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The Two Spaces of Eugène Minkowski

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Abstract

Eugène Minkowski was a French psychiatrist and philosopher during the first half of the twentieth century. He integrated the phenomenology of Husserl as well as French philosophy into the domain of psychopathology. However, previous studies of Minkowski have not focused on his interpretation of phenomenology, partly because of the difficulty of his interdisciplinary approach. In order to clarify certain aspects of his works on phenomenology, here, we will focus on the theme of spaces as proposed in his works. We believe our study of such spaces will show that Minkowski's philosophical contemplation between phenomenology and psychopathology would anticipate the work of Merleau-Ponty.

Keywords: light space, dark space, disturbance, articulate, debris, human

要旨

ウジェーヌ・ミンコフスキーは20世紀前半にフランスで活躍した精神医学者であり哲学者である。哲学の分野においては、フッサール現象学とフランス思想を精神病理学の分野に初めて導入した人物として知られている。しかしながら、その功績にも関わらず、ミンコフスキーについてはこれまで、その分野横断的な思想の困難さから、彼が現象学をどのように解釈し、これを精神病理学の分野に導入したかについて詳細に研究されたことはなかった。したがって本論文においては、彼の現象学を明らかにするために、彼の空間論に焦点を当てる。これによって彼の現象学と精神医学を結ぶ仕事の核心が、メルロ＝ポンティによって受け継がれたことが明らかになるだろう。

キーワード：明るい空間、 暗い空間、 精神障害、 分節化、 名残、 人間的

Introduction

Eugène Minkowski was a French psychiatrist and philosopher during the first half of the twentieth century. He studied and trained in psychiatry in Germany, but after the First World War he worked, for the most part, in France. He integrated the phenomenology of Husserl as well as French philosophy into the domain of psychopathology. However, previous studies of Minkowski have not focused on his interpretation of phenomenology partly because of the difficulty of his interdisciplinary approach. To examine an aspect of his work on phenomenology, we will focus here on the theme of spaces according to Minkowski.

1. The light space

The light space is a visual space (Minkowski 1970: 372) endowed with light. In addition, it is a socialized domain (Minkowski 1970: 393). As a result the light space constitutes a social domain for each person. As Minkowski wrote:

I also situate myself in this space, and in doing so I make myself similar to ambient things, at least in one aspect of my being; I occupy a place in this space in relation to other objects which are there, exactly as they do.

(Minkowski 1970: 428)

Once 'I' is placed in the light space, 'I' becomes something that resembles other objects, occupying a place. Therefore, 'I' has a spread, a distance and an extent. In this way, we can say that the light space as public domain has two functions. First, it establishes 'I' as a thickness that constitutes a part of this space. Whether I want to or not, I occupy a place once I live in this world. Second, the light space makes visible the condition in which 'I' is installed, drawing a comparison with other objects. It permits 'I' to reflect on this situation with visibility. Minkowski underlines this point as follows:

I “fall into lines” in this way, so to speak, and the space that englobes all of us brings about a leveling effect. Space thus becomes a “public domain”. I share it with everything that is there (…), I occupy only a very small place in it. It is in this space that I see my fellow men - seeing, moving, acting, living as I do. (Minkowski 1970: 428)

In the light space, 'I' becomes 'we'. 'I' am embedded in 'we' and the light space makes 'me' as small as my fellow men. Observing their comportment, I am conscious of my condition. For Minkowski, however, this situation is not Hell (Sartre 1947). Actually, 'I' can share this space as a social domain with others, and this space is a priori related to the world. But the light space has a more important feature. Minkowski finds a cause of mental disease in the transformation of the relation between the light space and the dark space. The light space is not the cause of the disease, but it is the place where it manifests because the light space is the common world.

2. The dark space

The light space is the space of vision, while the second space, the dark space, is that of touch. As Minkowski describes it:

Precisely because of this it [obscurity] does not spread out before me but touches me directly, envelops me, embraces me, even penetrates me, completely, passes through me, so that one could almost say that while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light. The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it.

(Minkowski 1970: 429)

In the dark space, no matter how I have established myself, as I occupy a part of the world, I do not have consciousness of my actions. Because I penetrate the dark space, I receive and mingle with it. Moreover, Minkowski states:

A light, a spark, can surge up in obscurity like a shooting star, only to disappear again. A murmur, a sound, a voice can be uttered; an icy blast can pass by. Obscurity can even be filled, be peopled, so to speak, with murmurs and noises. (Minkowski 1970: 429)

As we have seen, Minkowski shows the light space as the space of vision. The other, the dark space, is the space of touch. Here, however, the dark space is described as that of hearing (a murmur, a sound, a voice) as well as vision (a light, a spark, a shooting star). Therefore, for Minkowski, the dark space is full of the five senses, while the light space is that of vision as reflection only.

There is a paradox here. Minkowski claims that I cannot raise myself in the dark space and am confused by it. However, how can this self bring back these experiences of the dark space with this luxuriance of senses if it does not have consciousness of its manifestations in the dark space? It has just been affirmed that the dark space is filled with the senses, but here, Minkowski writes:

Dark space completely envelops me and penetrates me far more than light space; the distinction between inside and outside and, as a consequence, the distinction between the sense organs also, in so far as they are destined for exterior perception, play only a completely unimportant role here. (Minkowski 1970: 432)

It has already been stated that a light, a murmur, and an icy blast can appear in the dark space. Here, in contrast, Minkowski nearly abandons the role of the sense organs in this space. Without these, how can there be experience and creation of a vivid description of the dark space?

To attempt to answer this question, we will now study the relation between the light space and the dark space.

3. The overlap between the light space and the dark space

Minkowski (1970: 431) believes that, in normal life, the light space and the dark space “are in complete accord” but there is a disturbance in the relations of the two spaces. He comments as follows:

In order to characterize the relations between these two ways of living space as adequately as possible, one would have to ask whether light space is surrounded by dark space or whether it is ingrained in it.

(Minkowski 1970: 432)

In this way, Minkowski reflects on the relation between the light space and the dark space; he states that the latter surrounds the former like the frame of a picture. One can live in these two spaces in two different ways, but one cannot remain conscious of the dark space. This raises the question: How can one know something that stays in the shadow of the consciousness? To attempt to answer this question, we will take the example of a

perturbation of relations between two spaces. Minkowski quotes F. Fischer (1929 & 1930):

“I only know now,” the patient said, “that the autumn countryside” (which was before him) “without changing place is penetrated by another space, so fine and invisible that you can scarcely observe it. This second space is obscure or empty or terrifying; it is difficult to say which of these expressions comes closest to the truth. Sometimes one space seems to move; sometimes they pass through each other. They intersect single space. For the same thing happens in me. There is a continual interrogation directed at me, it orders me to lie down, to die, even, or to continue to go ahead”. (Minkowski 1970: 432-433)

This patient declares that there is a penetration of one space into the other. The autumn countryside is ordinary, but something strange penetrates it. It is difficult for him to notice this phenomenon, so he reports this experience of the overlap of two spaces with some difficulty. From the patient’s phrase, Minkowski concludes that “two dissociated worlds, one superimposed upon the other, exist in him” (1970: 423). While in ordinary life the light space is edged and supported by the dark space, in the diseased life the two spaces overlap.

We can interpret Minkowski’s reflections on the relation between the two spaces in this way, but what demonstrates these relations? We would like to recall one question that arose at the end of section 2; how can one have consciousness of and describe the dark space? Let us draw a conclusion about this question from the reflections of Minkowski; experience of the dark space can be described by borrowing from patients who feel something painful and have consciousness of the dark space. In addition, these patients use the sensations and consciousness of the light space. As Merleau-Ponty writes, “[t]he murky space which invades the schizophrenic’s world cannot substantiate its claim to be a space without being related to clear space” (2002: 336). The dark space cannot be justified by itself, but it can assert itself as a certain space owing to the lightness of the light space. Merleau-Ponty goes on to say:

He always retains, with clear space, the means of exorcising these specters and returning to the everyday world. The phantoms are fragments drawn from the clear world and borrow from it such standing as they are capable of enjoying. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 336)

As all is formed by the overlap of the two spaces, phantoms have two aspects, too. Although phantoms lead to disease and shadows, Merleau-Ponty considers them proof that patients do keep the way open to the common world. In this way, persons with diseases are tied to the common world owing to its light and order.

4. The light and psychopathological comprehension

Minkowski discerned an overlap between the dark space and the light space and Merleau-Ponty respected this relation between the two spaces. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty noticed debris of the light space in the dark space. For Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty, the dark space is as essential as the light space. As we have already noted, the dark space is deep, fertile, and full of mystery. Here, however, we show that the light space has an important role in the fields of phenomenology and psychopathology.

Why does Merleau-Ponty declare that there is debris of the light space in the dark space? He writes:

Are not mere appearance and opinion being brought back under the name of phenomenon? Is not the origin of precise knowledge being identified with a decision as unwarrantable as the one which shuts up the madman in his madness, and is not the last word of this wisdom to lead us back to the anguish of idle and solitary subjectivity? These are doubts which need to be dispelled. Mythical or dream-like consciousness, insanity and perception are not, in so far as they are different, hermetically sealed within themselves; they are not small islands of experience cut off from each other, and from which there is no escape.

(Merleau-Ponty 2002: 340)

Here, Merleau-Ponty clearly illustrates the possibility for the light consciousness to communicate with the mythical or fantastic consciousness, in other words, the consciousness of the dark space. Subjectivity in the field of phenomenology does not enclose the lunatic in madness, even when hallucinating; rather it always maintains a way to return to the common world through the light space. This way to the common world is the same as that which Jaspers (1971) called “the possibility of comprehension” in his psychopathology. That is to say, Merleau-Ponty excluded the anxiety of subjectivity, equating the way in phenomenology with that which psychopathology has opened.

How are these two fields equated? As Merleau-Ponty says:

But mythical consciousness does indeed open on to a horizon of possible objectifications. Primitive man lives his myths against a sufficiently articulate perceptual background for the activities of daily life, fishing, hunting and dealings with civilized people, to be possible. The myth itself, however diffuse, has an identifiable significance for primitive man, simply because it does form a world, that is, a whole in which each element has meaningful relations with the rest.

(Merleau-Ponty 2002: 341)

The mythical consciousness, namely the consciousness of the dark space, always maintains both the lightness and the darkness. Merleau-Ponty (2002: 341) called this relation between the lightness and the darkness “the link between subjectivity and objectivity”. This band makes psychopathological comprehension possible. Myths, madness, dreams are articulated and they have identifiable senses because they form the world, namely a totality, though they are unconscious. Merleau-Ponty continues:

It is true that mythical consciousness is not a consciousness of anything. That is to say that subjectively it is a flux, that it does not become static and thus does not know itself. Objectively, it does not posit before itself terms definable as a certain number of properties, which can be isolated from one another and which are in fact interlinked. But it is not borne away by each of its pulsations, otherwise it would not be conscious of anything at all. It does not stand back from its noemata, but on the other hand, if it passed away with each one of them, and if it did not tentatively suggest objectification, it would not crystallize itself in myths. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 341)

He distinguishes the mythical consciousness, the consciousness of the dark space, from the consciousness of the thing. On the side of subjectivity, the consciousness of the dark space does not know anything. On the other hand, on the side of objectivity, the consciousness poses nothing before the consciousness itself. Thus, the consciousness stays in the shadow of the two sides. However, the consciousness always keeps identifiable senses, being connected with the consciousness of the light space. The movement of objectification and the movement and the light always exist in the dark space; therefore, the dark consciousness can be crystallized.

5. Conclusion

We have followed studies on two spaces by Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty. For both phenomenology and psychopathology it is important to discover the debris of the light space in the dark space, because the light opens the way to the common world and the senses. One cannot be completely isolated from the world and other people, although one may want to be; one must always live in this totality. In other words, the world can never be reduced to separate elements.

Here, in conclusion, we would like to observe two different understandings of the light space from Merleau-Ponty and attach these to the cosmology of Minkowski. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2002) distinguishes two spaces: the geometric space and the lived space. This distinction corresponds to the light space and the dark space. These two spaces are different but are equally human. Further, Merleau-Ponty discusses a third space, the non-human space which is the natural space. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, the light space is the human space, but it is also non-human. Merleau-Ponty writes the following:

The dream space is segregated from the space of clear thinking, but it uses all the latter's articulations; the world obsesses us even during sleep, and it is about the world that we dream.

(Merleau-Ponty 2002: 341)

The light space can be articulated as the space of the dream: the dark space. For Merleau-Ponty, the function of articulation rises from objectivity. He continues:

This link between subjectivity and objectivity, which already exists in mythical or childlike consciousness, and which still survives in sleep or insanity, is to be found, a fortiori, in normal experience. I never wholly live in varieties of human space, but am always ultimately rooted in a natural and non-human space. (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 342)

Subjectivity and objectivity are connected in the dark space and the light space. Moreover, this band always exists in our consciousness when we have dreams. In other words, we take root in the natural and non-human space, in the light space.

In this way, Merleau-Ponty gives two different understandings of the light space. First, it is an anthropological space. Second, it is a non-human and natural space. We can read these two understandings of the light space in *Towards a Cosmology* (Minkowski 1999). Here, Minkowski takes on the challenge of enlarging the meaning of the word ‘human’ until it does not mean ‘proper to humans’. In his cosmology, the human is unified with the universe, and the human and the non-human are affirmed simultaneously. In order to clarify this new anthropology which includes nature and the universe, we will need to continue our research on the works of Minkowski and Merleau-Ponty.

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