

The Lure of Madness

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Since the early 1990s, the field of philosophy of psychiatry has developed and produced a range of interesting and important work.¹ This work can be broadly and rather crudely divided along analytic/continental lines. Analytic philosophy of psychiatry has been concerned with clarifying and interrogating key areas of contestation within psychiatric practice. There has been a focus on the nature of mental illness, clarifications of fundamental concepts such as the question of belief versus delusion, and the status of psychiatry as a medical science. Continental approaches have mostly drawn upon the rich history of phenomenological psychopathology and renewed that tradition through a turn to enactivist and embodied approaches in the philosophy of mind.² Attention here has been on understanding and outlining mental illness as an anomalous pre-re-

1 The following book series has published a lot of the important work in this area: <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/i/international-perspectives-in-philosophy-and-psychiatry-ipp/p/?cc=us&lang=en&>

2 A recent very fine example of this work is Sanneke De Haan, *Enactive Psychiatry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

flective experience, focusing on themes of embodiment, lived time, and being-in-the-world. Up to now, there has been little attention to the first generation of the Frankfurt School when thinking about the philosophy of psychiatry. However, I think that Adorno's negative dialectical philosophy has a great deal to offer when thinking through questions of the relationship between madness and reason.

Phenomenological work in the philosophy of psychiatry begins with an encounter of strangeness, one of puzzlement and an inability to understand. There is a negative transcendental approach in phenomenology that outlines an understanding of the core pre-reflective conditions for existence through their absence in madness. This approach has much to say about the departures from reason and life in madness (lack of a sense of lived embodiment, lived time and being at home in the world). However, it tends to view madness as only a radical absence, a lack of life. Part of the problem for phenomenology is that it doesn't question the historical construction of its own concept of normality.

A positive dialectics of reason and madness involves a deeper interpretation of the difference between reason and madness that reveals an identity; within madness there lies purpose, survival, and adaptation. Justin Garson has recently termed this approach "madness-as-strategy"; an understanding that underlying the negative experiences of mental illness there is a kind of purpose and meaning, function and not dysfunction.³ The ostensible difference between reason and madness is sublated in an identity.

One tradition that views madness as purposive is a strand of critical psychiatry that takes its inspiration from Thomas Szasz's famous assertion that mental illness is a myth. Such a tradition is a form of identity thinking. Madness can only be understood by translating it into a dominant concept of rationality; madness as survival, coping, adaptation, and self-preservation. One of the problems with such an approach is that madness is completely dissolved into a dominant form of rationality that itself remains unquestioned. Ultimately, the experience of madness is normalized as a form of instrumental reason. There is no such thing as madness, or even mental illness, only understandable and purposive reactions to negative life events.

A negative dialectical approach adds a different perspective, one that stresses the importance of heterogeneity and difference. However much one can assert and develop an identity of reason and madness beneath their ostensible difference, there remains a final non-identity, something recalcitrant to the demands of reason. For Adorno, philosophy begins with attention to this

3 Garson's wonderful book contrasts "madness-as-strategy" with "madness-as-dysfunction" as two paradigms across the history of madness, see Justin Garson, *Madness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022).

non-identity, this difference. There is always something nonidentical to reason in the experience of madness. This non-identity is not an absolute otherness. Negative dialectics requires a moment of identity between reason and madness. Approaches that search for purpose and meaning within madness respect this moment of identity. However, this identity itself is dialectical. Madness is not only understood as a form of reason, but reason too has its own pathology, its own history. The difference between madness and reason is constituted by a history of violence and suffering.

There is a twofold sense of contradiction in the negative dialectical relationship of reason and madness.⁴ First, the concept of madness cannot be dissolved into reason without a remainder. There always remains something nonidentical to reason in the experience of madness. Second, contradiction also refers to an antagonism within society, the historical forms through which reason constitutes and reconstitutes itself through its own limit-experience of madness, but these historical formations of reason are characterized by violence and suffering. This approach enables an understanding of madness as illness (immediately a radical problem of individual flourishing/being-in-the-world) but at the same time madness is always a political as well as a clinical question. It is such an approach that I construct in my recent book on *Continental Philosophy of Psychiatry*.⁵

One of the important consequences of a negative dialectics is a changed concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation does not lie in an identity of differences but with a final sense of being at home with that which is alien. Negative dialectics attempts an anti-systematic philosophy, one that will always turn against itself, insist on an attention to the singular, on a priority of that which escapes a complete interpretation. In such an insistence on micrological philosophy, as Adorno terms it, there is a humility towards grand claims and a resistance to master narratives. There is also a belief that those instances that don't conform to systematic reason offer a space for an idea of care that lies in attention to difference.

Such an attention to difference is the mark of critical approaches in the philosophy of psychiatry that diverge completely from Szasz's problematic formulation of mental illness as myth. These new critical approaches view neurodivergent and mad experiences as providing a resource for resistance. They affirm difference as the blueprint for a "new sensibility" that can move

4 For this twofold nature of contradiction see Theodor W. Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 1-2.

5 See Alastair Morgan, *Continental Philosophy of Psychiatry: The Lure of Madness* (Cham: Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).

beyond identity thinking and the dissolution of madness into reason.⁶ It is in this stress on an attention to difference and an emphasis on heterogeneity that Adorno's concept of negative dialectics will find a new life in different forms of critique in the philosophy of psychiatry.

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6 The reference to a “new sensibility” alludes to Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). For a brilliant reflection on questions of madness and recognition, see Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed, *Madness and the Demand for Recognition: A Philosophical Inquiry into Identity and Mental Health Activism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019). For a reflection on neurodiversity and Marxism see Robert Chapman, *Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2023).