

The Secrets of the Madman are Also Secrets for the Madman

A philosophy of madness: The experience of psychotic thinking, by Wouter Kusters,
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Arthur Sollie

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Abstract

Wouter Kuster's excellent book *A Philosophy of Madness: The Experience Of Psychotic Thinking* is a surprising reminder that one cannot fully grasp the genesis of psychosis without taking classical philosophical deadlocks and paradoxes serious. His book offers a perspective from which psychosis appears in a completely different light. The current review attempts to capture this changing perspective.

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A Philosophy of Madness: The Experience Of Psychotic Thinking is doomed to become a classic in its field. One usually searches for madness somewhere between gene mutations, brain deficits and neurotransmitters which are supposed to cause erroneous thoughts and false perceptions, *faute de mieux*. Following Kusters, *irresolvable paradox* is the 'stuff' madness is made of. Having experienced the inner turmoil of madness firsthand, philosopher and linguist Wouter Kusters makes this point so clear that one can only wonder why it has taken so long for someone to write this book—a statement only possible after reading of course. The book touches upon something crucial. It makes enduring clichés about psychosis irrelevant by introducing a perspective from which psychosis appears in a completely different light.

To present the book, one could give an overview of how the book is subdivided, evaluate the choice of material the author touches on, or hold the arguments against the recent state of science regarding schizophrenia and psychosis. This would present the book as an encyclopedia of interesting ideas, but it would miss something essential. The book somehow functions as an intervention that one cannot simply state in its immediacy, it must be demonstrated.

The basic thesis of the book is that madness and paradox have everything to do with each other. Madness leads to paradoxical thinking, one would think. But no, Kusters reverses this perspective: paradox leads to madness. "Between these two perspectives - that of the insane and that of the outsider - there is a huge gap. This difference is of great importance in the treatment and processing of what is called 'psychosis.'"

In this way, the author "transforms the image of the madman as someone who utters gibberish ... into one who faces the maddeningly difficult task of expressing the paradox of the Absolute." (p. 474) Well, if the book does anything, it is in this maddeningly difficult task: "I offer no solutions or ways to be saved from the paradox; I show only how the paradox functions and what philosophical and insane crystallizations it produces." Time and again, Kusters leaves the reader entangled in the paradoxes of his own assumptions of common sense. In doing so, he brings the reader to a different ground than the one from which he thought psychosis would be conceivable.

One cannot simply present this "ground" in its immediacy, for it is rather a loss of ground (a split, a gap, a paradox) where one thought to find one. It must therefore be enacted. This is what the book really offers, an enactment of its thesis in a way that recurs in all its corners. To present this essential aspect, we cannot but proceed in a similar way. So let us start from something basic to demonstrate the paradox in it and from there reconstruct Kuster's thesis. Let us start from the question one might face when one gets the work in one's hands: 'How am I supposed to read this book?' Should I understand it as a philosophy of madness? Or as a 'mad'—and therefore a 'bad'—philosophy? Is it reliable objective

knowledge about madness or rather some delusional, subjective production? Both choices lead to a deadlock, but one that in the end forces us to rethink what madness really *is*.

To choose the 'objective' reading, one assumes that the work is not 'contaminated' by madness. But what then to do with the mad twists, neologisms and exclamation marks that pop up throughout the book—especially when they are not 'neutralized' by quotation marks? Of course, one might condescendingly regard them as irrelevant poetic supplements, but that doesn't prevent them from being there. To engage in a 'subjective' reading, contrastingly, one assumes that the author is blindly driven by madness, incapable to consider the condition with an appropriate academic distance. It reduces the excellent conceptual work to mere subjective concoctions that can at best serve as valuable material for psychiatric case studies.

Both readings are highly problematic. Yet, at first glance, it seems that one is forced to choose. One reading excludes the other, there seems to be no common ground. We get stuck in an absolute opposition with no possibility of compromise. At best, one can divide the book's material into two mutually exclusive parts—subjective and objective—and treat them consequently.

But that operation gives rise to material that is impossible to categorize. Such a remainder proves that both readings *repress* something. They both assume that the subdivision is a necessary step for the object of knowledge, namely madness, to appear in full transparency. In doing so, one ignores the author's explicit thesis that *the impossibility of such a subdivision is precisely the point that leads to madness*, a point the whole book is an elaboration of (see Kusters, 2020, pp. xvi-xvii). By pursuing transparency, one somehow loses the madness.

For such an impossibility, Kusters argues, was one of the triggers of his most recent psychotic episode. While working on an article about the psychotic experience of time, he faced two opposed but nonetheless necessary conceptions of time (an 'external-objective-static view' and an 'internal-subjective-dynamic view'). Although both necessary, one never touches the other. Here, the thinker is stuck with what Kant calls ANTINOMIES.

This is where madness (as 'psychological') and philosophy (as 'universal') meet. When one encounters such an impasse, one usually (like Kant) attributes the problem to our limited ability to think the thing in question. The thing itself, time in this case, thus irrevocably seems to evade our attempt to know it. Kusters, on the other hand, shows himself here to be a real Hegelian. For Hegel discards Kant's conclusion and so does Kusters. Such a conclusion—regarding the impasse as a problem of knowledge and not as a property of the thing itself—reveals, to quote Hegel, an excessive "tenderness for worldly things" (Hegel, 2010, p. 93).

In the same vein, Kusters argues that when you encounter such an impasse, it means that time itself is paradoxical. The manifestation of this impasse dragged the author into a new psychotic episode. He writes that "most people are oblivious to the unfathomable miracle of time, and the normal non-philosophical individual rarely suffers from 'temporal confusion' with regard to what 'real time' is. Only the madman rubs up against the edges of the experience of time and ventures beyond them." (Kusters, 2020, p. 88)

Consequently, one might say that our impasse in deciding which reading to follow is not only the point at which our attempt to know madness and madness itself are most distant from each other, but also, surprisingly, the point at which one suddenly turns out to be at the heart of madness itself. To paraphrase Hegel, 'the secrets of the madman are also secrets for the madman', secrets that may drive you mad.

Kusters (2020, p. 468) elaborates this deadlock by means of the self-referential paradox in the famous statement, "All Cretans are liars," evoked by a Cretan. It is—not necessarily a correct, though—a perfectly possible form of knowledge about Cretans. But when a Cretan makes the statement, the very act of enunciation not only informs us about Cretan reality, but also manifests something tricky in that reality. The subdivision between (subjective) statements and (objective) reality becomes disturbed when one faces the surplus reality such statements leave us with. This effect, this unlocatable excess, arises regardless of one's psychological intentions. It manifests some rupture in reality that leads the Cretan to look back with perplexity.

How does this bring us to madness? Analyzing a crucial scene from August Strindberg's autobiographical novel *Inferno*, Kusters shows how Strindberg's paranoia arises from signs whose unclearness persecute him. Initially, the idea of a conspiracy against him seems highly unlikeable to him. Nevertheless, he cannot rid of his devastating suspicion. Eventually, his doubt reaches a tipping point. Before going to bed, he and a few friends check the area around his room to make sure that no mischief awaits him. Nothing happens. Yet, he does not find peace, on the contrary, he must get clarity. "Then," he writes,

in a dare-devil spirit, or perhaps only with the intention of making a physical experiment, I rise, open both windows, and light two candles. Then I sit at the table behind them, expose myself with bared breast as a mark, and challenge the unknown: 'Attack, if you dare!' (Strindberg, 1913, p. 92, as cited in Kusters, 2020, p. 606)

These acts, making his paranoia kick in with full force,

give Strindberg the feeling that he's gone too far. With such an act, he acknowledges that 'they're here'. When you merely think they're after you, the Plan seems less real than when you act on it. As soon as you start talking to 'them', writing about 'them',

acknowledging 'them', they become more real, and they strike back with great force. You're admitting that you believe in the Plan, you recognize that it exists, and your bare breast proves it. Acknowledging the existence of them can frighten you, to which 'they' can immediately react, as if you had awakened the proverbial sleeping dogs. (Kusters, 2020, pp. 606-607)

Whatever causes Strindberg's fear, it is not just a false perception in the sense that he 'wrongly' sees others that aren't there. He screams and bares his chest precisely because he *cannot* see them. He searches in vain for them. If the 'others' 'wake up' after the act, it means that his own scream reveals to him that 'they' are getting a grip on him. His actions prove to him a not-him in him. They show that he is not in control of himself, that he is haunted by something that escapes him.

Usually, hallucinations are considered to be projections of thoughts stemming from the mind of the madman. Yet, Strindberg is clearly not simply persecuted by a thought, but by something his thoughts *cannot* get a grip on. Analogously, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2006, p. 466) concludes from Schreber's memoirs (one of Kusters' main references) that his delusions result from the surprise of some "act by which something comes out of nothing". "It is in this very paradox," Lacan writes, "reflected by the intrusion of a thought, for him hitherto unthinkable, that Schreber sees the proof that something must have happened that did not proceed from his own mind" (Lacan, 2006, p. 467). One does not choose for a paradox to be paradoxical; its paradoxical nature imposes itself from without. Furthermore, Schreber's mind did not merely think about paradoxes. The paradox rather 'happens' unintendedly, like for the Cretan.

Kusters invites us to be astonished that there is a minimal difference between the acting subject and the subject who records his own actions. When one thinks, one may be surprised by one's thoughts. When one looks at something, it happens that one suddenly realizes one's proper gaze. This might lead to perplexity, not simply because one side is present to the other, but because of the presence of their uncanny incompatibility. This is obviously the disturbing factor for people who stutter; their problems often disappear when they do not hear themselves speak. One does not want to express such split. It appears as an uninvited guest. In this sense, it literally emerges out of nothing.

Kusters (2020) borrows another illustration from a friend. During a discussion about the evolution of species, his friend begins to act like a T-Rex. He testifies,

I was big, red, and I craved dead meat. I was hungry! I ran up to the mirror with a heavy tread, and the image there surprised me. I saw myself approaching the mirror in

an odd posture, but through that mirror image I also saw the animal that had taken possession of my body. (p. 539)

In the mirror he sees not simply 'himself' but a mysterious 'other', a split in the core of his own being.

Kusters, here, is in line with Schelling, Hegel and Lacanian psychoanalysis for whom such a troubling split is not only a *problem* for the subject. True, subjectivity cannot deal with, nor do without this split. But this way, subjectivity also struggles itself into existence. Eliminate the split and you lose subjectivity. So, instead of asking why inner thoughts appear in reality, Lacan (2006) forces us to rethink our idea of reality itself: how must reality be structured for hallucinatory phenomena to be possible? Well, for that to be possible, reality must include a split that makes the subject stumble into existence. Viewed this way subjectivity and madness are not simply obstacles to reality but overlooked means by which reality's inner split becomes accessible.

If subjectivity really is such a paradoxical response, why do we not constantly have to face such paradoxes? Here, Lacan introduces a distinction between the REAL and reality. 'Objective reality', or the 'common sense' with which Kusters (2020) introduces new perspectives, becomes transparent for a subject that excludes his traces from it. By doing so, he excludes reality's inner split. Yet, such an operation always leaves a trace. One can exclude subjectivity from reality, but one cannot exclude its exclusion. By contrast, we get to the REAL when we bring the split back into reality.

By indicating the traces of the split in reality, Kusters makes madness appear again and again. Madness can only be thought from this point onwards. If not, it will remain the mere error of thought it is usually considered to be. Of course, in madness, such a split quickly gets propped up with imaginary content as if not a structuring split, but some hidden other behind the scenes imposes paradoxical impossibilities onto oneself. Yet, following Kusters, we can only address these issues once we fully endorse the consequences madness confronts us with. Madness confronts us with a split that gives rise to subjectivity, a split one usually restlessly represses.

Let me conclude with yet another quote from Kusters (2020, p. 571): "not every psychosis," he writes, "may represent the truth, but there is a remarkable, self-referential, paradoxical element of madness hidden in the depths of the truth." I like this quote, one would rather expect him to write that there is a paradoxical element of truth hidden in the depths of madness, but no, there is a paradoxical element of madness hidden in the depths of truth. Madness not only disturbs madmen, but also our usual idea of reality, by bringing out its hidden truth.

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