

**Wouter Kusters**

*Philosophy of Madness*

*Fundamental and Transgressive Insights*

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# Introduction

## Philosophy and Madness

Ich impfe euch mit dem Wahnsinn.

-- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachlass 1882-1884* (136)

What do we make of the fact that, when out of their senses, some people have experiences perhaps of beauty, perhaps of terror, but always with implications of awesome depth, and that when they re-emerge out of their craze and into their so-called normal ego, they may shut the trapdoor after them and close out their vision once more and become prosaic in the extreme, straitened in a bland and shallow usualness?

-- J.W. Perry, *The Far Side of Madness* (1974: 8)

### 1 PHILOSOPHY OF MADNESS

This book is about the alpha and omega of philosophy and madness. I will show where both begin, to what heights and depths they may lead, and how the end of one of them may be the beginning of the other.

My basic proposition is that philosophy and madness have everything to do with each other. The discussions in the backrooms of academic philosophy correspond, with respect to their monologous form and content, and especially their world strangeness and detachment of daily practice, to quite a few dialogues and monologues in the smoking rooms of the psychiatric ward. Instead of interpreting this observation as a pejorative for philosophy, I will argue that this is a heuristically interesting and inspiring similarity. The fundamental connection between philosophy and madness has wrongly been forgotten and concealed since the last decades, or even centuries. This book purports to connect and relate these two domains again. The force, energy and fascination coming from marginal and mad authors like Daniel Schreber, Antonin Artaud and John Cusance may considerably enliven the sterile landscape of academic philosophy; and the treasure of ideas, thoughts and lines that we find with thinkers like Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilles Deleuze may enrich the spirit of many a madman.

The association between madness and philosophy is made too little in our times. This is because the medical profession has first succeeded in claiming that madness belongs to its expertise, and then they turned madness into a medical, or even neurobiological, problem, a brain disease. In addition, a link or dependency between madness and philosophy suggests that everyone who names himself a 'thinker' or a 'philosopher' would run a higher risk for madness. That is an unfavourable association; the philosopher prefers to consider himself to be the king of insight, sunk in pure contemplation in a sphere of clarity and light. Madness is preferred to keep outside, as a nadir of senselessness, a breeding place for unreal appearances, chimaeras and wandering stars. Eventually both medics and philosophers keep madness at a safe distance. Madness is ascribed to the invalids and mental cripples and to those deemed to have a brain disease. In that way, at the other side of the abstract barrier -- which sometimes turns into very concrete barriers -- between the normal and the deviant, the healthy and the sick, madness is neutralised, made dumb, and in the end, 'fragmented' or 'annihilated'.

This is a book about this process, the loss of the richness of the mad world.

The title *Philosophy of Madness* has several meanings. It is about a philosophical thinking-through of what madness is. At the same time I show how that same thinking can wander so far away from the everyday world that it may lead the thinker into its very object, that is, madness.

This book contains not only a philosophical voice -- madness itself also resounds. We will find that mad impulses and fascinations are essential to numerous heights of culture. It concerns not only the essays and stories by Aldous Huxley, Sybren Polet and Thomas Pynchon, but also the drawings of M.C. Escher and movies like *The Matrix* and *The Truman Show*; and, not only the mystical experiences of Nicolas Cusanus and Meister Eckhart, but also the philosophical vistas of Plotinus, Schelling and Sartre. When we listen carefully to the expressions of madness, we perceive a philosophical sound, a seizure -- or rapture -- by themes of fundamental importance and transgressive urgency that we know from the traditions of philosophy.

## 2 MADNESS AND PSYCHIATRY

### 2.1 Data

How can we describe madness and contrast it with non-madness or normality? How can we discern something out of the stream of life, the ocean of experience, that we could call madness? Psychiatry uses the term 'psychosis' for madness, which is described as follows by Johan Lezy in his detailed survey work *Psychosis: Appearance, experience, structure* (2007: 11): "'Psychosis' is grosso modo what is also called lunacy or insanity: a state of mind in which someone loses himself in delusions, hallucinations and incoherent thought." This book is about what is meant exactly by terms like 'delusions, hallucinations and incoherent thought', but for a first positioning Lezy's definition suffices.

But if someone has experienced an 'extra-ordinary' reality, he will not always call this a 'psychosis', and perhaps they will name it as confusion, revelation, spiritual journey, illness or crazy period. What madness contains and entails, is the subject of this whole book. Here I just give some examples to show that madness is quite different from ordinary daily life -- at least at the surface. To speak from my own experience: I passed twice through an uninterrupted period of about two months in which I was 'mad', and in which I was diagnosed as 'psychotic' by psychiatrists. Both periods are sharply marked in my memory, they differ from most of my other memories, and they are remarkably similar to each other, although they are separated by two decades.

I can easily come up with a range of experiences, thoughts, perceptions, interpretations and 'life styles', that unmistakably differ widely from normal life. To give some examples, I noticed that everybody above forty years old immediately understood all the languages of the world, meaning that language barriers were not real. I experienced and knew that there was no gap between thought and being. I feared that it was my turn to be crucified. I realised that I had become telepathic. I understood that the internet was actually created by my father and an uncle, and that spyware was installed everywhere for the greater good by a secret bond of elder wise men. I discovered that the earth was in fact completely flat, and that all so-called flying was a broadly set-up illusion and conspiracy. I was completely sure that God existed, and nothing else than God.

Such strange experiences and thoughts are an apparently incoherent shell around a deeper, essential 'spiritual change' -- if not a cosmic change. This book discloses that other world, behind the smoke screens of what is all too often dismissed as confusion, psychiatric disorder and illness.

On basis of my own experience it is easy, without any further theory, to make a first rough distinction between madness and normality. But in this book I only discuss my own experiences in so far as they rise above the particular, and attain a general conceptual plane. To draw this work out of the autobiographical ego-sphere towards a broader, more comprehensive level, some further 'objectification' is needed. Then my experience appears to correspond strikingly well with many self-descriptions and reports from others who have been

labelled as 'psychotic'. I will make use of such reports extensively in the text below. The collected works of Artaud; John Custance's autobiography *Wisdom, Madness and Folly*; Harald Kaas' novel *Uhren und Meere* and Daniel Schreber's *Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken* are all so rich and well-written that we will meet these authors many times throughout the various parts of this book.

Notwithstanding the correspondance of madness with the concept of 'psychosis' -- both among madmen as among psychiatrists -- there is also overlap, 'family resemblance', with diagnostic terms like schizophrenia and borderline-syndrome. And within itself the concept of 'psychosis' can be further subdivided into many kinds: manic, depressive, schizophrenic psychosis, psychosis illicited by substance abuse, psychosis as a reaction to trauma, chronic, acute, short term and mass psychosis, katatonic and paranoid psychosis, psychosis not otherwise specified, etcetera, etcetera. I will use the term madness and psychosis before these are 'otherwise specified' (however, see my reading guidelines below for some practical grasp of these matters).

Because the term 'psychosis' is applied to so many various cases, it is possible to criticise my descriptions and arguments, and claim that some of my statements 'are not valid for this or that kind of psychosis or psychotic person'. So be it; it is not my purpose to assist or improve psychiatric classification by adducing empirical experiential facts. Instead, my use of the terms madness and psychosis is meant to discard medical-psychiatric classification and clear the way for admission into a domain of philosophy, culture and spirituality. When we have arrived there (in part III), we will make other 'diagnoses', written in a different kind of ink, in another language, based on insights from philosophy and mysticism.

To what extent my analyses of madness correspond to life and experience of 'real psychotic patients', must follow from the measure in which those patients feel addressed by my descriptions. At the outset the acute psychotic patient is focus and role model. As we succeed to pry the madman from psychiatry (as an attitude to life), we will find that evermore experiences, thoughts and pursuits of ordinary life rest on a bedrock of madness. Then the focus of madness widens. The fire of madness will be found to smolder within experiences and activities of a range of human forms of life: philosophers, mystics, poets, shamans, absurdists, magic-realists, and many-others-who-are-not-in-this-enumeration.

In my book about psychosis of 2004, *Pure Madness*, I wrote: "Because of the time pressure of the essay contest,<sup>1</sup> many ideas could only be dealt with succinctly. That is why this book is nothing more than an 'essay', literally a try-out. Next years I hope to further elaborate on my ideas."

The results of this elaboration lies in front of you: *Philosophy of Madness*. This book has been further enriched and immensely deepened by a spontaneous deliverment of new data. I wrote *Pure Madness* seventeen years after my first psychosis, and based this book on quite old, and somewhat worn-out memories and ideas. But for this new book I had the opportunity to collect new, fresh data, as I became psychotic in the summer of 2007, exactly twenty years years after the first period. Initially, this meant a personal disaster, but after a while it was a blessing for this work: I could -- nolens volens -- 'test' and modify my ideas of *Pure Madness* in psychotic practice. And so my 'elaboration on psychosis' after writing *Pure Madness* consisted of a theoretical part, that is, cum laude graduation in a research master at the philosophy department in Utrecht, as well as practical field work, that is, compulsory admission into a psychiatric institution, situated literally at a stone's throw from the philosophy department building.

Along with some elaboration *Philosophy of Madness* also contains significant additions: more than *Pure Madness* this book covers the twilight zone between madness, mysticism and spirituality (especially part II and III). During my participatory field work in the

isolation cell and on the closed ward in 2007, my experiences extended far beyond the analytic-semiotic analysis of *Pure Madness*. The text and spirit of *Pure Madness* is still characterised by a certain basic trust in language. Although I demonstrate in that book how signs dissolve and disappear in psychosis, I still supposed that language would be able to speak out and contain her own vanishment.

In 2007 I was much more conscious than in 1987 of the experience that you break through the boundaries of language -- and thereby, the boundaries of thought -- to a new mad realm, which shares strong affinities with religious and mystic experiences, and which is light years away from psychiatric assessment or auto-biographical narratives about 'recovery' and 'self-management', 'acceptance', and so on. In later parts of this book I employ various thoughts and data from accounts and writings about ineffability, infinity, ecstasy, anxiety, revelations and messianism. In that zone the language of the 'data' -- the expressions of madness -- converges with the language of reflection, of philosophy.

## 2.2 Treatment

Methodology and basic assumptions in this book differ from mainstream psychological and psychiatric literature. It is commonly assumed that madness is not normal, that it should be explained on the basis of the ordinary, as a deviation or disorder from the self-evidential normalcy. My first entry into madness (part I) is, instead, the description of madness as it is experienced by mad persons themselves. By simply claiming that psychosis is, for instance, a 'dopamine level disruption', we are not informed in the least about how the mad world is actually experienced and looks like from the inside.<sup>ii</sup>

So this book is not about the brain, neurons or genes, and it is, in that sense, an untimely book. The dominant tone in modern discourse about madness is that when you go crazy, 'something happens in your brain'. The brain is expected and hoped to be the locus where sense and meaning are found clearly and distinctly. They hope to catch the scary spirit of madness inside the brain, in order to be in control of it and manage it. But even if one day a connection between madness and the brain will be found, we will still not understand what madness exactly is. Then we may know about matters of the mad brain, but we still do not know its mind, let alone its soul. We may call that 'explanation', but will not reach any understanding or insight. When we really think to understand someone better by analysing his brain, we make the same error as Patrick Bateman in the serial killer story, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. Bateman is likewise very eager to know the secret of femininity and so he saws some exemplars in half. It is only after searching through their bowels that he begins to realize that inner intimacy is not found in bodily insides.

We are living in a time in which everything that lies close to our hearts, namely, spirit, experience, culture is reduced into distancial data, namely, matter, behaviour and biology -- as if we have become strangers to ourselves. What is often forgotten in this process is that when you start reducing something -- whether it is called spirit, love or madness, and whether the result consists of matter, hormones or neurons -- you always first need to know precisely what it is you are reducing. In other words, when it would appear that madness -- or love, or even God -- is located on gene X, brain area Y, neuron bundle Z, what is it exactly that is located there? What is madness? To find out more about that, we need another route or method than the way that is paved by psychiatrists, brain researchers and pharmacologists. Therefore, it is no use spending many words on 'modern findings from brain research'.

The largest share of modern psychiatric literature is not so interesting or relevant to those who want to *understand* madness. In most research from contemporary biologically oriented psychiatry and cognitive psychology it is assumed beforehand what is 'normal', and what is 'reality'. And it goes without notice or further thought or inquiry that the mad world is a disturbance or deviation from the normal, real world. Many psychiatrists and psychologists

are not interested in madness, but only in the most efficient and effective ways to suppress and destroy her in the name of healing. And even the psychologists who make a willing effort to understand the madman and the world of madness, often miss the point. They prefer to psychologise madness away, reduce it to personal aberrations and traumas, instead of letting themselves be challenged in their own presuppositions about the world, reality and their place in it.

But fortunately there have been many interested scholars and psychiatrists in the history of psychiatry who were not primarily focused on MRI scans and results of blood tests. There are numerous accounts in which expressions and narratives by madmen were not immediately taken up as symptoms or effects of a deformed hippocampus, but as gateways to the mad world. Since the beginning of the 20th century traditions and methods have developed to observe behaviour and speech of mad persons in close detail, as an attempt to understand more of madness.

This so-called phenomenological psychiatry has been inspired by philosophical phenomenology, with authors like Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. In phenomenology focus lies on how world and reality, in all their modalities of, for instance, perception, memory or imagination, appear to the one who experiences or lives 'in the world'. In phenomenology proper everyday practical and scientific theoretical assumptions about what thought, perception and reality consist of, are put aside.

This tradition tries to understand the apparently strange mad world without immediately judging it in terms of disorders, deviations and lack. And it has been noted that not only the language of madmen, their way of perceiving the world or their emotions are different, but that there has been a fundamental change or transformation in their experience. This concerns a change in the way that time is being experienced and how thought and perception and distance and closeness relate to each other. This psychiatric tradition knows several famous names and classical works like Eugène Minkowski, *Le temps vécu* (1933), Klaus Conrad, *Die beginnende Schizophrenie* (1958), Wolfgang Blankenburg, *Der Verlust der natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit* (1971) and Louis Sass, *Madness and Modernism* (1982). Phenomenological psychiatry is the basis and inspiration for large parts of this work, and especially for part I.

However, although *Philosophy of Madness* is driven by a phenomenological approach, in the sense that it is focussed on 'first-person-experience', traditional phenomenological psychiatry does not go far enough. The concepts that are used and the observations that are made, remain in a certain sense at a distance and unmoved. For a first exploration of madness this may be adequate, but who wants to penetrate further into madness, must leave the safe shore of unmoved observation and analysis.

As long as the phenomenologist stays at the shore, he will not grasp what swimming really means, and certainly not what drowning is. At a distance he may observe people swimming and going under water, he may focus and analyse the sport of scuba diving or even the art of drowning. And his reports will remain in the resolute, well-described language of the coastguard observation and analysis. In that way he will succeed in turning madness into an individual self-contained state, essentially differing from his own safe and 'normal' position ashore.

In order to become really familiar with madness - to taste its fluid substance, to enter into its swimming, driving and drowning movements -- we need more means than those of phenomenology *sec.* Therefore, I will use other kinds of psychiatric approaches, by psychoanalytic thinkers like Lacan, Jung and Perry, but also by what may be called 'spiritual psychiatry', like the work of Edward Podvoll, *Seductions of Madness* (in part II) and John E. Nelson, *Healing the Split: Madness or Transcendence* (in part IV). Spiritual psychiatry has

taken up the age-old idea that madness and geniality lie close to each other. In this strand of thought and practice it is tried to demonstrate that a madman may have similar aspirations and insights as various kinds of 'enlightened', genial or high-sensitive persons, and that the madman mainly differs from them in dealing with this in a clumsy way. This thought lies quite close to my proposition of the madman as a 'crypto-' or 'proto-philosopher'.

But although ideas from Lacan, Jung and Podvoll are fruitful, the problem of both spiritual psychiatry and psychoanalysis, is that in the end they remain reluctant to break through the thin ice of madness. After all analyses of madness they finally speak from the position of comfortable everydayness about madness. To really throw oneself into that ocean of madness, a language and a way of thought are needed, that do not only discuss madness, but that debouch themselves into madness. We find such languages and ideas in philosophy. With a philosophical methodology, we are led to madness, although it does not provide an all-encompassing theory, no means to 'assess' what madness is and no therapeutic guidelines how to cure madness.

This book contains more prescriptions of how to become mad, than how to avoid madness. It is more focussed on 'psychotisation' or 'maddening' thinkers and philosophers than on re-education or psycho-educating the madman. At stake is not a chimera of madness, but the seduction of madness. My approach differs from those of caregivers or help-seekers. By examining extreme mad experience and thought, I do not want to isolate, classify or reject these, but to employ and apply them in order to broaden the normal or common ways of thought and experience. It is not the mission of the philosopher to help the madman or the psychiatrist. On the contrary, the madman may, possibly by way of the psychiatrist, help the philosopher with thought experiments or world constructions.

### **3 PHILOSOPHY**

#### **3.1 Philosophy from madness**

The nice thing about this book is that everything is turned upside down: the madman ends up at the chair of the philosopher -- and the philosopher is locked up in the isolation cell. In four steps the madman turns from data provider into interlocutor and companion. In part I the madman is predominantly an object that is observed, that displays data that are taken into account by the philosopher. In part II he begins to speak, he puts on the clothes of the mystic and his delusional texts are valued up into examples of mysticism and philosophical aphorism. In part III madness, mysticism and philosophy dance in circles, and produce whirlwinds into four directions. In part IV madness is crystallising, the madman rises up again from the mystic depths of part III to come to the surface and congeal there in the more familiar outlooks of paranoia, paradoxes and poetry, but no longer discernable from the philosopher.

Through all these four stages we treat mad data as potentially philosophical. The purpose of this book is to make reality from this potentiality, and to forge philosophy from madness. Common sense and common ground vanish in madness, and the madman ends up in a groundless world, an abyss, an 'Ungrund', but also in a mode of existence where trees, uprooted, grow into heaven and where there are no borders or limits -- a world without *containment* -- as psychoanalysts would call it. The world becomes a strange place for the madman, and he is perplexed by the non-foundations of existence, the existential fullness and emptiness at the same time. The madman, whether he wants or not, encounters vital question: what is life, what is good and evil, where does time flee to? Expert by experience and religious thinker, Anton Boisen, wrote in *The Form and Content of Schizophrenic Thinking* (1942: 24):

‘In any case he [de waanzinnige, WK] feels himself in the realm of the mysterious and uncanny. All the accepted bases of judgement and reasoning are gone. He does not know what to believe. His state is one of utter perplexity regarding the very foundations of his being. ‘Who am I?’, ‘What is my role in life?’, ‘What is the universe in which I live?’ become for him questions of life and death.’

These questions -- and attempts to answer them -- of the madman do not spring forward from a primitive urge or a cognitive disorder, but are, instead, produced by the high power, or short circuit, of thought, a pressure cooker full of spiralling, fascinating possibilities. The madman falters, and this is comparable to the falterings of Socrates when he, according to Apollodorus forgot time and came too late to a rendezvous. We also recognize this faltering in Wittgensteins pained hesitations and doubts, while searching for clarifications amidst of the confused. Louis Sass writes about this in *The Paradoxes of Delusion: Wittgenstein, Schreber and the Schizophrenic Mind* (1995: 12):

‘[Madness] is, to be sure, a self-deceiving condition, but one that is generated from within rationality itself rather than by the loss of rationality. The parallels between Wittgenstein and Schreber reveal not a primitive or Dionysian condition but something akin to Wittgenstein’s notion of a disease of the intellect, born at the highest pitches of self-consciousness and alienation.’

While Socrates’ thoughts and reasonings have been quite adequately represented by Plato, and Wittgenstein was also able to put his spirit into words quite acceptably, the perplexities, insights and conceits of the madman are, in contrast, expressed often in no other way than in, what they call, abracadabra, blather or in silence, in self-inscriptions or in laughter. The spark that usually enlightens our thoughts, propels our existence, seems in madness to have spread into a wildfire or turned into a lightning strike. Because of the intensity of the inner blaze, life seems, paradoxically enough, to have been extinguished. In this book we will do what we can to come in touch with that spark, that fire, rage or zeal.

The givenness of madness may also generate an expansion - or even an escalation - of the philosophical debate. Some arguments in philosophy tend to be simply rejected, because they would not be serious or realistic, because they would lead to supposedly untenable positions as, for instance, too extreme skepticism or even solipsism -- that is, the theory that there would be no other reality or world than the one in your mind or spirit. See for instance the casual remarks in an undergraduate philosophy course book by Filip Buekens (2003: 86): ‘A peculiar aspect of this philosophical discussion [about the (im)possibility of knowledge, W.K.] is that nobody (even not the skeptic) really doubts whether knowledge is possible. No skeptic has redrawn himself displeasably from the world, after having come to the conclusion that the existence of the world around us is not logically provable.’ The hidden assumption here is that extreme skepticism or solipsism as serious positions would be unreal or unlivable. Many madmen however, do not support such ideas as theories about the world, but do experience or live out these inside their world. To them it is quite feasible that doubt about the reality of the world, forces them to withdraw from the world (for instance, see chapter 1). In that way philosophy -- and thinking in general -- may be enriched by data from madness, and a philosophical position like solipsism -- and also idealism or radical determinism -- may be tested on their values for practice.<sup>iii</sup> The underlying motifs of this book can be phrased as: what does the possibility and existence of madness imply for common ideas about men and the world? In what sense is philosophy changed or stretched when we engage with data from mad experience? What is philosophy of madness?

Far too often madness has been thought of as the end point or stop gap of reason and not as a starting point or impetus for further reasoning. Even Wittgenstein, who walked so eloquently on the thin edge of madness, employs the concept of madness as an undiscussed breach of philosophy. Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty* (1969, par. 281):

‘I, L.W., believe, am sure, that my friend hasn't sawdust in his body or in his head, even though I have no direct evidence of my senses to the contrary. I am sure, by reason of what has been said to me, of what I have read, and of my experience. To have doubts about it would seem to me madness - of course, this is also in agreement with other people; but I agree with them.’

And elsewhere he writes (par. 257):

‘If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn't know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why.’

In both examples madness is that from where you can not speak further, about which you must remain silent, the locus where communication and language end. This book breaks that silence.

### **3.2 From philosophical side**

#### **3.2.1 A place for madness**

In madness philosophising takes place, and on the other hand, there is interest in madness from the philosophical side. Often madness is represented as something that has to be controlled and neutralised by philosophy or by reason. The most important philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, constructed his grand philosophical design, an architecture of concepts and arguments, in order to sustain and argue for the trustworthiness of the world, the certainty of knowledge and the stability of experience. Kant's philosophy protects the reasonable man against his mad opponent. This system guards modern man against thoughts of bottomless skepticism, experiences of boundlessness and the seductions of animal sensuality.

In modern philosophy these ideas have been taken up, discussed and criticised. French thinkers like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze do not consider madness to be something that should be restrained, but see madmen as victims of the effect of subtle forces of the so-called Reason of the Enlightenment. Especially Foucault's *History of Madness* shows what forces, powers, ways of thought and discourse have turned the madman into a sick patient, and at the same time Foucault provides the words and motivation to act and speak against those forces. Deleuze shows, especially in his double volume *Anti Oedipus*, how we may conceive the mad experiences and expressions in a quite different way, and how these can receive -- in line with the thesis of my book -- a liberating power. Those, who pass through the psychotic process, attain, according to Deleuze, an acme of thought and experience, and escape time-bound societal and cultural patterns.

The philosophical school of phenomenology relates quite differently to madness. The phenomenological method connects as closely as possible to the subjective experience, to the givens of consciousness, avoiding any assumptions about some common sense reality, in order to understand the world of lived experience. This unprejudiced stance towards experience provides an excellent methodology for research in madness. But, when all

assumptions about the reality have been put between brackets in these phenomenological investigations, the phenomenologist ends up with his ideas and conceptions, his perplexities and uncertainties into a similar kind of sphere as the madman -- who is also in continuous doubt about the realness of reality. Phenomenological philosophy provides not only a possibility for examination of madness, but leads itself by detached, contemplative, self-reflexive thought to a kind of willed madness.

Madness is of all times and cultures. In this book I use ways of thought, concepts, methods and citations from various modern philosophical currents, but also from older sources, from theology, from psychiatry and psychology, from literature and autobiographies. This book is distinct from many empirical-scientific studies, as from psychology and psychiatry, because I do not suppose a standard for what would be normal and what deviant. With help of a philosophical analysis I examine what madness means, as experience and as concept. At first glance my book seems to provide a range of analyses and reflections to understand madness. Apparently it contains a definite philosophical conceptual machinery on the one hand, and a definite corpus of data from madness on the other. But, as I already suggested above, beyond this textual picture of two well-defined domains ('clear and distinct' as Descartes would call them) there is a chaotic undercurrent in which madness and philosophy are mixed-up and indiscernible. This undercurrent influences both poles, of philosophy and madness allowing me to disclose the interrelationship of madness in philosophy, and philosophy in madness.

### **3.2.2 Mad philosophers**

In their texts philosophers may discuss, implicitly or explicitly, place and meaning of madness. Their ideas can be considered as tools, as the oars to row on the ocean of sense, nonsense and madness. In addition it is known about some thinkers that there was a certain moment or period of madness in their own life. Their self-made oars seemed to change into Leviathans or mermaids, rising from below the surface, and drawing them out into the depths and under the waters which they tried to navigate.

An interesting example of this is Plotinus, the neo-platonist philosopher of the third century CE, whom we will discuss extensively in part II and III. Plotinus systematised Plato's ideas and gave them a more individual or psychological twist. The highest possible goal for our souls is, according to Plotinus, to make contact with 'the One'. By inner contemplation we could 'ascend' from the earthly world of souls to the higher spirit, the intellect, to eternity and finally to the One. For Plotinus this path upwards is, just as for Plato, a road of thought and cerebral contemplation. But Plotinus also says that the final 'breakthrough' of intellectual thought towards the One cannot itself be thought through or discussed, and can only be 'experienced'.

Plotinus himself went through periods in which he experienced contact with this One, and we could say, from a modern perspective, that he had an extraordinary or mystic experience, or even a 'psychosis'. We know too little about his life and his time to make too definite claims about the relation between Plotinus' philosophy and the nature of his remarkable experiences. Did Plotinus undergo these experiences because of his intense philosophical contemplations? Or did his philosophy about the One come forward from these experiences? Or were his philosophical writings and his personal life unrelated? We do not know, but we do know that both his own special experiences and his philosophy about the One were very important to Plotinus himself.

Another interesting example, appealing to one's imagination, is Thomas Aquinas. This hyperactive medieval philosopher and theologian had already written tens of voluminous works when he received a 'special experience'. Praying in front of a crucifix Thomas was suddenly struck by an 'insight' or 'vision', after which he did not produce any writings

anymore. What exactly happened is unknown, but it has been recorded that Thomas said (quoted in Weisheipl, 1974: 321): “All that I have written seems like straw to me, compared to what has now been revealed to me.” Had he been struck by madness? Is this comparable to the stammering of madmen about revelations (see *Intermezzo II*)? Did this strike or flash of madness put an end to Thomas’ serious philosophy, or do these words represent Thomas’ summum of wisdom?

Several centuries later the French mathematician and thinker Blaise Pascal was struck by the lightning of madness -- or of inspiration, or insight. During a period of insight and revelation that lasted several hours, Pascal wrote a short note that started with: “FIRE. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of philosophers and scholars. Certitude, heartfelt joy, peace.” This note was found after Pascal’s death, sewn into a pocket of his coat. But, unlike Thomas Aquinas’ experience, Pascal’s ‘extraordinary experience’ made him write more, and in a gradually more theological and philosophical mode.

In modern times many other well-known and less-known philosophers have undergone periods of madness (for example, Hume, Cantor and Foucault), among whom Nietzsche may be the most famous and intriguing example. Eleven years before his death he suffered a breakdown in which he embraced a horse in Torino and fell prey to an irreversible state of madness. Just as for Thomas, it had become impossible for Nietzsche to write philosophy, and after a while he could not deliver any comprehensible speech anymore. Unlike Thomas, Nietzsche has been living for more than ten years after this horse incident, although many of his human capacities had been extinguished.

In this respect Nietzsche is seen as an example of what may happen when madness surprises and destroys you. We could conceive Nietzsche’s madness as unrelated to his work and stemming from a syphilis infection. But already in earlier work by Nietzsche some detect a mad tendency. Nietzsche would have criticized the deep foundations of culture and society with his merciless mockery, and would have dug so deeply and become so involved personally that he also let his own foundations shock and break. He would have been the great exposé, the philosopher with the hammer -- which finally hit himself as a boomerang.

I am glad to be able to present myself in a similar context. In contrast with Nietzsche however, I did return from madness, and it is my task to explain and elaborate what Nietzsche saw and thought at that time with that horse in Torino. In this exercise I will not involve my own personal adventures, neither write biographies about Nietzsche, Husserl, Deleuze or Cantor. But I will allude expressively and reflectively to a world that Nietzsche -- but also Cantor, Plotinus and Pascal -- thought to descry during extreme transmarginal situations: a world of madness, the same as the ordinary world, but, as it were, turned and twisted 360 degrees.

### **3.2.3 Madness from philosophy**

But the topic is not yet exhausted with a discussion of philosophy that analyses madness and a survey of mad philosophers. The relationship between philosophy and madness is more tight-knit than that madness appears now and then, thematically or rhetorically in philosophical texts, or that some philosopher may have visited a psychiatrist. I already mentioned it above with respect to phenomenology: the theoretical thinking through of the philosopher has its counterpart in the practical acting through, breaking through and breaking down of the madman: madness is philosophy lived out -- and derailed -- in practice.

Therefore, the term ‘philo-chosis’ might sometimes be more appropriate than a term as ‘psychosis’ to refer to the deep-existential confusion in madness: about the boundaries between self and world, words and concepts, infinity and finiteness. When the philosopher is engaged with such comprehensive themes of life, he is doing this as a pastime or as his profession, on paper or in an academic dialogue. But for the madman this engagement is a

bitter necessity to keep his head above water, to keep afloat. For instance, the seemingly esoteric, academically philosophical problems concerning the proof of existence of other minds, or the proof of a world outside thought, or concerning the difference between past and future time, are for quite a few madmen concrete and urgent problems of daily (mad) life.

The source of wonder and amazement, the movements of fascination and distancing are similar for philosopher and madman. But the philosopher knows somehow how to deal with such questions in a socially acceptable and conventionally limited manner. For the madman such deep, philosophical -- and estranged -- worries can haunt him and disorder his life. These enigmas can draw him in the apparently obscure depths of madness.<sup>iv</sup> Wittgenstein wrote about these matters (1969: par. 467):

“I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy.”

I do not only employ philosophy to elucidate and explain madness, but also use madness to bring philosophy to a head -- and beyond. Philosophy in this book is the best example of controlled textual madness. By examining -- and liberating -- what exactly is propelling philosophy, I will open up madness. In this way *Philosophy of Madness* is from itself a potentially ‘dangerous’ or ‘negative-transformative’ work. The means to understand the subject of this work, are also the means to immerse into this subject, if not for the reader, then at least for the author.

#### **4 READING GUIDE**

We live in a free country and this is a free book: everybody is allowed to read what he wants, from front to back or criss-cross hopping through the text, depending on one’s whims. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to provide some reading guidelines.

##### **4.1 Approach from the outside**

I describe madness and philosophy from the inside out, and do not use traditional classifications from psychiatry or philosophy. But to concede to the reader of this voluminous book, I give some directions about where to find what. Roughly spoken, in part I and IV I focus more on the schizophrenic aspects of psychosis and in part II and III more on the manic aspects. Chapter 9, 13, 15 and 16 are about delusional systems, chapter 10 and 11 about drug-induced psychoses. Chapter 12 deals with anxiety and depression in psychosis and chapter 11 and 14 focus on the religious dimension in psychosis.

The most important kind of psychiatry that I use is the phenomenological approach, which plays a role throughout the whole book and most explicitly in part I. Jungian psychoanalysis is the background for chapter 15, and spiritual psychiatry is the subject of chapter 14. Biological psychiatry does not play any significant role, although I could not withhold myself from criticising the way the concepts of ‘salience’ and ‘meaning’ are (ab)used in the biological psychiatry of Kapur (in intermezzo II.III.I).

Part I is flavoured most by a phenomenological perspective, inspired by philosophers as Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In Part II I develop a mystical-philosophical approach and until chapter 9 of part III Plotinus and Husserl are the main philosophical voices. In chapter 11 Georg Cantor, Nicolas Cusanus and Peter Sloterdijk come on stage. Sartre and Schelling play their role in chapter 12 and 13. I discuss one particular text of Lacan in chapter 13. Charles Taylor is the inspiring source for chapter 14.

Mircea Eliade’s work on the sacred is of importance for the whole book, and especially chapter 14, where I employ his work also for an examination of yoga theory and

shamanism. Henri Michaux and Aldous Huxley are the most important interlocutors with respect to experiences with illicit drugs, and I use Sybren Polet, Thomas Rosenboom and Thomas Pynchon for some longer literary examples of madness.

Main so-called 'experts-by-experience' are Antonin Artaud, Daniel Schreber, John Cusance, Harald Kaas and myself. I discuss Artaud in chapter 12, Intermezzo III.I and chapter 16, Schreber especially in chapter 13 and 16, just as Kaas. My own experiences are molded in all words of this book, but in more expressive literary form in the Overture, the fragments in part I, the *via psychotica linguistica* in chapter 7, the four intermezzo's after part II and the Finale at the end.

Who is the target of this book? First of all it has been written for all those who were, are or will be mad, especially those who have once been deemed psychotic. A somewhat larger target group are the family members, friends, acquaintances, psychiatrists and all others who have dealt with mad people. The other important focus are all readers with a philosophical or spiritual interest, because this book addresses the question of what man is, and can be; and what human limits and transgressions in experience and language mean. These are themes not only relevant to anthropologists, but also to phenomenologists, postmodernists, metaphysicians and other philosophers. The broadest target audience consists of everyone somehow interested in spiritual affairs, everyone with a poetic or literary stance to life, and who is curious about the widths and extremes of the spirit.

So far so good -- my reading guidelines, referring to persons, target groups, categories and divisions. This should provide a first access into this work, but not more than that. I do not want to suggest that the zone that you can reach with mescaline would essentially differ from schizophrenic psychosis; that Harald Kaas would not be a literary writer; that Artaud would not be a philosopher; that Sloterdijk would not be an 'expert-by-experience'; or that madmen or philosophers would be a clearly definable and restricted group. And even more, it remains to be seen whether all words here reflect my own experiences. If that were really the case, nobody would understand such a private mirroring language, or, on the other hand, I would have become fully transparent and caught and resolved into definite words. It is neither this nor that. Usually things are much simpler and much more complex than you think.

#### **4.2 Inner dynamics and thematics**

All this notwithstanding, I will now provide a summarily survey of the four parts of this book, which correspond to the four elements of antique Greek physics: earth, water, air and fire.

Part I starts with an exploration of the main 'deep' transformations in madness. I present a phenomenological analysis of madness and discuss a variety of expressions and reports of mad experiences -- including some longer fragments of my own acquired through introspection. I elaborate on four themes: the collapse of reality; the shifts of boundaries between inner and outer world; the altered experience of time and the upside down transformation of space. In this first part I conclude that philosophy and madness lie close to each other: the philosophical analyses point reflectively in the same direction as my mad evocations and expressions. A mad breakthrough mirrors a philosophical eureka-moment of insight. The method here is analytical and phenomenological: we start from a common sense perspective and we try to empathize our way into the mad world by letting the philosophical wonder and doubt of the own world run wild. Most important in part I is the work of phenomenological psychiatrists and psychologists like Louis Sass and Eugene Minkowski and phenomenologists like Husserl and Merleau-Ponty. In terms of antique Greek physics this part is dominated by the element of Earth, because of its seeking (though not finding!) of grip and analysis.

In part II the reader is seduced into identifying even more with the madman and to let himself be carried along in the 'stream' of madness. The middle man here is the philosophical mystic -- and mystic philosopher -- who will shed a new light on psychotic detachments and uprootings. The madman and the philosopher leave earth and firm ground and embark -- under the flag of mysticism -- for the ocean. The element of this second part is therefore Water. In this part we part with ordinary language, images and ways of thought in order to examine the oceanic and tsunamic in participatory observation. The phenomenological philosopher is no longer only observer and steps aboard of the ship of fools. For example, I will show and explicate the mad undercurrent in the Husserlian philosophy of time.

Mad data in part II come further alive: madmen like Custance, Donald Crowhurst and myself are no longer only cases of discussion or 'data providers' but engage in conversation with major mystics and philosophers like Eckhart, Plotinus and Husserl. Text style in this part becomes more loose and dynamic -- 'mad', so to say. Part II is more concerned with the imitation or reliving of a mad process than with an overview or analysis, let alone, diagnosis of a state of affairs. In this part I make more use of the work of Edvard Podvoll (1990) on 'the seductions of madness' than of Louis Sass' work, which describes madness more in its static-schizophrenic aspect.

In part III we venture further into the oceanic and airless, on the crossing-point of mysticism and madness. Here the madman has been transformed into the philosopher, and the philosopher into the madman. The heat of the fire lets the water ascend and changes it into light nebulae, under the sign of the Greek element of Air. There we build four cloud castles, to have some imaginary airy ground on which we can say something. We discern there four kinds of mystic madness and mad mysticism, circling around the Plotinic One, Being, Infinity and Nothingness. When we would translate this typology into psychopathological terms, these four kinds boil down to, respectively, obsessive-paranoid psychosis, manic psychosis, religious psychosis and depressive psychosis. However, instead of simplifying and locking up madness into psychopathology, I aim to liberate the four kinds of mysticism and madness and relate them to philosophy, spirituality and culture. In part III we will visit many rooms of the cloud castles, like the rooms of mescaline and LSD-users (Huxley and Michaux); those of theologians and philosophers like Nicolas Cusanus and Peter Sloterdijk; and those of 'nihilists' -- in the broad sense of the term -- like Sartre, Schelling and Artaud.

While part III revolves around something ineffable, indivisible, uniform, in part IV this tendency to 'monism' does not hold anymore, explodes and gets fragmented. In this last part I show where the mad and mystic quests in heaven and hell can lead to in practice. Perhaps the reader received the impression -- from chapters 10 and 11 and intermezzo II -- that madness consists only of revelations, ecstasies and heavenly joys. After chapter 12 I describe the less joyful aspects of madness: the emptiness and anxiety, the rampant delusional systems, the nagging hallucinatory spheres, the isolations, and the often self-decided death.

In part IV I show how madness gets a concrete form in the paradox, the category of the sacred and the planned systems. The cloud castles of part III collide on earth and all kinds of decrystallised forms enflame: shamanism, sorceries, telepathies -- with its matching element in this fourth part: Fire. In part IV I will further discuss the Schreber case, that I compare to the Wittgenstein and the Sass cases. I also argue that we can gain more insight into madness with help of the notion of the 'sacred', as we know it from the works of Mircea Eliade and Charles Taylor. Part IV is also the place where I show, with the wisdom of the preceding three parts, how we can re-interpret some classical cases of paranoia, megalomania and persecutory delusion, and relate these life forms to the human condition, instead of to individual failure, illness and lack of power. In the last two chapters of part IV the 'plan' of madness, the 'plan' of madness treatment, and the 'plan' of this book will converge and conclude into the Final.

The order of the parts of this book may seem to mirror the order of the psychotic phases. From such a perspective the mad journey begins with a philosophical or existential wonder about reality, thought, time and space (part I), it gathers speed in mystic and mad raptures (part II and III) and ends in an unlivable form of madness (part IV). Although there is some truth in such a consecutive phasing, we could also say that in every part, in every chapter madness starts again -- and does not end at the end of the book. Therefore, the sixteen chapters may be read separately and in arbitrary order, and can be conceived as different exploration routes through madness. The enigma of madness can at the same time be described in terms of e.g., altered space (chapter 4), detachment (chapter 5), infinity (chapter 11), or cosmic planology (chapter 16).

This book shows madness in philosophy and philosophy in madness. These two are initially on a separate level -- at least in the text -- but the further we proceed in the book, the more these two converge towards a merger or fusion in a point of vanishment. Phenomenology changes, via the mystic route, into *lunatology*. In this process mirror effects, transformations and reversals emerge: the madness that I describe, is the madness that pushes this same description; the philosophy that I use, is the philosophy of madness (the snake spits out his own tail, and swallows it again). Most characters in this book play a double role. With the ideas of philosophers like Husserl, Plotinus and Taylor I analyse madness, but I use these same philosophers as examples of mad thought. And quadruply self-referentially: the philosophy I employ to describe madness, was the omen of my madness outside the text, in real life. The philosophical work that lies in front of you, is the elaboration and impact of what was started in madness.

## Literature

### (of the whole book)

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<sup>i</sup> This was the ‘Van Helsdingen Contest’ for the best work on the border of psychiatry and philosophy, see [www.psychiatrieenfilosofie.nl](http://www.psychiatrieenfilosofie.nl).

<sup>ii</sup> I use masculine pronouns, like ‘he’ and ‘his’ for the mad’man’. Of course women may also become mad. The masculine referents should therefore only be understood in a grammatical and not a semantic sense.

<sup>iii</sup> For the contemporary debate about the existence or non-existence of a free will, it could be profitable to examine what it means in real life, of at least some madmen, to experience that their own body and actions are controlled and determined by forces from outside.

<sup>iv</sup> The intrinsic connection between wisdom and madness has been noted before. Lezy (2007: 35) writes: ‘The philosopher examines the basic existential conditions, the schizophrenic sinks through this basis... At the beginning phase of a psychosis you are confronted in a quite concrete way with what is always being presupposed: you really experience the loss of trust in reality, and this occurs in a nervous and hyperreflexive way. You intuit, as it were, what is only aimed at with great effort by the philosopher... It is not accidental that schizophrenic persons are often engaged in the enigma of existence or of being itself, and that they employ a language that has a philosophical outlook, even when it concerns persons who are not particularly gifted and not familiar with learned discourse. It also often occurs that persons, that used to be focussed on practical and material affairs, become engaged in abstract ideas and esoteric or mystic themes. This does not spring forward from a purely intellectual interest, but seems to be related to their own strange experiences.’