order and meaning to the need of understanding disturbed human experience. Therefore, a relationship between the two is a relationship of mutualism. They exchange knowledge, exchange information but are not necessary to each other. I don't think that phenomenological psychopathology should at all moments return to the original philosophers in order to verify if a certain statement is right or not. That is a function of the philosopher. The psychopathologist is an empirical scientist, a human scientist, and there I think that the relationship is one of affinity, mutual relationship and it is evident that they provide clarifications as well. But, personally speaking, I do not use the term naturalization of phenomenology, because I think that it presupposes that phenomenology need to render tribute to its origin, and I do not think that. I think that phenomenological psychopathology, psychiatry and psychology have an autonomy of full right. My stand on this debate is a stand of freedom from the original philosophical foundation. I will even quote, to not say that I am on this alone, a passage of Minkowski, who was certainly the one who coined the term phenomenological psychopathology in the more strict sense, in the sense of examining the foundations of existence, of going further than Jaspers went. He said that to be faithful to the classical authors is not to keep always repeating -the quote is by heart, but that's the idea- but actually to inspire, to have the original intention of seeking human foundations, and therefore, for the psychopathologist to be faithful, he needs to be free. The greatest faithfulness of the psychopathologist in regard to philosophy is freedom.

**INTERVIEWERS:** The next question is more or less a follow up of what you have already said. It does not seem wrong to say that this braincentrism is still the current psychopathological paradigm. We can observe a certain turn starting with the DSM III in the 80s, in which

mainstream psychopathology adopted various new features and changed its original program. This mainstream psychopathology has however been put into question. How do you see this mainstream psychopathology and how could phenomenological psychopathology contribute to it?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** DSM's main psychopathology, that as I said is operationalist, that is, it strives to be able to provide easily employable categories, and I think that it runs in circles for a very long time. The new editions of DSM showed that the capacity of understanding human existence, which is the foundation of practice, was lost, and lateral renewals were then tried, but it walks from nothing to nothing. It has arrived to such a point in which one of the violent critiques against the operationalist DSM comes from the braincentered paradigm, which is for example RDoC, that says that DSM is good for nothing and that what we should in fact understand are the genetic, neuroscientific cerebral components contained in the disease, a positivist paradigm. The positivists are not satisfied with braincentrism. I think that this psychopathology, for being more simple, is more mainstream, and should remain like this for a good while. But its limits are given in the clinic. We should not forget that the clinic is the final goal of a psychopathology. And then, yes, even the operationalists and the positivists have lost themselves regarding the clinic with all the horrors in psychiatry that we daily see regarding mental health.

What does phenomenological psychopathology have to contribute? Firstly, it can contribute with a philosophical comprehension that organizes in a deeper way a logical-scientific context of neuroscientific findings. It has a function, and there is a philosophical one, of organizing in a more coherent way the body of knowledge, which was previously already an idea of Jaspers, although he was not a phenomenologist. In the second place, phenomenological psychopathology has to contribute with the clinical capacity. There will not be a clinic without a more advanced psychopathology, and the phenomenological psychopathology is a very advanced form of clinical understanding. It contributes in order to see how the altered experience appears in every individual. I specifically think that the idea of clinical decision making, whether that by which one understands in a patient in order to make a clinical decision, by saying something to a patient, by proposing a behavioral or environmental intervention, it depends above all from phenomenological psychopathology. It has an enormous value in the maintenance of clinical quality in mental health, vide psychology, psychiatry. In psychiatry, phenomenological psychopathology has the function of guiding the

pharmacological conduct, which is still a very non-explored topic. Pharmacology is something very welcome and necessary in psychiatry, the pharmacological organization, the logic which makes one clinician to propose pharmacological effects to the patient, it has a lot to gain if guided by phenomenological psychopathology.

**INTERVIEWERS:** You have employed the word ‘clinic’ several times, and this is also a concept that has different meanings in literature, such as a more existential encounter between beings and a not so existential, much more practical and daily concept of clinic. How do you understand the clinic?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I think that, for phenomenology, the clinic mixes some things from normal and daily existence with that encounter that occurs in a protected state. I don’t think that psychotherapy must suspend the differences between the roles of patient and clinician. I think that in the phenomenological tradition those roles are closer than in traditions which understand a much wider difference between one person and another. In the same way, the frontier in phenomenology between psychotherapeutic action -now speaking as psychiatrist- and pharmacotherapeutic action or in the behavior or context managing of people, as is sometimes necessary in my area of alcohol and drugs, this difference doesn’t make much sense. There are certain divisions in society, people are used to the psychiatrist to do one job and the psychologist to do another. However, strictly speaking in the phenomenological thinking, the works are very similar, because they come less from a scientific elaborated ‘technique’ and muito more from a context of contact between two people, the integrality of two people. So I like to understand clinic in a very indefinite way, namely, that by which one does by a profound understanding of someone’s existence and the way by which this existence distorts because of some experience.

**INTERVIEWERS:** The phenomenological psychopathology movement has many faces and influences, as Spiegelberg already understood in the 80s. From classical names such as Jaspers, Binswanger and Minkowski as well as contemporary ones, among which you have already mentioned such as Thomas Fuchs, Havi Carel, Thomas Sass, Josef Parnas, Giovanni Stanghellini. In your published papers you sometimes dedicate a whole article to some of those nomes, as is the case with Jaspers and Binswanger. I would like to know if there are some of those names which you consider especially important and relevant both for your work and also for contemporary phenomenological psychopathology.

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** Well, I think that if we think about the history of psychopathology, the most quoted, visited with more references is Karl Jaspers. Although Jaspers is a moderate phenomenological author and many people say that he was not a phenomenologist -he himself says that he was not a phenomenologist-, nevertheless he is in the end in contemporary literature the biggest reference, and it makes sense. In terms of impact, I think that he is the biggest impact throughout the time. There are new authors such as Thomas Fuchs, which is a fundamental author of vast influence, multiple interests, great erudition and maybe the one who has the biggest impact right now. I believe that this is currently the greatest and most representative impact, both in the proper sense of importance, deepness, as well as in the sense of extent of interests. Personally, the great author who was much important for me was Binswanger. He was a confused author, hard to read, multifaceted, complex, irregular, ambiguous, and because of this I think that he enlightened in a barroc way, he shed light but also shed shadow upon the great themes. So I think that Binswanger and his heir, Blankenburg, who most developed the idea of anthropological proportion which is the idea that guides me the most in my own works. I think that this author was very good for me, but my utmost personal respect for Binswanger's work. But this is a work that is nowadays hard to be read, it is a work that needs a tourist guide in order to be known. But there are a lot of other authors. This is a tradition in which people can be initiated, already advanced and still do not know a lot of important authors.

**INTERVIEWERS:** Well, we already quoted danish, italian, german and french names. But how would you evaluate the phenomenological psychopathology scene in Brazil? How's it going in contrast to what is being produced worldwide?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I think that the brazilian phenomenological psychopathology is excellent, great. I think that it is a psychopathology which is capable of having authors who have inspired themselves from many traditions, both philosophical as psychopathological. I think that only a few countries in the world, to not say no country at all that I have met, has such an intense diversity and production regarding phenomenological psychopathology as Brazil. There are so many people involved, the capacity of making disciples as some young people who are very interested, that produce work, reread and reinterpret. I think that the brazilian tradition is maybe the most rich in utilizing phenomenological psychopathology.



And it is not only I who is saying this. A lot of colleagues tell me when I am travelling around that they are surprised by the number of people and with the age of those people. If I had a critique to do, and I have it, is that brazilian phenomenological psychopathology or psychology is too modest. It does many things but it still keep looking too much to the other side of the ocean in order to receive things that are frequently worse than what is produced here. It has been showing itself more and more, but it could be more proud of itself.

**INTERVIEWERS:** Does this has to do with publications in english?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** In order to establish a dialogue with the whole world, the publications in english are necessary and important. But the publications in english cannot replace the original thought in its original language, because it is there that things appear in the first place. I always write in english for international publications. I like reading the international literature. I am fairly up-to-date on what is being produced in french, english, german and spanish, and even less in spanish. And I think that the things that the young people produce here is in most of the times superior. So I would say that maybe what we could do here is throw ourselves a bit more, to not repeat so much the tradition. I think that Brazil gets a little intimidated. To stay always connected to the tradition can end up with a colony spirit, it ends up not daring enough, and then some cultures which dare, but make things even with an inferior quality, emerge as the most innovative. I think that we could be more comfortable to innovate in phenomenological psychopathology.

**INTERVIEWERS:** Could you talk about your current research interests and projects?

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I am currently writing a book about my opinion on psychopathology of substance use, of chemical dependence and drug abuse, which is my main phenomenological project which shall be published in 2020, by Springer. It is a hired project in english, and it is exactly in this spirit that what we produce here should be in touch with the world, with the international community. This is my main personal project, which consumes a lot of time for inspiration and a lot of will to work. Together with this project I lead a post-graduation course here in São Paulo. My interest in this course is precisely to train and educate people in the sense of making people see and produce literature, master and doctoral degrees, but also to produce a clinic, to see patients and experiences and from that also to produce

a clinic. I think that phenomenology in clinic makes only sense if it is also rooted in a way of meeting the patient which is phenomenological. There is a lot of work to be published, much to be done which is to keep, expand and renew this tradition which I have been dedicating myself a lot.

**INTERVIEWERS:** What is the role and the challenges that you consider that phenomenological psychopathology may play in the future? You can also use this moment to say something for those who are reading, as for young people who are starting in phenomenological psychopathology.

**GUILHERME MESSAS:** I would like to start this answer with another quote, now from Karl Jaspers. This quote is very dear to me for a while and I think that this is what I would have to say to the young people who are starting, who are still in the moment of getting in contact with knowing another tradition, when you create a bond with a tradition. “The determination of finding something new and being original is usually futile. Novelty is a gift which suddenly appears to the individual who hardly works maintaining a lively spontaneity of observation and continuously thinking in time. The first need is always to absorb what has been done before. But we train ourselves confirming what is already known, and the new things appear in the next generation when they are possible”. I would say to the young people that the future of phenomenological psychopathology comes from patience. It comes from entering and penetrating into the classic texts, from reading them and getting used to a way of seeing the clinic, so people see how the most experient and seniors do the clinic, and then gradually penetrating in the phenomenological tradition. I am very optimistic that the role that phenomenology will carry on in the future is that of being able to see all the complexity of human existence. And human existence does not transform itself, it incorporates all technologies which exist in contemporaneity, which will keep existing, and make that the challenges of existence change, the capacity of seeing those challenges, the capacity of bringing those people to the maximal potential of everyone’s gift is the greatest challenge of phenomenological psychopathology. I see a very bright future, which is already happening, and I think that it in fact lies in the hands of young people letting themselves be permeated by this tradition in psychopathology and the psychological clinic of psychiatry.

**Guilherme Messas** – Psychiatrist for over 25 years, professor at the Santa Casa de São Paulo School of Medical Sciences (FCMSCSP) and member of the Values Based Center at St Catherine's College in Oxford. Coordinates specialization courses in Phenomenological Psychopathology at the same institution and participates in national and international research projects related to the themes of psychiatry and alcohol and drug abuse. Professor Dr. Messas has been doing for decades an important and valuable work of dissemination of phenomenological psychopathology in Brazil, with international contributions of equal relevance. His various publications in national and international journals cover topics such as phenomenological psychopathology, alcohol and drug abuse, and differential diagnosis. He has also been publishing several books, of which we list only *As Formas da Alteração Mental* (2007), *Psicopatologia Fenomenológica Contemporânea* (2008), *Ensaio sobre a Estrutura Viva* (2010) and *Psicose e Embriaguez: Psicopatologia Fenomenológica da Temporalidade* (2014).

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