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# Writing on the history of the philosophies of psychiatry: the Cambridge approach

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## Résumé

Alienism (psychiatry, psychological medicine) has been philosophized upon since its inception during the 19thC. The marked variations shown by these contributions reflect the changes in fashion that have affected historiography, philosophy and medicine since the early 1800s.

So far, there has been little interest in writing the history of the successive philosophies of psychiatry. This neglect of the diachronic approach is likely to reflect the ahistorical bias of both analytical philosophy and of the neurosciences, currently in great vogue.

As they accumulated, the ‘philosophies of psychiatry’ came to form a polythetic class of analytical, descriptive, auditorial and prescriptive activities. This may have resulted from the fact that they have tended to focus on different components of the psychiatric manifold. On the one hand, centripetal approaches brought into psychiatry off-the-shelf, generic philosophical methodologies, such as the philosophy of mind which are not specific to the problems of psychiatry. On the other hand, centrifugal approaches, (practised by psychiatrists with philosophical and historical training) have been able to identify the specific problems of psychiatry, as they actually emerge in the clinical interface.

Developing this second approach, the Cambridge group has shown that psychiatry: a) is a hybrid discipline (straddling the natural and social sciences and borrowing concepts from both) and b) has built in a similar hybridity into its objects of study (mental disorders and mental symptoms). This hybridity carries important implications for our understanding of mental disorders and symptoms and exposes the fundamental difference in epistemological basis underlying psychiatry and medicine. In turn, this carries consequences for selecting valid research methodologies and for the ethics of therapeutic intervention.

Historical epistemology, the historiographical approach chosen by the Cambridge group also shows that the history and philosophy of psychiatry are inseparable. This lecture will propose a research programme and the corresponding conceptual tools that may be needed to develop a successful HPS approach to the philosophies of psychiatry.

**Mots-Clés:** historical epistemology, philosophy of psychiatry, hybrid discipline, mental disorders, mental symptoms

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