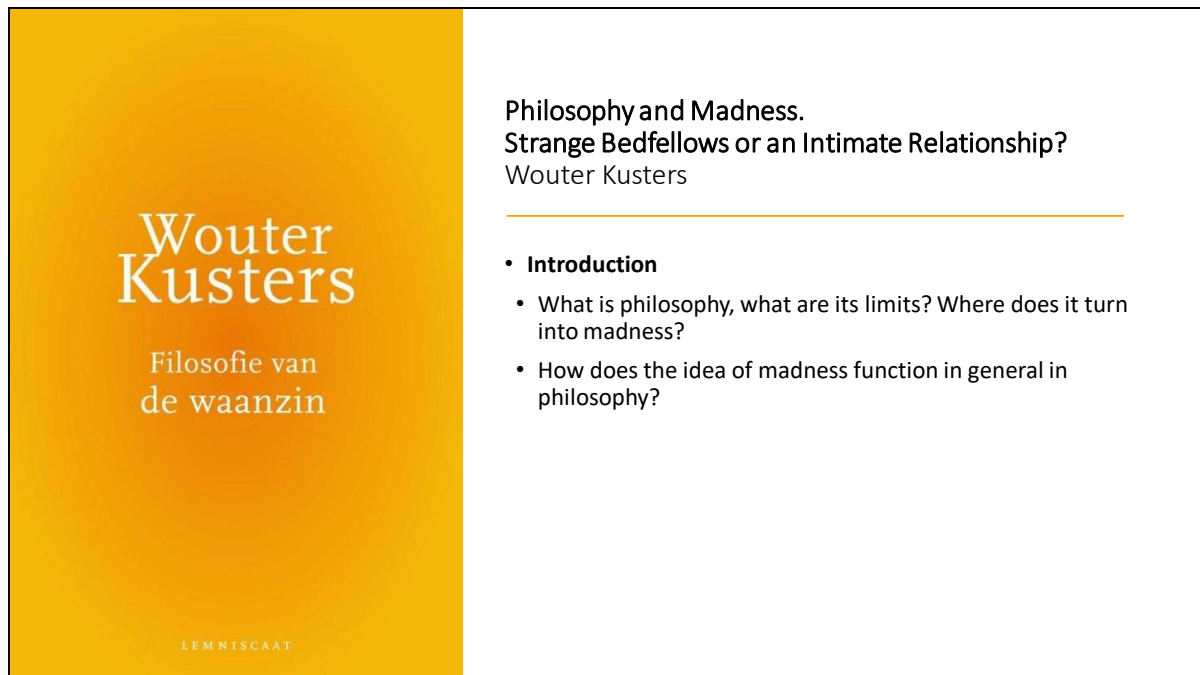


Paper Presented at the Occasion of the Visit of Louis Sass to the Symposium on Madness and Art in Ghent, Belgium, February 2020.

Wouter Kusters

Philosophy and Madness. Strange Bedfellows or an Intimate Relationship?

I want to thank the organization, Jasper Feynaerts, Bart Marius, Museum Guislain and the University of Gent, who gave me the opportunity to speak here on the occasion of Louis Sass' presence.

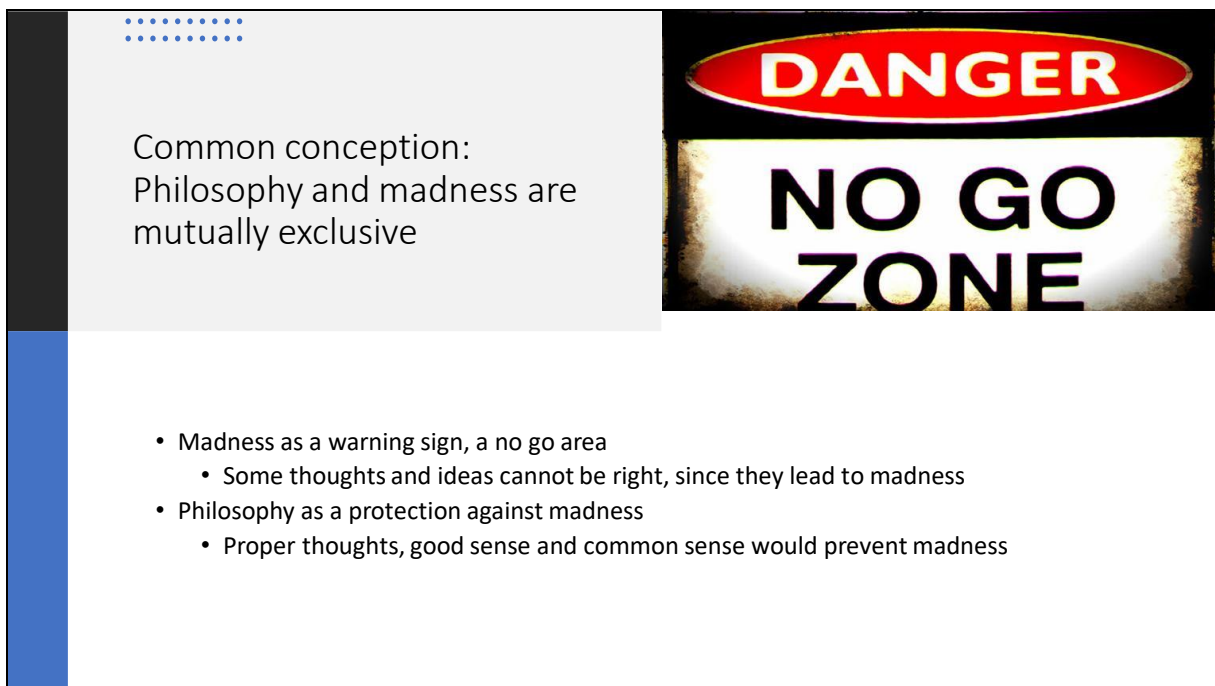


I will spend some thoughts on Louis' work about the relation between philosophy and madness. In my own work I have used many of Louis' ideas and his phenomenological approach into psychosis, and here I will discuss some of these *in my own way*.

I say "in my own way", because, although I agree with many of Louis' ideas, observations and arguments, my initial focus is different. Louis' starting point is the schizophrenic patient, his experiences and life world, and from there he examines characteristics, similarities and differences within this patient group, and between different groups of patients, non-patients, artists, writers, philosophers and so on. I start from a slightly different point of view, namely from the philosopher's questions of "what is philosophy, what are its limits, where does philosophical sense become mad nonsense?" This approach brought me professionally and personally to a similar domain as Louis, namely the wild

and complex thoughts and experiences that are found within and around psychosis.

However, I do not enter that domain to search for more fine-grained descriptions of the patient population. I do not want to add some kind of phenomenological or experiential addendum to the knowledge of the DSM, or to supply extra patient data to facilitate higher psychiatric control over the enigma of madness. Therefore, I will not discuss different classes of patients and their diagnoses, but will restrict myself to a few comments about how the idea of madness functions in general in philosophy.



Common conception:
Philosophy and madness are mutually exclusive

- Madness as a warning sign, a no go area
 - Some thoughts and ideas cannot be right, since they lead to madness
- Philosophy as a protection against madness
 - Proper thoughts, good sense and common sense would prevent madness

First of all, madness is often considered to count in philosophy as a kind of *warning sign*, or as a *no-go-area*. That is to say, madness is implicitly or overtly mentioned and used to prove that a certain argument or idea should be rejected since it would **lead** to madness. Or, even worse, because the philosophical theory in question would itself be an **expression** of madness. In this way of thinking madness is not only considered a warning sign for philosophy, but philosophy itself is considered as a tool to protect oneself and others from madness. With proper thinking, with clear and distinct thought, with good intentions and by sticking to realism and to common sense, madness can be avoided.



The case of solipsism

- What is solipsism
 - *I am the only one*
- Solipsism in philosophy
 - Descartes: *I think, therefore I am*
 - Problem for Descartes: *do others also exist?*
 - Mad Cartesians: *I think, I am, and nobody else is*
 - Solipsism also possible in philosophical idealism, phenomenology.

A good example concerns solipsism. Solipsism is the theory that there is only one real and conscious mind in the universe, and that happens to be yourself. Other people do not have their own free will or their own mind, but are just your own phantasies, or just a kind of automatic robots, without a soul or mind and deprived of autonomous agency. In solipsism I am the only person that really exists. Of course, solipsism is not a very viable or practical theory, able to attract many followers, and an organization or school of solipsism seems hard to build. However, solipsism does refer to a complex domain of thought, where other well-founded philosophical approaches could lead to. Take Descartes' philosophy with its famous statement, *I think, therefore I am*. This thesis functions in his philosophy as the ground of existence: "I cannot deny, and I know that I am thinking, and that is the reason that I must exist." The existence of myself is certain. However, once I have reached this absolute certainty through my philosophical exploration, I am still far away from the certainty that in addition to myself, also *other* people really exist. In strict cartesian philosophy, the existence of other persons, is not that evident as that of my own, and solipsism could be a possible consequence of cartesian reasoning. Descartes' solemn statement could then be slightly modified, and interpreted slightly different and then it would express the mad or solipsist core: "I think, I am, and nobody else apparently is". Such unwelcome outcomes are also possible in other related kinds of philosophy like idealism and phenomenology.

Solipsism or madness as an argument against some philosophies

- Common sense: Philosophical Idealism locks you up in your own mind and makes you mad
- Ricoeur: "Solipsism has always been the common sense objection to idealistic philosophies....phenomenology is obliged to recognize this objection as **a difficulty undermining it from within.**"



Now, madness is used at this point as a negative argument, when it is stated that idealism or phenomenology cannot be true because of their possibilities of leading to solipsism. Idealism would lock you up in your own mind, and make other minds inaccessible, unreachable, that would be madness, goes the claim. Note what Paul Ricoeur says in his book about Edmund Husserl, one of those philosophers under suspicion of solipsism: "Solipsism has always been the common sense objection to idealistic philosophies....phenomenology is obliged to recognize this objection as **a difficulty undermining it from within.**" The defenders of such philosophical approaches however, also employ the madness argument. Because, instead of saying "yes, my theory leads to solipsism, and I am proud to be a solipsist", they go at pains to modify their interpretations of Descartes in such ways that solipsism is avoided in the theory. They do not allow that the existential impossible intrudes into the realm of philosophical possibility.



Splitting by way of the impossible:

- Common sense:
 - Serious philosophy
 - Real philosophers
 - Proofs/Affirmations of the existence of other minds,
 - Philosophies directed at the common good, the community, the connection, etc.
 - The real Descartes, the real Husserl
- Nonsense/solipsism:
 - Mad philosophy
 - Mad philosophers
 - Sticking to solipsism
 - Anti-social, mentally disordered, autistic, schizophrenic
 - Descartes' demon, Husserl's stubborn method

Now, when this argument of insane madness is accepted by all, then the result is that idealism, rationalism, and also phenomenology gets split into on the one hand a good non-solipsist variety, for the well-functioning philosopher who is able to relate his ideas to common sense. And on the other hand the bad variety, mad idealism, which is not held by serious philosophers, because, well, because it would be madness, not common sense, but nonsense. Furthermore, this distinction between two varieties on the theoretical level, like mad idealism and proper philosophical idealism, extends itself to the personal level, to the actual thoughts of the actual philosophers themselves. Then, it is said, that Descartes himself is a philosopher, who therefore also must reject solipsism, and avoid his own demon that tries to seduce him to solipsism.

The strange role of madness

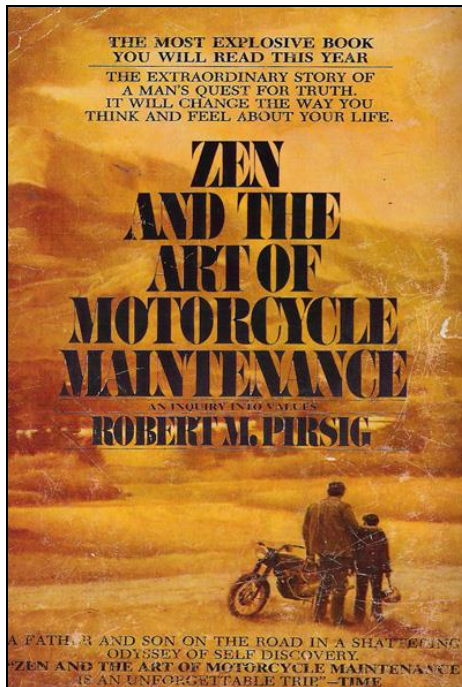


- Madness is nonsense
- Madness is the name of nonsense and chaos
- The negativity of nonsense enables the construction of positive sense
- Then the nonsense is needed for sense
- From beyond the limit between sense and nonsense, madness provokes the sense to become nonsense
- Madness as a seduction, as a Cartesian demon, *an undermining difficulty from within*

In spite of the rejection beforehand of solipsism and other forms of madness, madness has a strange ambivalent relation with philosophy. First of all, the content of madness is believed to consist of nothing but nonsense, impossible thoughts and unliveable experiences. But in its form it functions as the name and identification of that nonsense, thereby enabling to draw a line between what counts as sense, and what counts as nonsense. Madness is then used to identify and separate proper philosophical meaning from absurdisms and paradoxes, to contrast order with chaos, and to distinguish common sense from nonsense.


In other words, due to the supposed impossibility of madness, we are also able to define and contain what is possible, and are able to hold the possible and the real as distinct from the impossible and the unreal. And so madness functions in philosophy as the primordial hidden difference, and thereby enables order to become ordered, while madness itself remains without meaning and value.

And, in spite of all of its supposed negative, nonsensical non-philosophical character, madness has the power to seduce and infect the philosopher as a person, because thought always longs to more than what the image of thought as common sense can contain. And then, in what Louis Sass also describes as the age of Romanticism, madness is considered as the absolute outside, the absolute Other in a world that thinks that everything is transparent and in reach of common sense. Madness has then become an alien force the philosopher has to fight with, a cartesian unspeakable demon, that is haunting him, or an *undermining difficulty from within* that is seducing him.



Perhaps these last aspects of madness, with inclusion of all of its contagiousness and its hereditary aspects have been most eloquently and famously described in Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

The
Impossible
Madness //
Evil //
Contradiction



Walt Whitman

- Madness as excluded by existential philosophy
- Evil as excluded by moral philosophical reasoning
 - Cf. utilitarianism, its unwelcome outcomes, Peter Singer
- Contradiction as excluded by classical logic
 - A contradiction is impossible, and proves its negation
 - A ban on contradictions guarantees coherence and order in logical systems

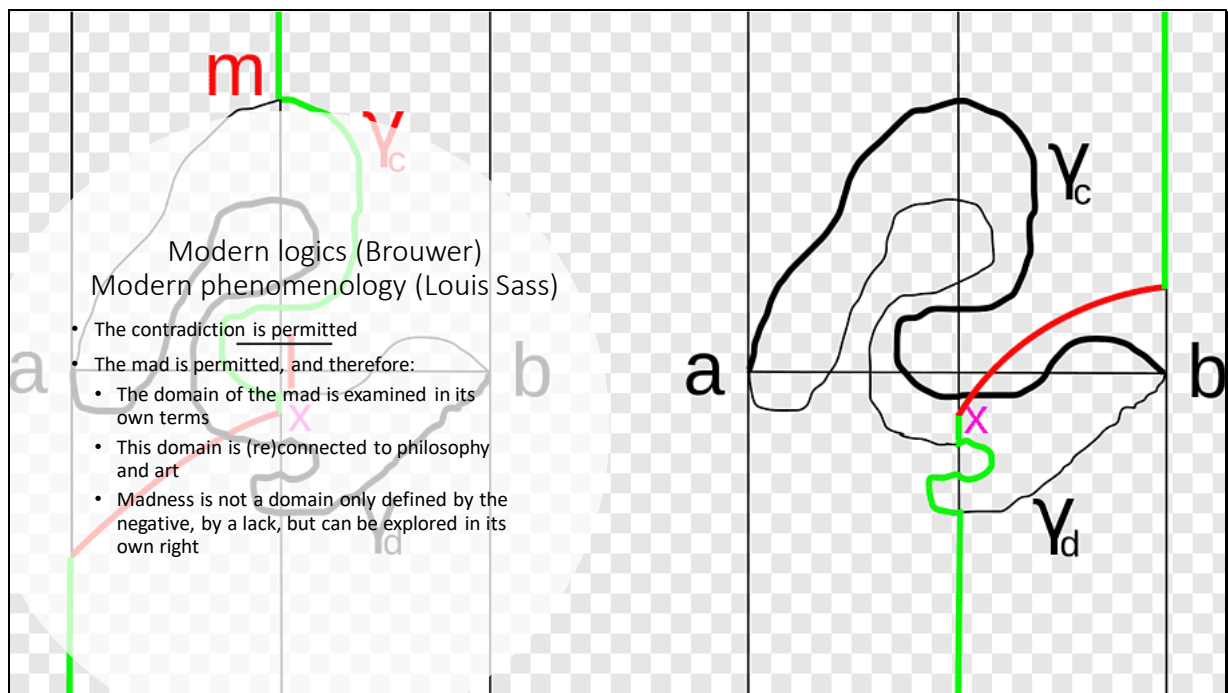
Today for the broad range of existential philosophy madness functions as the existential impossible. In that way madness in existential philosophy is comparable to evil in moral philosophical reasoning. For instance, take an ethical theory like utilitarianism. This theory might have as one of its consequences the affirmation of an act as good, that is normally considered as undisputably bad,

such as killing newborns in order to reduce overpopulation. In such cases we conclude that the ethical theory must be wrong, and that it cannot and should not be part of our ethics, and of our beliefs about the good. And then, when some rigorous utilitarian philosopher like Peter Singer would stretch his utilitarianism beyond a certain limit, with such horrendous claims as a consequence, the philosopher would be expected to clean up his ethical theory to prevent such unwelcome consequences, and to eradicate such sick immoral inclinations from his own soul. So, just like madness points to the existential impossible, and thereby defines the existential possible and proper philosophy, in a similar way evil or badness points to the morally impossible, and thereby carves out what is good, and what counts as good ethics.

In addition to the existential impossible, and the moral impossible, in classical logics and mathematics we have this concept of the logically impossible, which is expressed as contradiction. In classical logics, we make use of the negative power of contradictions when we prove that a certain proposition is valid by showing that its negation would lead to a contradiction. The ban on contradictions then enables us to ground the construction of coherence.

The analogy with the mad and the bad, is that first of all, a certain commonsense claim is made: madness is unliveable, evil is immoral, and in logics, a contradiction is not allowed within our idea of truth, that is, our set of true propositions. Contradictions would explode the whole system of truths and non-truths. One mad person destabilizes a room full of conventions, and it was one evil act that ruined men's chances to stay in the harmony of Paradise. With help of these three domains of a philosophy of common sense, with its clear limits and its binary oppositions, a positive vital world of goodness, truth and coherence is constructed by excluding the mad, the bad and the contradictions.

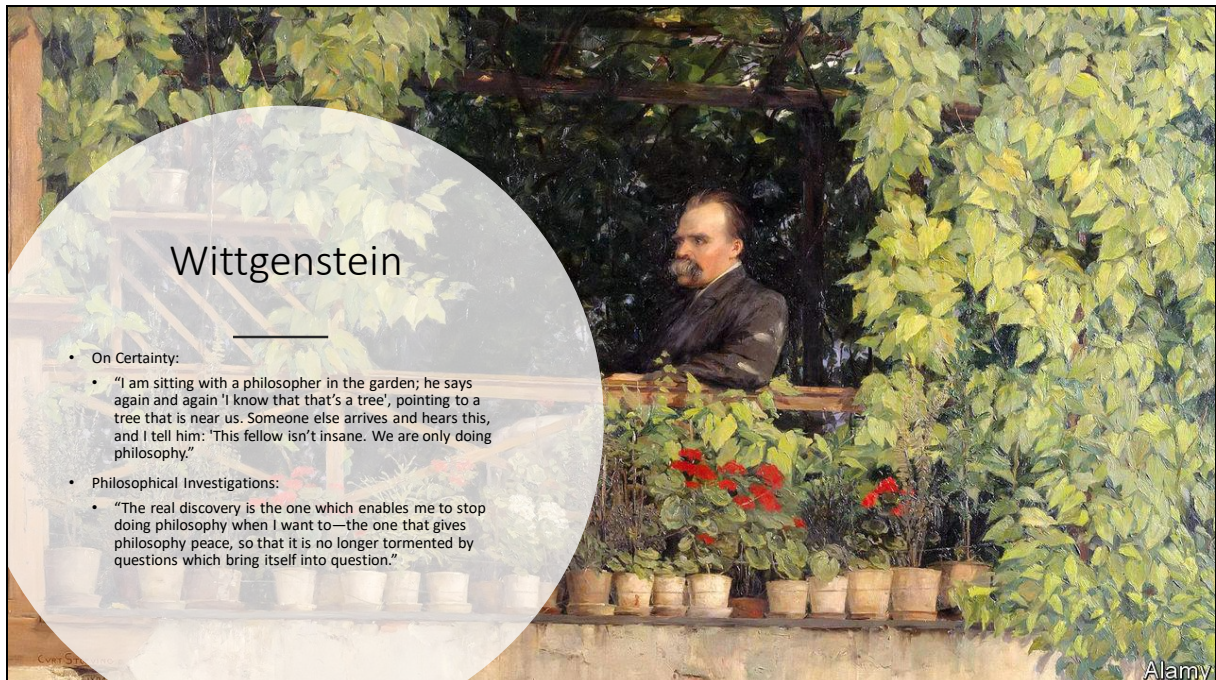
Now, the interesting thing in logics is that this law of non-contradiction has been challenged and refuted. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, classical logic has been followed by a range of other kinds of logics, for various purposes, that all differ in their axiomatic principles. In post-classical logics as founded by the Dutch mathematician Brouwer, contradictions do no longer lead to rejections of one system, and affirmation of another. After Brouwer, contradictions can no longer be used in such an exclusive and negative way.



Now, after this detour I want to return to the philosophy and phenomenology of psychosis. Just like Brouwer freed the contradiction from its logical shackles, it can be argued that Louis Sass freed madness and the mad from their medical shackles and isolation away from art and philosophy. In his work Louis Sass and those who have been inspired by him, do not use the psychotic mind and thought as examples of how not to live, as warning signs, no go area, or as the existential impossible. Instead Louis Sass and the new phenomenologists start from the other side, from the philosophies of Husserl, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty and Lacan as well as from the meaningful thoughts and perspectives expressed in modern art. And when we follow such philosophers and artists we can get a sense of the domain of madness, no longer as an excluded reserve of meaningless illness, but as a kind of third way between common sense and nonsense.

This innovative perspective from philosophy consists in a turn towards the domain of madness without describing it in only negative terms. The mad is not compared with the normal, in order to describe what the mad lack, but madness is considered as a substantial domain, with its own logics, its own peculiar kinds of organization of dualisms around notions like passivity versus activity, inside and outside. When we follow Louis Sass in this, the price is that we can no longer define our philosophies as in contrast with mad thought. However, we may gain that we can fly on the wings of various philosophers and reach a kind of overview or even insight into what may be going on in that seemingly incomprehensible nonsensical area of madness.

Now to end my talk I give two quotes by Ludwig Wittgenstein, one of Louis Sass' most appreciated philosophers. I quote him both as a philosopher with wise words that may throw a light on what madness may be, but also as a philosopher who himself had some tendencies quite reminiscent of certain kinds of madness:



First quote is from “On Certainty”:

“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.’”

And the second from his Philosophical Investigations: “The real discovery is the one which enables me to stop doing philosophy when I want to—the one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself into question.”