

## The philosophies of madness: an introduction

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## The philosophies of madness: an introduction

What might be the value of the often rather abstract theoretical reflections of philosophy for understanding the concrete and lived experience of various forms of madness? And is there something contained within the transgressive forms of mad experience that could be of special relevance for philosophy? Are these two distinctively human domains of activity and experience only externally and contingently related, perhaps only the affair of the wandering philosopher with idiosyncratic interests; or might there also be a more intrinsic or even essential affinity between them? If so, then what, if any, would be the difference between philosophical reflection and amazement regarding the basic categories of human existence (e.g., the nature of reality, self, identity, truth, free will, . . .) and the kind of hyperflexive interrogation of these foundational issues that we find in madness?

This broad set of questions formed the initial impetus and topics of discussion of the first edition of the *Too Mad to be True* conference held in Museum Dr Guislain in Ghent (Belgium) in 2021, an international conference dedicated to exploring the various links and intersections between philosophy and madness. The contributions of the current special issue on *The Philosophies of Madness* that grew out of this conference have all developed these questions further, applying them in two broadly distinctive ways.

### 1. Philosophical understandings of madness

A *first direction* taken by various contributions aims to demonstrate how the resources of philosophy can be productively applied in gaining a deeper understanding of the nature, delimitation, epistemology and experience of madness. This form of “applied philosophy” follows the lead of Karl Jaspers – the founding father of phenomenological psychiatry – who, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, argued that familiarity with the concepts and methods of philosophy were of special relevance for those involved with the understanding and care of mad individuals. “The psychiatrist’s competence”, Jaspers argued, “is really commensurate with how far his education and knowledge would qualify him to belong to the philosophic faculty” (Jaspers, 1957/1981). One way in which philosophy, according to Jaspers, might increase psychiatric competence is by offering a suitable and sophisticated conceptual framework to conceive and understand the alterations of

experience, expression and action that occur in madness. Such philosophical sensitivity would especially be appropriate for grasping the phenomena of the so-called “first-person perspective” – a domain seemingly ill-suited to concepts and descriptions derived from philosophically naive common-sense.

Several contributions (e.g., by Nielsen et al.; Hermans; Stanghellini et al., Spencer, Lopez) draw on the tradition of phenomenological philosophy – a branch of continental philosophy associated with authors like Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and traditionally focused on offering faithful descriptions of experience and elucidating its supposedly “essential” or “transcendental” features (for an overview, see Stanghellini et al., 2018). They illustrate how phenomenology can enrich accounts of mad subjectivity. Such phenomenological description may help, for example, to improve diagnostic practices, by allowing to appreciate the previously overlooked unity or shared characteristics of seemingly heterogeneous and disparate phenomena, but also by introducing differentiation in what may otherwise superficially appear as similar and homogeneous as in Monti and Stanghellini’s (1996) concept of “the phenomenological razor”.

In this sense, the paper by Nielsen et al. demonstrates how an apparently “unspecific” and transdiagnostic phenomenon like “social anxiety” may acquire, through detailed phenomenological elucidation, a more distinctive character, becoming revelatory or expressive of what the authors describe as “the Gestalt” of schizophrenia. Nielsen et al.’s careful phenomenological work has wider ramifications for ongoing debates in psychiatry regarding, e.g., the categorial vs transdiagnostic nature of psychopathology (Fusar-Poli et al., 2019), or the currently popular appeal to “complaint-oriented” or “symptom-focused” approaches (Bentall, 2006). The authors’ work shows that a substantial part of confusion and disagreement in this field might result from inadequate assessment practices which may be resolved, or at least ameliorated, by drawing on the discriminating tools of phenomenology (see also Fernandez, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2022).

Driven by a similar concern to grasp the “lived worlds” of individuals that attract a diagnosis of schizophrenia, Stanghellini et al. argue that a hitherto importantly overlooked or underplayed aspect in the phenomenological tradition consists in the self-hermeneutical or interpretative activity of patients as meaning-making agents. This broadened perspective should allow increased recognition of mad individuals not merely as the passive recipients of “anomalous experiences”, but in their active capacity as epistemic and position-taking persons. This extended phenomenological model goes significantly beyond traditional phenomenological approaches which have primarily emphasized experiential disturbances at a more passive or pre-reflective level (e.g., disturbances of so-called “minimal” or “basic” self – Nordgaard et al., 2021). As such, it has important theoretical and clinical

advantages—e.g., amongst others, it supports the mad person's sense of epistemic agency (see also Houlders et al., 2021).

The importance of safeguarding, and wherever possible, increasing and maximizing mad individuals' epistemic and hermeneutic capacities is further underlined in Spencer's contribution on the relation between forms of hermeneutic injustice in psychiatric practice and the experience of "unworlding" in madness. Departing from Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2012) account of the intentional function of speech expression, Spencer demonstrates that such "unworlding" – i.e., the experience of losing one's bearing on everyday intersubjective reality – may not merely occur as a supposedly natural or spontaneous effect of madness, it may also be provoked and exacerbated by forms of hermeneutical injustice that are endemic in psychiatry.

Both the contributions of Lopes and Hermans take the phenomenological concept of "unworlding" further, extending it in their respective analyses of depression (Lopes) and melancholia (Hermans). Hermans' paper shows how melancholia significantly exceeds a mere "depressed mood" that, according to its diagnostic rendition in DSM-5 (2013), is simply "more severe, longer lasting or present without reason" (p. 151). Drawing on the work by the eclectic (phenomenological, psychoanalytic, aesthetic) philosopher Henri Maldiney, Hermans aims to bring out melancholia's distinct character, in a way that doesn't reduce this form of mad experience to one we can readily understand or empathize with.

By situating melancholia *beyond* (easily) recognizable emotional states, Hermans' paper also touches on a classical and critical point of contention in phenomenology's overall approach of madness – taken up in the contributions by both Bellaar and Pienkos. If, in the felicitous phrasing of Naomi Eilan (2000), the challenge madness poses to philosophical accounts is that of "solving simultaneously for understanding and utter strangeness", phenomenological concepts, which commonly situate madness beyond the realm of ordinary forms of experience, risk solving for strangeness but at the expense of understanding (see also Morgan, 2022).

This is, at least, one of the Wittgenstein-inflected arguments developed in detail in Bellaar's contribution. Bellaar critically discusses phenomenological (e.g., Ratcliffe, 2017; Van Duppen & Sips, 2018) and Wittgensteinian (e.g., Rhodes & Gipps, 2008) approaches of delusions which commonly appeal to a loss of "bedrock certainties" (or similar notions like a loss of "ontological framework conditions", "common sense" or "natural self-evidence") to explain their distinctive irrationality. While going some way toward accounting for the patent strangeness of delusions, Bellaar shows how such accounts place delusions beyond the realm of meaningful understanding (however, see Gipps, 2022 for a more heterodox view on the various meanings of "understanding"). This would imply not only

a profound empathic shortcoming,<sup>1</sup> i.e., precluding the possibility of shared meanings between clinicians and mad individuals, but it would also be inconsistent with the way delusions in mad individuals tend to coexist with a host of ordinary rational beliefs and behaviors (cf. the phenomenon of so-called “double-bookkeeping”; see Bleuler, 1950; Parnas et al., 2021; Sass, 2014). Bellaar proposes that delusions may be alternatively understood as having the logical character of non-epistemic “avowals” – an original proposal that is echoed in the contribution by Hofman, Hubacher & Maatz on the linguistic meaning of delusions.

The risk and profound dangers of (not) understanding madness by enclosing it in its own and impenetrable “life-world” are further propounded in Pienkos’ touching essay on the tragic case of *Ellen West*. Ellen West (a pseudonym) was a 32-year-old woman admitted to the Bellevue Sanatorium in Kreuzelingen (Switzerland) in 1921, where she received treatment by Ludwig Binswanger, who later became one of the major figures in phenomenological psychiatry. Dramatically, after a short period of unsuccessful treatment, Ellen was discharged from the hospital and soon after committed suicide. Disconcerting for a tradition priding itself on its hermeneutical acumen and finesse are the controversial phenomenological analyses devoted to the case by Binswanger some 20 years later (Binswanger, 1958/2004), portraying Ellen West’s suicide as the “authentic” and “natural” realization of a life fundamentally unhappy and enslaved. Pienkos revisits this dramatic history to raise a set of essential questions which have lost nothing of their urgency for current and future phenomenological psychiatry: “How could a psychiatrist condone the suicide of his patient, and how could the tools of phenomenology be used in service of this conclusion?”. Pienkos argues that recent developments within phenomenology—e.g., its more refined and empirically supported diagnostic descriptions—, while important, would by themselves still fall short in addressing the more substantial issue put forth by Ellen West’s tragic history. What would have been essential for an enriched and appropriate understanding of Ellen West – and by extension, of all mad individuals – was the adequate recognition of the specific social, historical and cultural environments in which her subjective life-world was embedded. In the case of Ellen West, such recognition would have enabled improved understanding of this young woman’s problematic eating pattern and difficult relation with her body, thereby also allowing to envision – as opposed to Binswanger’s fate-like determination – therapeutic hope and change. A more general implication Pienkos draws for current phenomenology is the need to refocus its analyses beyond the subjective experiences of individuals to include how such experiences are formed and sustained by their surrounding material, social, ideological and historical conditions (a proposal echoed in recent phenomenological work on so-called “scaffolding”; see Krueger, 2020; see also the

recent special issue on this subject by Pienkos et al., 2023). If one of the sobering lessons of the phenomenological *époque* (i.e., the suspension of everyday reality in favor of a focus on its phenomenal appearance), as Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) once suggested, is the impossibility of its complete realization, Pienkos' essay demonstrates that this apparent methodological limitation is, in fact, something to be cherished and nourished within phenomenological psychiatry.

The contributions briefly introduced above all offer lively demonstrations of the added value of philosophy in gaining a more emphatic or theoretical understanding of madness – the papers by Dings & Tekin on the epistemological ambiguities that surround the notion of “expertise-by-experience”, and by Russell on the current limitations of the enactive framework for clinical psychiatry, offer similar contributions.

## 2. Mad insights and philosophies

As recently argued by Garson (2023; see also Kusters, 2020; Morgan, 2022; Feyaerts & Kusters, 2022), the relation between philosophy and madness is often restricted to one in which philosophy employs its normative determinations (e.g., of what it means to be rational, to have a normal “sense of self”, to be aligned with reality, . . .) to conceive of madness in terms of the absence or derailment of such epistemic, existential or experiential vices. A *second direction* of thought – which transpires, to varying degrees, throughout the other contributions (by Jeppsson, Kusters, Sollie, Humpston, Rabaey & Vanheule, Vanheule) – reverses, or at least significantly complicates, this general schematic: rather than analyzing madness by means of some philosophical (pre-)conception of what it means to be normal, a shared assumption in these essays is that madness itself may provide a unique insight in various aspects of reality and the myriad vicissitudes of human existence. Such an idea, however, does not necessarily imply a romanticized view of madness as some kind of higher, more authentic, or satisfying mode of existence – indeed, it may well be true that a certain forgetfulness and blind acceptance has its salutary effects in navigating our everyday lives (see also Sass, 2014; Bégout, 2005; and the contributions by Jeppsson and Humpston). It does, however, challenge the deeply rooted idea of madness as an essentially distorted state of mind and experience.

We can see this assumption at work in the psychoanalytic essays by Tkatch, Rabaey, and Vanheule. These contributions all adhere to the psychoanalytic view – articulated in Freud's so-called “crystal principle”<sup>2</sup>—according to which madness has the potential to reveal aspects of human existence that are generally overlooked (or perhaps “repressed”) in normality, yet which nonetheless secretly traverse ordinary experience. Tkatch's essay analyzes in this sense the significance of a seemingly marginal

phenomenon like “post-traumatic somatization” – taken as an example of an unconscious bodily expression or what the author calls, in Heideggerian parlance, a “bodying-forth” – to draw larger implications about the unconscious as being a precondition for the appearance of phenomena as such. Rabaey & Vanheule offer a close reading of Lacan’s rather cursory remarks on mania, showing how Lacan – throughout the different stages of his intellectual development – no longer considered mania as a mere instance of language “gone mad”, but as exposing something of the madness already inherent in ordinary language. Vanheule’s essay argues how Lacan’s engagement with Blaise Pascal’s “wager”-arguments regarding the existence of God allows for a different, more flexible conception of psychosis compared to Lacan’s earlier structuralist deficit-model, aligning it more closely with the existential issues of trust and belief in the Other which also typically mark neurosis. Vanheule draws out the clinical advantages of this revised Lacanian conception, which renders psychosis more amenable to social-contextual and therapeutic influence.

The papers by Jeppsson, Kusters and Humpston resume a more straightforward philosophical focus, yet they too lend a voice to madness as a privileged gateway into inquiries about the nature and status of knowledge and belief (Jeppsson) and first/third-person asymmetries and the paradoxes of self-awareness (Kusters, Humpston). Similar to Bellaar’s contribution discussed above, Jeppsson’s essay engages with Wittgenstein’s conception of “hinge commitments” to clarify the nature and epistemological implications of the radical kind of uncertainty that characterizes certain forms of psychotic experience. In keeping with these essays’ perspective on the potentially revelatory nature of madness, Jeppsson uses the phenomenon of “radical psychotic doubt” – i.e., a form of all-encompassing doubt regarding everyday common-sense reality – to show that the grounds of our ordinary epistemic practices are less compelling than often believed. Jeppsson assesses the extent to which several anti-skeptical responses (hinge epistemology, reliabilism, contextualism) may convince or persuade the mad person out of his or her uncertain predicament and finds all of them wanting. In this way, madness may function as a real-life benchmark to evaluate the strength and validity of various epistemological theories. Jeppsson’s argument has further important clinical implications: if, in the face of radical psychotic doubt, it may be *rational* to suspend judgment about the validity of everyday reality, then regaining one’s trust in the common-sense world would require a leap of faith which is, in essence, *non-epistemic* in nature. This perspective, therefore, casts doubt on the fruitfulness of common and well-intended therapeutic strategies that attempt to convince mad individuals about the truth of everyday reality (e.g., through psychoeducation or by pointing out reasoning errors): from the perspective of radical psychotic doubt, such strategies seem simply to presuppose what

is radically put into question in madness. As an alternative strategy, Jeppsson discusses how the adoption of Pyrrhonian skepticism – i.e., the suspension of judgment – has helped her to navigate radical psychotic doubt and to avoid the seemingly forced choice between belief in the everyday or mad world.

The articles of Kusters and Humpston both engage with the persistent question of why it is so difficult to understand madness. This is a question, of course, that has also been addressed in the first group of essays from a more detached perspective of philosophy. Despite the variety in respective solutions offered to this central difficulty, a shared assumption in the philosophy of madness is that this hermeneutical problem essentially reflects a gap or distance between the third-person position of philosophy and the first-person experience of madness, a gulf of understanding that could be solved with the right form of (radical) empathy or conceptual finesse. Less often appreciated, yet forcefully exposed by Kusters and Humpston, is the possibility that this breach in understanding, and the paradoxical complexities of the first- and third-persons, already affect the mind of the mad individual (for this point, see also Sollie's book review of Kusters' *A Philosophy of Madness* in this special issue). This is reflected in the highly self-conscious and reflexive states of "omnipotent passivity" and "omniscient oblivion" in schizophrenia described in detail by Humpston (see also Feyaerts & Kusters, 2022; Sass, 1994). Both can be understood as the essentially unstable, dialectical outcomes of the self-focused trajectory of a mind intensely engaged with its own understanding and (non-)engendering. At moments of supreme insight and eschatological ecstasy, such a mind recognizes its own self-presence and conscious agency as the foundational substance of all that exists (not unlike the "insight" of idealistic philosophers like Fichte, Hegel or Schelling). Yet no sooner does this ultimate self-conscious realization occur than the opposite insight arrives: that this mind, from its own newly gained perspective, is in fact nothing more than a lifeless object, a passive substance of mere contemplation that, as such, is perhaps even less than nothing. The schizophrenic mind, according to both Kusters and Humpston, is essentially a form of acutely lucid awareness which becomes progressively ensnared in the paradoxes of its own making, thrust back and forth between states of ecstatic activity and nihilist passivity in an endless dialectical vortex which nonetheless operates in a perfect and timeless stasis.

It is obvious that such a paradoxical form of self-awareness significantly complicates – although perhaps not entirely (see Sass, 2003) – philosophical and clinical attempts at hermeneutic understanding: for how is one to express or communicate a state of mind which is both all and nothing, whose first-personal capture by the subject of such a (non-)experience also immediately deprives that person of his or her status as subject? Perhaps the



best we can do is to appreciate the complexities of the activity of self-understanding in which the mad individual is already engaged, while recognizing that this kind of understanding does not result in any easy, final, or even communicable insights – in fact, such an expectation would contradict and misrecognize the intricate paradoxes of self-understanding of which the schizophrenic individual is already all too acutely aware.

## Notes

1. See again Gipps (2022) for doubts on whether such empathic limits have the dire ethical consequences they are often claimed to have.
2. Freud's (1959) of this idea is worth quoting in full: “[W]e are familiar with the notion that pathology, by making things larger and coarser, can draw our attention to normal conditions which would otherwise have escaped us. Where it points to a breach or a rent, there may normally be an articulation present. If we throw a crystal to the floor, it breaks; but not into haphazard pieces. It comes apart along its lines of cleavage into fragments whose boundaries, though they were invisible, were predetermined by the crystal's structure. Mental patients are split and broken structures of this same kind. Even we cannot withhold from them something of the reverential awe which peoples of the past felt for the insane. They have turned away from external reality, but for that very reason they know more about internal, psychical reality and reveal a number of things to us that would otherwise be inaccessible to us”.

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