

A critical comment on Thomas Fuchs's *Psychiatry as a Relational Medicine*

Comentário sobre *A Psiquiatria como Medicina de Relação*, de Thomas Fuchs

Fabio Caprio Leite de Castro

Abstract

The book *Psychiatrie als Beziehungsmedizin – Ein ökologisches Paradigma* (Fuchs, 2023) is an essential work in the field of phenomenological psychiatry. Thomas Fuchs manages, in a clear and pedagogical way, to offer the reader an argumentative path that weaves together different domains (philosophy of mind, biology, psychology and psychiatry) and multiple theories (systemic theory, autopoiesis, enactivism, synergetics and phenomenology), showing their coherence in an ecological-integrative paradigm. We propose a critical analysis of the main arguments presented in the book and based on an integrative ecological model, to defend that psychiatry is a medicine of relation. We emphasize the possibility of integrating the 5e paradigm and the systemic and phenomenological model with the theory of causal circularity, vertical and horizontal, which allows us to understand the disorders of embedded subjectivity as disorders of self-understanding and interaction of the person.

Keywords: ecological paradigm; 5e cognition; enactivism; circular causality.

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Resumo

O livro *Psychiatrie als Beziehungsmedizin – Ein ökologisches Paradigma* (Fuchs, 2023) é uma obra incontornável no campo da psiquiatria fenomenológica. Thomas Fuchs consegue, de modo claro e pedagógico, oferecer ao leitor um caminho argumentativo que costura diversos domínios (filosofia da mente, biologia, psicologia e psiquiatria) e múltiplas teorias (teoria sistêmica, autopoiese, enativismo, sinérgica e fenomenologia), mostrando a sua coerência em um paradigma ecológico-integrativo. Propõe-se uma análise crítica dos principais argumentos defendidos no livro, a partir de um modelo ecológico integrativo, para a defesa de que a psiquiatria é uma medicina de relação. Enfatiza-se a possibilidade de integração do paradigma 5e e do modelo sistêmico e fenomenológico à teoria da circularidade causal, vertical e horizontal, o que permite compreender os transtornos da subjetividade incorporada como transtornos de autocompreensão e de interação da pessoa.

Palavras-chave: paradigma ecológico; cognição 5e; enativismo; causalidade circular.

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Introduction

The book *Psychiatrie als Beziehungsmedizin – Ein ökologisches Paradigma* (Fuchs, 2023) is an indispensable work in the field of phenomenological psychiatry. Thomas Fuchs manages, in a clear and pedagogical way, to offer the reader an argumentative pathway that stitches together various domains (philosophy of mind, biology, psychology, and psychiatry) and multiple theories (systems theory, autopoiesis, enactivism, synergetics, and phenomenology), demonstrating their coherence within an ecological-integrative paradigm.

Over the past three decades, Fuchs has developed a highly original anthropological conception with notable studies in psychiatry, and he is currently regarded as one of the leading figures in phenomenological psychopathology. Progressively, his work has moved toward a phenomenology of embodiment and of the person (Fuchs, 2000), engaging in a critique of neurocentrism, functionalist reductionism, and postmodern constructivism (Fuchs, 2020)¹. The emphasis on an ecological model for a non-reductionist understanding of the brain has become increasingly prominent in his oeuvre (Fuchs, 2008)².

The paradigm presented by Fuchs in his recent book *Psychiatrie als Beziehungsmedizin* (2023) is, therefore, the result of a long process of theoretical elaboration and maturation. Its main objective is to respond to a need in contemporary psychiatry, which lacks an effective answer to the classic mind–body dualism—one that, at the same time, does not fall into a dangerous neurocentric reductionism. Moreover, Fuchs's thesis seeks the contact zone between phenomenology and the systemic perspective, offering a clarifying conception of (i) subjectivity/intersubjectivity grounded biologically; (ii) mental disorders understood through an ecological lens; and (iii) an ecological perspective on diagnosis and therapeutic possibilities, according to this model.

¹ For a review of the book *Verteidigung des Menschen* (2020), which brings together articles concerning these critiques and in defense of humanism, cf. Castro; Jung, 2020.

² This book was translated into English (FUCHS, 2018) and, more recently, into Portuguese (FUCHS, 2024). In 2023 and 2024, Thomas Fuchs took part in the **Ciclo Subjetividade e Cultura** (organized by the research line in Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of the Graduate Program in Philosophy at PUCRS), in which he delivered, in 2023, the lecture “Was wird aus dem Menschen? Plädoyer für einen neuen Humanismus” (which he likewise gave on the occasion of receiving the Erich Fromm Prize in 2023) and, in 2024, the lecture “Psychiatrie als Beziehungsmedizin – Ein ökologisches Paradigma.” These lectures are translated and published in FUCHS, 2024a and FUCHS, 2025.

Psychiatry as a “relational medicine”: a new paradigm

As a starting point, the book poses the question of why psychiatry needs a new paradigm (Fuchs, 2023, p. 15). Since its constitution in modernity, psychiatry has lived with an ambivalent identity, as underlined by the aphorism of the psychiatrist Martin Roth: “the most human of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities.” (Ibidem). In the history of psychiatry, what we often find is an attempt to integrate multiple aspects, which point toward the complexity of the human.

However, one of the trends that has become very present in the scientific debate about the human being is reductionism, which may be defined by the following thesis: phenomena or systems with a higher organization can be fundamentally explained and known by phenomena or systems of lower organization. In physicalist terms, the events of the world are describable as processes to which they reduce. Thus, when we shift to a neurological model, this conception would lead us to a neuroreductionist theory of brain disorders or diseases—which has become dominant in Western psychiatry. From a theoretical standpoint, neuroreductionism is generally associated with “epiphenomenalism,” according to which effective causal processes actually occur at the neurophysiological level, such that subjective experiences like feelings, thoughts, or intentions are, ultimately, merely epiphenomena, or side effects of brain processes.

Contrary to this model, George Engel (1977) developed the so-called “biopsychosocial model,” which aimed to offer a non-reductionist response and a holistic understanding of medicine, psychosomatics, and psychiatry. Fuchs (2023, p. 24) values in this model the concept of the “person”, understood as the totality of an organism as well as the unity of subjective experiences and behaviors. Beyond the concept of person, the concept of “emergence” is also decisive, in the sense of designating the arising of phenomena at higher systemic levels, which could not be explained merely by the processes or components of lower levels. (Ibidem). Through this model, it is possible to conceive illnesses and disorders at three effective levels (Ibidem, p. 25–26): as somatic (third-person perspective), experiential and behavioral (first-person perspective), and as maladaptation with respect to socio-ecological conditions (ecological perspective).

However, the proponents of the biopsychosocial model failed to offer a response to the growing dominance of one of the three domains in question (somatic, behavioral, social), which, since the 1990s, have driven an increasingly reductionist turn in psychiatry.

Its theoretical model ends up relying on an eclecticism without philosophical coherence—besides failing to clearly spell out the causal relations between the different hierarchical levels of the organism (Ibidem, p. 26). In the face of new reductionist trends, Fuchs presents the need for a new paradigm capable of integrating, with philosophical orientation and empirical basis, the most up-to-date approaches in cognitive science, phenomenology, developmental psychology, and socio-ecological psychology.

Before beginning the presentation of this paradigm, Fuchs (2023, p. 28–34) also offers a prior conceptual stance in relation to two conceptions that typically pose problems for the theoretical recognition of a fundamental role of embodied subjectivity in psychiatry: “dualism” and “epiphenomenalism.” The answer of epiphenomenalism (the reduction of subjectivity to neurophysiological processes) conceals a danger, in the way it rejects classical dualism (the separation between soul and body), precisely because of the inconsistent reductionism to which it is tributary. To move beyond this debate, Fuchs (2023, p. 31) presents the hypothesis of an “explanatory pluralism,” which does not explain disorders strictly by neurological processes in a linear-causal structure, but situates them with respect to the different hierarchical levels of the organism. This thesis enables the explanation of an independent causality at the higher levels and, in a circular manner, makes it possible to account for a “top-down” efficacy among these different levels.

Embodied cognition and the “5e” cognition paradigm

Once the hypothesis of an explanatory pluralism has been established—the ground on which the entire book is oriented—Fuchs then embarks on a theoretical course aimed at constructing an ecological-integrative paradigm for psychiatry. Moving in this direction, the first step taken by the author is to validate and integrate into his argument the paradigm originating in the cognitive neuroscience—commonly designated as “5e.” This nomenclature derives from five terms that characterize human cognition, based on aspects that came to be recognized especially from the 1980s onward—when an approximation was forged between philosophy of mind, neuroscience, and phenomenology, given the set of experimental results in the field of embodied cognition. According to the “5e” cognition paradigm, cognition is *embodied*, *enactive*, *extended*, *embedded*, and *emotive*.

The issue raised by Fuchs in this chapter is less that of explaining this paradigm—already well known in the cognitive sciences debate—and more that of showing its applicability in psychopathology. Each of the five characteristics of human cognition

presented in the “5e” cognition paradigm yields, as it were, a possible avenue for approaching the experience of mental disorders. In the case of *embodied* cognition, the example used by Fuchs is depression, “whose core symptoms are by no means of a purely ‘psychic’ or even ‘cognitive’ nature, but primarily somatic” (2023, p. 42). That is, in the conception of depressive symptoms, the description of psychic and cognitive symptoms finds them related to bodily dimensions. Evidently, this does not mean that the psychic and cognitive dimensions are reducible to the biological in a physicalist sense, but—diametrically opposed to this kind of reductionism—that depressive symptoms are not separable from the corporeality that suffers them.

In his analysis of enactivism, the theory that originated the thesis of *enactive* cognition, based on the notions of autopoiesis, adaptivity, and ascription of meaning, Fuchs (2023, p. 49–50) shows how, in disorders, there may be an impairment of such matters—that is, of the organism’s relation with the environment. In this sense, the feature that marks the impairment of cognition as enaction would be a rigidity and loss of flexibility in the interpretations and valuations of situational changes. Based on the systemic model in which the enactivist conception was elaborated, the notions of flexibility and rigidity employed here have a different sense from what we find in mechanistic conceptions, which end up reducing the cognitive process to the neurological structure involved. Such flexibility or rigidity is observable in the person’s very interaction with their social or family context, not being a mere result of neurological processes.

In the field of *extended* cognition, that is, of an extension of cognition into a broadened scope in terms of tools and meaningful interactions in lived space, Fuchs (2023, p. 58–59) again presents the example of depression. He also presents the examples of anxiety, panic, and post-traumatic disorder, to illustrate the way in which different modalities of suffering and avoidance of specific objects and spaces are experienced.

The fourth aspect of the “5e” cognition paradigm, the *embedded* cognition, can likewise lead to an understanding of mental disorders. From this angle, observation is directed toward the influences of culture on psychic disorders. Fuchs offers as examples (2023, p. 62–65): (i) “patoplasty” (*Pathoplastik*)—that is, the historical mutability of psychic pathologies—such as the emergence of hysteria or anorexia/bulimia in different historical contexts; (ii) the looping effect, as in the “Werther effect,” on the increase in suicide after the publication of Goethe’s work, or the increase in cases of “multiple personality,” or even of burnout; (iii) the pathogenesis of schizophrenia related to certain matters of a social

order; and (iv) the processes of modernization and acceleration related to depression.

Finally, the *emotive cognition*, that is, emotions understood from the paradigm of embodied cognition, foregrounds the theme of value qualities or affective pregnances (*Affordanzen*) vis-à-vis the surrounding world, from the centripetal angle of affective components and from the centrifugal angle of emotional components (Fuchs, 2023, p. 67 – 68). In the affective–emotional domain, it is possible to describe the affective qualities of objects from the bodily experience of resonance with the world, through perceptual affections and emotions. In psychopathology, Fuchs exemplifies this dimension by way of the relations between the reduction of bodily perception and emotional disturbances, particularly in alexithymia or in borderline disorder.

From embodied cognition to embodied subjectivity

Building on the foundations provided by the paradigm of embodied cognition, Fuchs proposes, in the third chapter (2023, pp. 75–103), a new step toward embodied subjectivity—based on the relation between biological organization and conscious experience. Already in the previous chapter, Fuchs had shown himself receptive to the concepts of autopoiesis, but here he is even more explicit regarding this systems-based biological theory (Maturana; Varela, 1995), which posits the principle of the “self-organization of living beings.”

Throughout Chapter 3, adhering to the autopoiesis model, Fuchs brings to the fore how self-organization can be understood as a relation of the whole living being to its components; he examines how this whole of the living being can be conceived as the basis for conceiving subjectivity; he develops the dual aspect of the body—the objective body and the living body (*Körper* and *Leib*)—through which the living being appears (and whose model overcomes the traditional mind–body problem); he examines the special form of causality of the living being, which makes it possible to interpret subjectivity as an effective, non-reductionist physical principle.

What is most striking and original in his approach, with respect to embodied subjectivity, is the way he elaborates a circular causal theory to make explicit the efficacy of subjectivity, with which he proposes a rereading of the traditional distinction (stemming from the hermeneutics of Dilthey and Jaspers) between explaining (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*). By means of the conception of causal circularity, it becomes possible to spell out how and why explanation and understanding are not mutually

exclusive, but complementary.

In this case, it is an interpretation of the thesis of causal circularity drawing on Hermann Haken's Synergetics (2013). Fuchs's originality lies precisely in showing how subjectivity, as organism or living system, is constituted by vertical processes of circular causality ("bottom up" and "top down")—given the relation between the whole of the living system and its components—as well as by horizontal processes of causality (between the components of the same level of a living system), through the reciprocal interaction among the components (Fuchs, 2023, pp. 86–91).

Thanks to this circular causal theory, which unfolds both at the same level and across different levels—from subatomic particles, through cells and organs, up to the living system—it becomes possible to offer a non-reductionist answer regarding the relations between the nervous system, the body, and the environment. That is, the way Fuchs responds to dualism and epiphenomenalism is by presenting an even more complex causal theory, not limited to specific cross-sections among the different levels of elements in a living system.

There is a particular ingredient in this conception that makes it possible to understand how these causal relations are effectively produced: namely, the diachronic dimension of the relation between process and structure. From a diachronic perspective, embodied memory (habits, capacities, interaction schemes) is formed from the diachronic sedimentation of the relation between neuronal structures and experiential and behavioral processes.

As time passes, neuronal structures modify the processes, and these in turn induce neuronal plasticity. Both dimensions (related to the dual aspect of the body, *Körper* and *Leib*) are essential in the sedimentation of bodily memory, in the form of a diachronic spiral (Fuchs, 2023, pp. 97–103). This spiral, however, is not rigid, so that it can be modified by a higher level of the organization of subjectivity (located at the level of the person): self-determination. Fuchs (2023, pp. 103–105) describes this self-determination by way of two phenomenological concepts: self-understanding and embodied freedom.

Embodied intersubjectivity

Up to this point, the explanatory model about the organism's self-organization, about the dual character of the body and about the circular causality (vertical and

horizontal) has turned exclusively to subjectivity in its organization and personal experience. Once the model has been established, which gives the biological contours of subjectivity and, at the same time, integrates it into a cognitive and embodied perspective, it remains to establish how the person, as a living system, relates to others in the world. Chapter 4 of the book aims precisely to complete this description of subjectivity.

Far from being a merely complementary aspect, this approach is, without doubt, one of Fuchs's major contributions—while at the same time making it possible to broaden the understanding of how the relation with the social environment, at the personal level, is realized in the most varied verbal and nonverbal forms of interaction, in terms of a “social ecology of the person” (2023, p. 109). For the construction of this model, two concepts prove fundamental: dynamic coupling (*dynamische Koppelung*) and intercorporeity (*Zwischenleiblichkeit*).

The notion of *Koppelung*, which we translate as “coupling”³, concerns a process of interaction that can be described from the third-person perspective. In this sense, it is an emergent dynamic of bodily interactions and conversations, from the perspective, so to speak, of an objective “synchronization” (2023, pp. 108–110). However, this perspective on interaction does not exhaust intersubjective experience, insofar as the latter is also constituted from the first- and second-person perspective (I–you) as intercorporeity—*Zwischenleiblichkeit*. (2023, p. 114).

From a phenomenological perspective, the concept of intercorporeity becomes decisive for describing the processes of synchronization and desynchrony in their modes of experience. This concept unfolds in terms of interaffectivity, involving impressions (affects) and (emotional) expressions within a space of intercorporeal resonance, in which each person has, from themselves, a proper place of resonance and responsivity.

The space of resonance and responsivity of each person, that is, their “personal niche” (*persönliche Nische*), is understood by Fuchs from what he calls the “ecology of lived space”—which makes it possible to found an ecological psychopathology. Psychic suffering, as Fuchs states, “often results from a disturbance of social resonance or of responsive

³ In this sense, the translation could also, in our interpretation, evoke the objective aspect of *Paarung* (pairing) in Husserl (Hua I, 1973, §51, pp. 141–143), the concept by which empathy (*Einfühlung*) is bodily rooted in the phenomenology of transcendental intersubjectivity. For Fuchs, pairing makes possible the synchronization between the lived experience of the person themselves and the lived experience of the other with whom they interact, through a mutual recognition of each one's own experiences. Therefore, this phenomenologically derived notion should not be confused with the idea of “pairing” typically presented by behaviorism, in the sense of the association between stimuli—for example, of a neutral stimulus with reinforcing stimuli, so that the neutral stimulus becomes a conditioned reinforcer.

effects” (2023, p. 120), in something like a separation from or distancing of significant people and contexts. In this sense, still in this Chapter, Fuchs (2023, pp. 121–123) briefly presents examples of disorders, assessed from the angle of loss of relation and interaction in melancholia, borderline personality, paranoia, and chronic schizophrenia.

The defense of an ecological-integrative psychiatric paradigm

Drawing on a synthesis of all the previous argumentative steps, Chapter 5 presents the foundations of an “ecological-integrative paradigm” in psychiatry, as a human-ecological model. As such, it casts an ecological perspective on psychic disorders, as well as on circular processes in psychotherapy.

Considering the human being from an ecological perspective (which involves their sociocultural environment), Fuchs proposes a “non-reductionist naturalism” (2023, p. 127), according to which the person-organism is situated at a hierarchical level of systems of interaction—which range from the subatomic level to the cultural level, integrating the physical, biological, and sociocultural systems (2023, p. 128–129). In this sense, the person is situated in an intermediate layer of bodily interaction processes, constituted by organismic systems (components of their own body) in a bodily unity, which is integrated, by way of relation with the environment, into broader dimensions (as part of social and cultural relations).

From this perspective, considering the various elementary levels constitutive of the organism and its interactions with the environment, Fuchs proposes an ecological paradigm for the understanding of psychic disorders, in accordance with the two forms of relational circularity: vertical and horizontal (2023, p. 135–138). In this sense, psychic disorders can be interpreted as disorders of vertical regulation, as disorders of embodied subjectivity (which culminates in the person’s self-understanding), and as disorders of horizontal regulation (relating to interaction and the need for relation). Both forms of disorder present themselves in a circular manner. Fuchs exemplifies the disorder of vertical regulation with the “vicious circle” of anxiety and the disorder of horizontal regulation with the “interpersonal vicious circle” in depression (2023, p. 141–148).

In general terms, the problem can be posed as follows: by which criteria can we evaluate the health or the disorders of these two regulatory dynamics? Fuchs (2023, p. 139–140) offers the following criteria: resilience in the face of vulnerability, ascription of meaning, flexibility, responsivity, self-efficacy, formation of a personal niche, and sense of

coherence. In contrast, psychic disorders are marked by excessive vulnerability, a distorted perception of the world (self-sufficient perceptions and egocentrism), increased rigidity, loss of resonance and responsivity, lack of an experience of efficacy (insufficiency and anxiety), a reduced or impoverished personal niche, and loss of meaning.

From this perspective, disorders are described with circular models (vertical and horizontal), considering the various constituent layers of the person-organism and its interaction with the surrounding world. Furthermore, psychotherapy, in the ecological-integrative paradigm, assumes a pluralistic perspective, oriented by the various hierarchical levels of the organism. That is, Fuchs (2023, p. 158–175) adopts a classification of multiple forms of therapy considering the physical-biological constitution of the organism, as well as the dual aspect of corporeality and the forms of social interaction. Depending on the level at which the therapeutic process is conceived, therapy may take the form of somatherapy (based on psychopharmacology), of emotion self-regulation, of psychotherapy, and of social-system therapies.

Final Considerations

In our judgment, Fuchs's book fulfills the promise of presenting an ecological-integrative paradigm for psychiatry. From the standpoint of philosophy of mind, the thesis of explanatory pluralism offers a convincing argument against classical dualism as well as against reductionist epiphenomenalism. With regard to the cognitive neuroscience, Fuchs shows with great clarity how all aspects of the “5e” cognition paradigm can furnish domains for describing mental disorders from the orientation of the phenomenology of the body.

Without losing sight of the biological rootedness of subjectivity, Fuchs proposes an approximation between the phenomenological perspective and the systemic perspective. In so doing, his argument proposes a scope for approaching subjectivity that recognizes its phenomenological dimensions yet does not give up on understanding them in the light of a biological account. Moreover, his wager is, at bottom, to respond to neurological reductionism (neurocentrism). However, such a response could only gain credibility by offering an explanatory model in biology. Hence his effort to defend a theory of circular causality (vertical and horizontal).

Furthermore, a theory of subjectivity is only complete when one considers the person's relations with the world—and therefore levels of causal circularity that extend to the environment, society, and culture. It is in this sense that he presents his decisive

descriptions of synchronization, resonance, and responsivity. All these elements become essential for an ecological interpretation of mental disorders, whether as disorders of vertical regulation or as disorders of horizontal regulation.

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