



Sanity and Insanity: Is truth always sane?

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Abstract:

When madness is excluded from the domain of reason, a deeper question becomes apparent on the horizon: who possesses the authority to draw these boundaries? Giving that intellect has never been content merely to define itself; rather, it has defined itself through what it excluded, making madness an "Other" through which it affirms its own presence and measures its own sanity. This is what Michel Foucault revealed when he traced how insanity, throughout history, was transformed from a voice that possessed a place within human experience into an object of exclusion, confinement, and medicalization. At this foundational moment, modern rationality was built upon the ruins of what it had silenced. On this basis, the article seeks to discuss the dividing line between reason and unreason, and the way in which each has contributed to the formation of the other, thereby opening a horizon for rethinking the meaning of reason and the limits of truth.

Keywords: Madness, Sanity, Insanity, Truth, Silence, Resistance, Philosophy, Sickness.

Introduction

Philosophy has long been accustomed to defining the human being as the rational animal, and the circle of definitions has expanded to include descriptions such as speaking, mortal, sarcastic, provocative, and laughing, among other diverse attributes that apply to only part of human existence and essence. It is important to note that contemporary philosophy has, to a large extent, unsettled our understanding of the essence of the human being and of his rational truth. If it is valid to define the human being by the preceding attributes, is it conceptually valid to define him as mad as well? In truth, madness has always constituted the mirror through which reason measures its limits and tests its certainty. From Descartes, who excluded madness from the sphere of methodological doubt for fear that certainty itself might be affected, to Michel Foucault's critique of this exclusion in *History of Madness*, where he shows how reason did not merely define madness but established its authority over it and excluded it as an "Other" that threatens the order of rationality. For, if it is impossible to comprehend madness independently of reason, then the question of madness is, first and foremost, a question of reason, and every attempt to understand madness is in fact an attempt to understand reason. It is said: "Take wisdom from the mouths of the mad." Has the rational person ceased to be inspiring and creative, and what wisdom can issue from a madman? More importantly, how can such wisdom be represented? Are we dealing with irrational



manifestations, or are we facing a different or parallel system of reason? And if that is so, would this not constitute a disturbance to the rationality of reason itself and to its cognitive capacity?

Sanity and Insanity:

No concept in the history of human thought has received as much multiplicity in interpretation and difference in meaning as madness. Seeing that it is neither a fixed given nor a complete truth; conversely, it is a concept that has taken shape through a long historical, cultural, and philosophical process, that has made determining its relationship with reason one of the most controversial issues, and has made defining its meaning something that changes with the systems that have embraced it. Although this change has not been limited to the nature of madness itself, it has also extended to the nature of its relationship with reason, where madness and reason are intertwined in a complex manner as a result of interactions and contradictions that suggest not merely a form of opposition, but also a kind of harmony and consonance, which is a remarkable paradox in the nature of the human being. Exploring this paradox requires understanding madness as one of the dimensions that reveal reason, “Although it is madness to understand madness in itself” (Roy, 2012, p. 9).

Perhaps the first manifestation of this intricacy is evident in the way ancient human civilizations viewed madness, considering it “an affliction caused by supernatural forces.” The Egyptians and Assyrians regarded many illnesses as afflictions cast down from the heavens, while Greek myths depicted madness as a trial imposed by the gods. Popular knowledge and traditions, meanwhile, attributed madness to evil spirits (Roy, 2012, p. 47).

Nonetheless, this conception did not remain constant throughout history; rather, the concept of madness continued to change according to the social, intellectual, and historical systems that produced it. In view of the fact that, from the beginning of the European Renaissance, “the concept of madness began to move away from the body and become detached from it toward the mind, coming to be regarded as a disorder of will and thought. Then, during the eighteenth century, it came to be viewed as an error and ignorance that concealed human beings from the light of reason, and paved the way for the emergence of the modern therapeutic institution, which not only isolated the mad person but also deprived him of his personality and civil legitimacy” (Fadel, 1997, p. 125).

While this transformation was embodied at the institutional and social level in the emergence of what came to be known as the mental clinic, philosophical thought approached madness from a different perspective. For, thinking about madness was no longer associated with treatment and isolation, but rather with the nature of its relationship to reason. In accordance with this, philosophers undertook an analysis of the components of the human psyche in its various intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and rational dimensions, making reason the foundation of the ideal individual and a clear and distinctive model upon which idealistic, political, and moral principles were based. Notwithstanding, within this glorification of reason, they did not “deny the existence of the irrational; rather, their achievements and works



that they formulated ... indicate that they recognized the complete dangers inherent in the emotions ... for there is no way to save human beings from catastrophe except through the calm pursuit of reason” (Roy, 2012, p. 48).

On that account, emphasis was placed on reason as the criterion of truth and the ideal image of human existence, in an attempt “to place reason in its proper position within existence...” (Nassif, 2008, p. 177). Nevertheless, this elevation of reason was not without criticism, as a number of contemporary philosophers argued that reducing truth to reason alone conceals other possibilities for understanding the human being. Madness was therefore no longer viewed simply as the opposite of reason, but rather as an experience that reveals its limits. Hence, André Gide emphasizes that creative writing belongs neither to reason alone nor to madness alone; one should position oneself between the two. We should be “close to madness when we dream and close to reason when we write, for madness, like thought, is a form of the human being,” as Hegel puts it (Fadel, 1997, p. 126).

In accordance with that, madness was no longer merely a deviation from reason; it became a discourse possessing its own logic. This is what Foucault recognized when he stated that madness “speaks about itself through itself, condemns and defends itself, and demands to be close to happiness, truth, and reason ... and to be closer to reason than reason itself” (Michel, 2006, p. 36).

Accordingly, this understanding requires not only a reconsideration of madness, but also a rethinking of reason itself. Here, defining the concept of reason becomes an indispensable necessity.

The concept of reason has been established in philosophy in two senses: a narrow sense that encompasses the capacity for inference and deduction, and a second, broader sense that includes “the ability to form concepts, judgments, and inferences, and to apprehend principles, connections, and relationships among things in their various forms...” (Nassif, 2008, p. 177).

However, possessing these capacities alone is not sufficient to describe a human being as rational, since the rational human being is, above all, an active subject, and reason is one of his attributes. Further, a person is rational not merely because he possesses the faculty of reason, but because of his ability to perceive and engage in rational reasoning. “That is, what matters is not possessing the attribute of reason, but activating this attribute, applying it, and making use of it” (Nassif, 2008, p. 179). This confirms that rationality requires activation, and that this activation is what gives it a real existence in the living being. What is noteworthy here, even so, is that activating rationality requires adherence to the requirements and judgments of reason. Failure to activate them properly, or violating the judgments of reason and treating them with disregard, moves us from the realm of rationality into the realm of madness. Thence, it is necessary to distinguish between madness as a mental illness and madness as the opposite or antithesis of reason and wisdom. Giving that when we address the concept of madness in the context of this reading, we do not mean the disorder or functional



impairment addressed by psychiatry, which requires specific diagnosis and treatment. This is madness that concerns the individual in itself and does not carry a meaning that extends beyond it. More precisely, what concerns us here is madness in its philosophical and ethical sense, that is, as an attitude opposed to reason and wisdom as defined by the prevailing system, not because of incapacity or illness, but because it constitutes a departure from the logic imposed by that system. As discussed above, it is important to pause at Nietzsche, who regarded madness as natural and reason as characterized by incapacity and limitation, and considered madness to be superior in the possession of knowledge and wisdom. He states: “There is no one less like me than myself; I am subject to two fundamental moods, each of which regularly changes within itself, making me a rational madman in one and a mad rational man in the other. Yet, in both cases, madness surpasses wisdom” (Fadel, 1997, p. 127). It follows that, the mad person is not necessarily someone who has lost his rational faculties, but rather someone who possesses the courage to live a truth that the community has not dared to acknowledge. The mad person represents another possibility of understanding, seeing the world outside the frameworks of the familiar. Therefore, he does not become detached from reality, but rather detaches himself from the certainty of society and places it under question, because true certainty is the path of the individual toward madness, as Nietzsche puts it. At this point, the question arises once again: who has the right to decide who is rational and who is mad? Returning to language itself may reveal another dimension of this problem. For, the Arabic language has sought to clarify the meaning of madness, identify its significance, and trace its various interconnected forms. In most dictionaries, madness is defined as “the disappearance of reason or a corruption within it”.

Madness, in this sense, stands in opposition to reason or weakens it. According to Ibn Manzur, madness designates concealment and covering; madness is that which conceals and covers the intellect (Ibn Manzur, 1994). Since reason, linguistically, as stated by Ibn Faris, is “that which restrains from blameworthy speech and action,” madness, without restraints, gives free rein to forms of speech and action beyond the scope of reason. Moreover, a rational person is one who gathers and organizes his affairs and judgment. It follows from this that madness is liberation from the restraining power and authority of reason. Madness is also associated with the expression “his madness overtook him” or “he lost his bearings,” while it is said that “the night became mad” to mean that it grew dark. In this sense, madness becomes a loss of the light of insight and discernment. Besides, in the Qur’an, the word (mad) is mentioned eleven times, and it often appears as an epithet used by those who denied the prophets and messengers and rejected their prophet-hood, meaning that they were described as mad because they had deviated and departed from what their peoples had become accustomed to, bringing something contrary to the way in which they lived. In Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-Arab*, the synonyms of madness reach eighty terms, which corresponds with Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi’s description when he said that “reason among its people is vast ... and likewise, madness among its people has a wide scope.” Accordingly, the wider the domain of



reason the greater the extension and movement of madness. As for our question concerning the boundary between reason and unreason, insofar as the latter is regarded as madness, we may say that madness is whatever departs from and deviates from what is familiar and customary; it is everything that departs from the rational, reasonable, and logical system enjoined by the majority. Hence, saying “this is madness” becomes a judgment directed at everything that does not fit within a predetermined cultural or political framework” (Michel, 2006, p. 13). It thus falls outside the standards that the community has come to regard as sound and legitimate, which is what Foucault referred to under the notion of the regulated middle boundary, describing it as “a divider between those who follow the right path and those who are outside the boundaries” (Michel, 2006, p. 13). For, the dividing line is what societies draw between reason and unreason, or between those regarded as following the right path and those placed outside this framework. However, if society draws the dividing line between reason and madness, the human being himself does not appear to be a being characterized by absolute stability, since human nature reveals a degree of tension and emotionality, which makes this boundary less solid than it appears.

From this perspective, Allah, the Exalted, says: “Indeed, humankind was created impatient. Distressed when touched with evil withholding when touched with good him except those who pray” (Surah Al-Ma'arij, Ayah 19) The creation of the human being as impatient means that anxiety and excessive distress are not acquired traits, but rather an inherent element in human constitution. If this is the case, then the verse does not portray the human being as a mad creature; rather, it reveals that within his constitution there exists a degree of fragility and emotionality that does not always respond to the demands of pure reason. Hence, what we call madness is not necessarily a complete break from reason, but rather a disturbance in the balance between reason and emotion. This invites us to reconsider the human being, neither as a being whose existence cannot be reduced to reason alone, nor to its opposite.

If, in Foucault's terms, the mad person lends his image to all phenomena of cultural belonging, then this madness will not be a path against that which has become impossible and indomitable. For, the penetration of madness into reason in the figure of the madman signifies the capacity of madness to approach truth, rather than an inability to do so. This comes close to what Foucault argues: that the possibility of questioning reason arises from the very depths of unreason itself, not from reason itself. Perhaps this proximity is what makes literature the most suitable space for approaching this imbalance between reason and emotion. “The treatment of madness in literature reflects the human being's emotional contradiction toward reason itself. Reason becomes perplexing, strange, and complex through its unusual and deviant manifestations, while also remaining a familiar and recognizable reason, it is fundamentally composed of a structure of dreams, threats, and strange desires that are most often concealed from the external world and from the conscious self” (Fadel, 1997, p. 126).

The association of literature with madness makes it a mirror that reveals what reason is incapable to express, thereby opening a space for dialogue between madness and thought.



From here, madness in literature is no longer a mere narrative subject; rather, it acquires a philosophical dimension. Further, philosophy, in turn, takes on a metaphorical and symbolic dimension through it. This makes madness a philosophical problem that is difficult to overcome and that resists any single definition. It is “an intellectual and contemplative phenomenon insofar as it is a loss of reason; an ethical phenomenon insofar as it is a departure from the familiar; a psychological phenomenon insofar as it is confusion and a lack of balance; a social phenomenon insofar as it is marginalization or a choice of the margins; and a creative phenomenon insofar as it is a deviation from the norm and the established system” (Meraj Ahmed, 2021). In this regard, the question of madness becomes a question not merely of what it is, but of the way in which it expresses itself.

Wisdom, madness, and silence:

Silence in the experience of madness is not merely the absence of speech; rather, it is a language of another kind that emerges when familiar language is unable to contain what is concealed in the depths of the self. Because the mad person is often excluded from the sphere of rational discourse, his silence becomes a testimony to the impossibility of communication with a society that recognizes only what conforms to its own logic. On that account, Foucault notes that the history of madness is also a history of systematic silencing: “The Renaissance restored the voice of madness, but it controlled the sources of its violence, and the Classical Age would come to silence it with a strange force” (Michel, 2006, p. 67). The mad person was not only deprived of his freedom, but also deprived of his right to have his voice heard. Consequently, silence becomes a space of resistance as much as it is an effect of exclusion, for it harbors a truth that rational language has been unable to articulate.

It can be inferred that Arab culture departed from this rule through its greater interest, compared with others, in the subject of madness, as it treated it not as a pathological condition but as a cognitive condition, considering it part of Arab life. Mad people, therefore, were not excluded or loaded onto ships of fools such as those known in Western literature: “the ships that carried their mad cargo from one city to another truly existed, and for this reason the fools lived a life of wandering, while the madman was the passerby, the traveler between two shores to which he belonged to neither” (Michel, 2006, p. 29). For, madness is not a negation of wisdom. On the other hand, Al-Ghazali was right when he saw, beyond reason, another stage in which matters are revealed that reason cannot apprehend through demonstration. This explains and justifies the interest of jurists, religious scholars, theologians, and others in mad people, and their eagerness to penetrate their spaces and domains, explore their anecdotes and stories, and engage with them.” Ibn al-Jawzi remains a unique and distinctive case through his book (*The Stories of Fools and Simpletons*), in which he saw “in their stories a lesson for whoever reflects, for in them one sees what makes one laugh and weep, and extracts from their states that which reveals the fluctuation of minds” (Ibn al-Jawzi, 2020, p. 10). Within a comparable context, Ibn Khaldun asserts that among the established features of the concept of madness in the popular imagination are sanctity, truthfulness, and spontaneity. Thus, most



saints and sages in Arab culture were considered mad or Majadhib (those believed to be spiritually drawn toward God). Perhaps this is what would make madness sacred. And the truth is that the image of the mad person can reflect existential anxiety, silence in the face of an intractable reality, and a struggle against imposed silence through excavating what has been left unspoken, particularly with regard to human issues. In this instance, for example, al-Jahiz, in *The Book of Misers*, brings the margins of society into view through the stories and anecdotes of misers. What prompted him to do so was the question of someone who wondered about what had corrupted their minds, confused their thoughts, blinded their insight, and disrupted their sense of balance, and how all of this could coexist with an exceptional degree of intelligence and cleverness.

It is true that such literary texts offer us a more beautiful and humane philosophy. Yet, from another perspective, they have kept the mad person as an object of the sage, specifically as an object of his laughter. This is an image in which the mad person has not yet been liberated from the control of the wise and rational person.

The discourse of madness is a critique of the nature of the centering on reason, in an attempt to make this centering neither infinite nor transcendent. In the way that the marginal presumes the position of the central, unreason becomes a different kind of madness. It is a madness of a silent nature, because there is an aspect of truth that can only be grasped by silencing reason. Thence, the moment of reason's silence does not mean the death of truth, as Ibn Khaldun emphasizes. Instead, it is an important moment for knowing another face, or other faces, of truth itself. This suggests that truth may be more complex than we imagine. This is what led some critics to argue that Foucault discovered the concept of silence within the idea of madness and reached the conviction that the mad person is someone who possesses a different vision of this world but is unable to express it in an intelligible way, and this brings us closer to what Jacques Derrida stated when he asked: "Regarding what one cannot express, would it not be better to remain silent?" And if there is an intention to silence the needs and voices of others, whether through force, disregard, or indifference, then madness is a silent cry, exactly as Blanchot described it: "the silent cry that breaks all speech that is addressed to no one and received by no one."

Madness and Revolution:

The mad person does not necessarily reject reality; in fact, he exposes its fragility and unsettles its certainty. For this reason, throughout history, he has appeared as a troubling figure to authority, seeking to expose what authority attempts to conceal beneath the guise of order and rationality. From here, madness is no longer a mere individual disorder; in some interpretations, it has become a symbolic act of resistance and a revolt against the familiar, not because it destroys reason, but because it pushes reason to reconsider its boundaries and question what it presents as an ultimate truth. For, in Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*, reason does not become madness only when it turns into an instrument of power, a means of extending influence, and a mechanism for controlling all forms of arrogance and brutality; it



also becomes madness when it works to consolidate a totalitarian system that regards any criticism or rejection of it as a crime and an act of terrorism.

If reason reaches the height of madness when it succeeds in granting rational legitimacy to practices that are, in essence, contrary to reason, then the most dangerous forms of this madness are manifested in those who are presented as rational individuals, leaders, and decision-makers. These “rational madmen” have been responsible for plunging the world into deadly and devastating wars, for which political, security, and moral justifications were formulated that gave them the appearance of rationality, while their consequences revealed another face that had nothing to do with reason. How can reason justify such a degree of destruction? Is what is happening, not a form of madness? These questions open up a broader philosophical horizon, because they do not merely challenge the outcomes of reason, but also its alleged neutrality. Here Nietzsche enters the discussion, not to declare the failure of reason, but to reveal that reason can become a servant of the will to power, constructing seemingly rational justifications for violence while concealing within them a drive toward domination, which is what political reality currently demonstrates. Moreover, the Western civilization that Nietzsche once criticized has, at the present time, listened to his words with great attentiveness. Everything it does in terms of the ideologization of science, the monopolization of the values of freedom and citizenship, the support of dictatorial regimes, and the isolation of entire peoples from the values of modernity and progress is something that Nietzsche himself could not have imagined, even in his wildest dreams.

Be that as it may, the madness of power is not always limited to those who possess the instruments of domination and reshape reality according to their interests. It also extends to those who knowingly or unknowingly accept living with the consequences of that domination without possessing the will to resist it.

Here, another, more painful image of madness emerges. This is manifested in the Eastern world, where we find twenty-two Arab states and fifty-seven Muslim states, with a combined population exceeding two billion people, claiming to be free and fully sovereign over themselves and their countries, yet waiting for an unidentified masked person, stripped of his homeland and besieged by the entire world, to awaken within them the will to resist and restore their belief in their right to struggle against falsehood, is there not, in this waiting, with all the contradiction it entails, another face of madness?

Conclusion

The aim of the article was not to arrive at a final definition of madness as much as it was to reveal the transformations of its meaning and the differences in its significance throughout the history of philosophy. For, the analysis has shown that it was never a single concept or a fixed truth, but rather remained a complex human experience whose meanings change with the changing ages and intellectual systems. Furthermore, if rational consciousness has become accustomed to viewing it as a deficiency or a deviation from the order of reason, philosophical action is not a loss of reason, but rather the courage to think beyond its familiar



boundaries and a belief in a possibility that has not yet become reality. For, how many ideas have been described as madness because they preceded their time, and how many visions appeared impossible before becoming reality? In the present context, a question that is difficult to resolve emerges: if reason has attained such power that it has enabled it to reshape the world, has it been equally capable of making human beings more humane? Or do we need a little “madness” that liberates us from the servitude of the herd and restores to us the ability to dream, to differ, and to believe in what has not yet become reality?

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