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Concepts of Madness:

A Comparative Study of Western and Eastern Philosophical Thought

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Contents

Introduction……………………………………………………………………………………………………3

Chapter One – Concepts of Madness in Western Thought……………………………………………5

Chapter Two – Concepts of Madness in Eastern Thought………………………………………16

Chapter Three – Rethinking Madness: Different Philosophical Perspectives………………22

Conclusion…………………………………………………………………………………………………25

Bibliography………………………………………………………………………………………………26

Introduction

Madness is a concept that has been studies by philosophers for centuries. It has posed questions about the limits of reason and the structures that underpin human understanding. The concept of madness challenges boundaries of what we consider normal and asks us to confront fundamental uncertainties: What does it mean to be rational? How can we distinguish reality from illusion? And what do we make of experiences that deviate from the norms that societies and philosophical traditions hold as fundamental? To engage with madness philosophically is to step outside the familiar frameworks of reason, culture, and the human condition.

This thesis explores the concept of madness within two broad intellectual traditions often categorised as 'Western' and 'Eastern' thought. While these terms encompass diverse and intricate traditions, they are used here as heuristic tools to compare dominant trends in how madness has been understood, framed, and treated. Western philosophy, grounded in dualistic frameworks that can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, frequently conceptualises madness as a deficiency: the absence of reason, self-control, order, or reality-orientaion. Madness is often being constructed as the 'other'. As Michel Foucault demonstrates in *Madness and Civilization*, this framing not only reflects philosophical assumptions but also informs the institutional and social practices that define and control madness.

When we take a loot at Eastern traditions, particularly those rooted in early Chinese philosophy and medicine, we see that they offer a different perspective. Rather than framing madness as a deviation to be corrected, they often describe it as a phenomenon that can reflect cosmic imbalance, ethical misalignment, or even liberation from societal constraints. Daoism, for instance, sometimes describes madness as a state of spontaneity and freedom, a rejection of rigid norms that brings the individual closer to the Dao. Confucianism, while more focused on social harmony, incorporates madness as a critique of moral and societal failure. Early Chinese medicine integrates madness within holistic frameworks of health and balance, treating it as a temporary state within the natural cycle of human experience.

The philosophical significance of this comparative study in this thesis lies in its potential to illuminate the assumptions from these different perspectives on madness. Western thought's tendency to isolate madness as a deficiency contrasts sharply with the

relational, holistic and integrative frameworks found in Eastern philosophical traditions. By placing these different perspectives in dialogue, this thesis seeks to challenge narrow definitions of madness and explore its broader implications.

When we think of madness, in a philosophical way, we do not merely think about it as an abstract or theoretical concept. Madness, as a phenomenon, confronts some of the deepest questions about human existence and our relationship to the world. How do we construct norms of rationality and reality? What happens when those norms are broken? And can madness, rather than being a threat to these structures, reveal their limitations and point us to new ways of thinking? These questions are central to this thesis, which examines madness not only as a philosophical concept but also as a lens through which to reconsider the boundaries of reason and the human condition.

This study contains three parts. Chapter One examines the dominant frameworks of madness in Western thought, focusing on the dualisms and deficiencies that define much of its philosophical and institutional treatment. We will focus on thinkers like Plato, Descartes, and Foucault, examining how madness has been constructed as the antithesis of rationality, self-control, order, and reality-orientation. Chapter Two turns to Eastern perspectives, with a particular focus on Confucianism, Daoism, and early Chinese medicine. Here, madness is embedded within broader systems of balance, harmony, and relational ethics, challenging the binaries of Western frameworks. Finally, Chapter Three engages these traditions in dialogue, critically comparing their approaches to the concept of madness. In this chapter we will explore the possibilities for rethinking madness as a phenomenon that transcends cultural and philosophical boundaries.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to demonstrate that madness, far from being a mere deviation or deficiency, is a deeply complex and multifaceted phenomenon. By exploring its treatment across traditions, it seeks to uncover new insights into the nature of reason, disorder, and the human condition.

Chapter One
Concepts of Madness in Western Thought

Western philosophy has been relying on binary oppositions as a fundamental framework for understanding the world for a long time, probably since its origins in ancient Greece. Influenced by foundational thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, this dualistic framework has shaped Western intellectual traditions, structuring ideas about reality, morality, and human nature. Concepts are frequently organised into strict dichotomies – rationality vs. irrationality, mind vs. body, good vs. evil, nature vs. culture, free will vs. determinism, and so on – forming systems of thought that emphasise clarity and coherence.

As Peter Elbow notes in "The Uses of Binary Thinking," this reliance on oppositional categories reflects an enduring tendency to reduce the complexity of human experience into clear distinctions, thereby prioritising clarity and coherence over ambiguity. In each pairing one term is typically privileged as normative or positive, while its opposite is marked as deficient or lacking.[1] This binary way of thinking deeply shaped Western thought and culture, extending this to its treatment of madness. Within this dualistic tradition, madness is rarely treated as a complex phenomenon in its own right. Instead, it is often defined in opposition to traits that are highly valued in Western thought, such as reason, self-control, order, and reality-orientation. Madness becomes the 'other' to these ideals, conceptualised not as something with intrinsic value or meaning, but as the absence of what is considered normative.

The exclusion of madness from the realm of valued traits is not a purely philosophical abstraction; it has had profound historical and institutional consequences. In his influential work *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault describes how, beginning in the Classical Age, madness was systematically excluded from the realm of reason. He argues that this binary opposition between madness and rationality was not merely a philosophical concept but also a social and institutional practice. Madness, which had previously been perceived as part of the human condition, was redefined in terms of deficiency and deviance. Institutions like asylums arose to confine and silence madness, reinforcing its exclusion from rational discourse and society.[2] Madness, in this

[1] Elbow, "The Uses of Binary Thinking," 51-54.
[2] Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*, ix-xii.

framework, was cast as a disruptive force that had to be suppressed to preserve social and epistemological stability. This thought reinforced a rigid binary that marginalised madness as not only irrational but dangerous.[3]

This chapter explores the recurring ways in which Western philosophy has framed madness as a state of deficiency, focusing on four interrelated themes:

i. **Lack of Rationality**
Madness as the absence of reason, often contrasted with rationality as the defining trait of humanity.

ii. **Lack of Self-Control**
Madness as a failure of emotional regulation and self-governance, undermining moral agency and virtue.

iii. **Lack of Order**
Madness as a disruption of personal, social, or cosmic order, threatening stability and harmony.

iv. **Lack of Reality-Orientation**
Madness as a detachment from reality, linked to alienation or illusion.

Each of these themes will be examined through the writings of key Western philosophers, including Plato, Seneca, Descartes, Kant, Freud, and Foucault. By placing their treatment of madness within their broader philosophical frameworks, this chapter aims to uncover the intellectual foundations of the Western perspective on madness as a deficiency. Central to this analysis is an examination of the dualistic assumptions underlying these conceptualisations and their broader implications for how madness has been socially and philosophically marginalised.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that this analysis does not claim to represent the entirety of Western philosophy or its traditions. The Western philosophical canon is not a monolithic entity, and not all thinkers have conceptualised madness in the same way. The dualistic and deficiency-based framework discussed here reflects dominant trends within specific strands of Western thought, but it is by no means universal. Exceptions to this perspective exist, with some thinkers, such as Foucault, offering a more nuanced or critical view of madness that resist traditional binaries. This

[3] Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*, 70-74.

chapter, therefore, does not seek to define 'the' concept of madness in the West but rather to explore recurring themes and tensions within a subset of its intellectual history. By focusing on these dominant trends, this analysis provides a foundation for the comparative discussion of Eastern perspectives in a later chapter.

Lack of Rationality

Rationality has long been regarded as 'the' defining trait of humanity within the Western philosophical tradition. The Greek philosopher Aristotle famously characterised humans as possessing a 'rational principle,' emphasising that the capacity for reason distinguishes humanity from other beings and serves as the foundation for ethical and intellectual life.[4] This elevation of rationality as the highest human faculty has profoundly shaped philosophical, cultural, and scientific narratives, framing reason as the essential characteristic for morality, social harmony, and knowledge. Within this framework, madness is often conceptualised as the negation or absence of rationality, a deviation from the essence of what it means to be human.

In his *Republic*, Plato gives a striking illustration of how madness can be conceptualised as a deficiency of rationality. In Book IX, Socrates talks about the tyrannical soul, where 'eros,' a powerful and unruly force, becomes the "leader of the soul" and enlists madness as its "bodyguard."[5] This madness eradicates moderation and rational order, driving the soul into chaos and corrupting its capacity for reason and virtue. As philosopher David McNeill observes, Plato is trying to frame madness here as a force that not only disrupts rationality but also purges the soul of its remaining virtues, leaving it vulnerable to base and destructive desires.[6] In this context, madness is reduced to a lack of rationality. It is compared to a failure to govern one's impulses in accordance with reason. Interestingly, Plato's *Phaedrus* offers a more nuanced view of madness, distinguishing between destructive forms of irrationality and 'divine madness.' In this dialogue, certain forms of madness, such as poetic inspiration or prophetic vision, are portrayed as gifts from the gods that transcend ordinary rationality and reveal higher truths. [7] However, even in this context, rationality remains the ultimate standard. Plato's divine madness is only acceptable when it aligns with higher moral and intellectual ideals,

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[4] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.13.
[5] Plato, "Republic," 225.
[6] McNeill, "Human Discourse, Eros, and Madness in Plato's "Republic"," 235-241.
[7] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 54-55.

which reinforces the idea that rationality is the primary lens through which human behaviour and thought are evaluated.[8]

For a philosopher like René Descartes, rationality is not only central to the definition of human nature but also to the foundation of knowledge and truth. In his *Discourse on the Method*, Descartes famously declares, 'I think, therefore I am,' grounding human existence in the capacity for reason.[9] In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes briefly considers madness as part of his method of radical doubt. He writes:

> Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to the insane, whose brains are impaired by such an unrelenting vapor of black bile that they steadfastly insist that they are kings when they are utter paupers, or that they are arrayed in purple robes when they are naked, or that they have heads made of clay, or that they are gourds, or that they are made of glass. But such people are mad, and I would appear no less mad were I to take their behaviour as an example for myself.[10]

In this passage Descartes uses madness as an illustration of an extreme form of irrationality, a state so far removed from reason that it lies outside meaningful philosophical inquiry. Descartes does not want to engage with this idea of madness; rather, he uses it to underscore the centrality of rationality to human existence. His dismissal reflects a broader pattern in Western philosophy: madness is treated as an absence, a failure to meet rationality's normative standards, and thus excluded from serious consideration.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault examines the historical construction of madness. He argues that madness, beginning in the Classical Age, was systematically excluded from the domain of rational discourse. This exclusion, according to Foucault, was not merely a social or institutional act, but a philosophical transformation that redefined madness as the antithesis of, and thus dangerous to, reason. During the Renaissance, madness had not yet been strictly opposed to rationality. Foucault identifies this era as one in which madness retained a certain ambiguity, often viewed as part of the human condition, capable of revealing truths that lay beyond the reach of reason.[11] However, during the Classical Age, this relationship shifted completely. Madness was no

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[8] Shelton, "Divine Madness in Plato's *Phaedrus*," 260-261.
[9] Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method*, 29.
[10] Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 41.
[11] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 24-32.

longer understood as an alternate form of understanding or an expression of human complexity. Instead, it was reframed as a deficiency – a failure to conform to the principles of rational order. Foucault describes this transformation as the "Great Confinement,"[12] a period in which madness was both physically and conceptually excluded from society. This exclusion, Foucault argues, was tied to the rise of rationality as the dominant value in Western culture. All other forms of thought and existence were measured against this rationality.[13] Madness, as the negation of this standard, was cast as a disruptive force requiring control and silence. It became irrelevant within the rational framework.

Lack of Self-Control

Western philosophy has often also conceptualised madness as a state where self-control is lost, allowing irrational impulses to dominate human behaviour. This framing ties madness to the failure of rational governance over the self. In this section, we will look at the approaches of Plato, Seneca, Freud, and Foucault so examine madness through the lens of self-control.

When we return to the fragment discussed in the previous section, Plato's depiction of the tyrannical man in the *Republic* offers further insight into how madness is intertwined with a lack of self-control. In Book IX, Socrates describes how the soul of the tyrannical man becomes dominated by unrestrained desires, which Plato likens to "drones" swarming within. These desires, filled with indulgences such as "incense, perfumes, wreaths, wine, and all the other pleasures," overpower reason and establish chaos within the soul.[14] As this internal disorder escalates, the soul adopts madness as its "bodyguard,"[15] which leads to the expel of virtues such as temperance. Plato writes:

> Then this popular leader of the soul adopts madness as its bodyguard and is stung to frenzy. If it finds any beliefs or appetites in the man that are regarded as good or still moved by shame, it destroys them and throws them out, until is has purged him of temperance and filled him with imported madness.[16]

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[12] Ibid, 38.
[13] Ibid, ix-xii, 35-36.
[14] Plato, "Republic," 225.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.

In this context, madness is not merely an absence of rationality but a direct consequence of the failure to exercise self-control. The tyrannical man feels overpowered by his desires, which disrupt both his internal harmony and moral agency. For Plato, this portrayal shows the essential role of self-mastery in achieving a just and ordered life, while madness can lead to reason failing to govern the passions. This framing aligns with Plato's broader philosophical commitment to the primacy of rational order and the dangers posed by its collapse, which can also be seen in his analogy with the horses and the charioteer.[17]

Seneca provides another perspective on the relationship between madness and self-control in his treatise *De Ira* (*On Anger*). He declares "Some of the wisest of men have (...) called anger a short madness: for it is equally devoid of self control"[18], drawing an explicit parallel between emotional unrest and the loss of rational self-governance. For Seneca, anger represents a temporary lapse in reason, a moment when the individual is overwhelmed by irrational impulses, much like madness itself. He argues that anger, like other unrestrained emotions, disrupts the soul's equilibrium and leads to actions that deviate from virtue and wisdom. Madness, in this context, is not limited to a pathological state but serves as a broader metaphor for any condition in which self-control is abandoned. Seneca aligns madness with the inability to regulate one's passions. Unlike Plato, who emphasises the philosophical structure of the soul, Seneca's approach is deeply influenced by Stoic ethics. For Seneca, the antidote to madness lies in cultivating reason and moderation, virtues that enable individuals to master their emotions and live in accordance with nature. By equating madness with emotional excess, Seneca broadens the concept beyond its medical or metaphysical connotations, presenting it as a challenge to ethical living and self-discipline.[19]

Sigmund Freud provides a psychoanalytic lens through which madness can be understood as a failure of self-control, manifesting most prominently in what he terms psychosis. In Freudian theory, the psyche consists of three interacting components: the 'id', which embodies primal instincts and desires; the 'superego', representing societal norms and moral constraints; and the 'ego', which mediates between these forces to maintain balance and coherence.[20] Psychosis, or madness, occurs when the ego is

[17] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28-31.
[18] Seneca, *Dialogues: Seneca*, 75.
[19] Ibid, 88-93.
[20] Freud, *The Ego and the* Id, 19-33.

overwhelmed by the pressure of the 'id' or alienated from external reality, resulting in a breakdown of rational governance. In the *Ego and the Id*, Freud describes the psyche's internal struggles, saying that madness is not merely the absence of reason but a collapse of the ego's ability to regulate competing demands. In the case of psychosis, Freud argues that the ego is overwhelmed by unconscious drives of the 'id' or retreats into a distorted reality shaped by unprocessed trauma or repressed desires.[21] This disconnection from reality can be compared to the loss of self-control that Plato and Seneca discuss, framed in psychological rather than ethical terms.

Michel Foucault, in *Madness and Civilization*, examines how madness has historically been associated with a perceived loss of self-control. He describes how madness in the Classical Age was likened to a form of natural fury, bringing it to an animalistic dimension. This natural madness was seen as a wild, untamed force that could only be subdued through physical confinement and institutional control.[22] According to Foucault, the bestial nature of madness was central to its marginalisation, as it represented a threat to the rational and orderly society envisioned during the Enlightenment. Aditionally, in his chapter 'Passion and Delirium,' Foucault explores how madness was understood as the ultimate loss of mastery over one's own being. Those who failed to regulate their passions were excluded, not only from rational discourse but also from the social and economic order.[23] In this time, madness was both a philosophical and a political problem, something that needed intervention and exclusion. By highlighting these historical dynamics, Foucault reveals how the mad were being transformed into objects of medical and institutional authority, legitimising systems of power and discipline.

Lack of Order

Order, as a value in Western philosophy, has often been associated with harmony, stability, and coherence. Madness, by contrast, has frequently been framed as a fundamental disruption to this order, posing threats not only to the individual but also to the social and cosmic realms. In this section we will examine how thinkers such as Plato,

[21] Ibid, 68-88.
[22] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 70-74.
[23] Ibid, 85-116.

Hobbes, Kant, and Foucault have linked madness to chaos, analysing its destabilising effects on personal, political, and metaphysical systems.

In Plato's philosophy order is frequently tied to the harmonious functioning of the soul and the polis. In *The Republic*, Plato portrays madness as a state in which the tripartite soul, composed of reason, spirit, and appetite, falls into disharmony. When reason fails to govern the spirit and appetites, the individual becomes fragmented and chaotic, losing their ability to act virtuously.[24] Plato's charioteer analogy in *Phaedrus* vividly illustrates this disarray: the rational charioteer loses control over the unruly horses, leading to chaos and destruction.[25] Madness, in this sense, is not merely a lack of self-control but also a breakdown in the soul's internal order. Plato's view extends beyond the individual to the political sphere, as he argues that the disordered soul mirrors and contributes to societal instability. A state ruled by the equivalent of a 'mad' tyrant – one dominated by irrational appetites – is destined to collapse, disrupting the harmony and justice that define the ideal polis.[26] For Plato, the restoration of order, both in the soul and in society, requires the reassertion of rational governance, positioning madness as a direct threat to this foundational principle.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes provides a distinct but complementary perspective, emphasising the role of order in maintaining societal cohesion. In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that human life in its natural state is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"[27] a condition of perpetual chaos that he equates to a form of collective madness. According to Hobbes, this madness arises from the unregulated pursuit of individual desires, leading to conflict and instability.[28] The social contract should serve as a remedy for this disarray, imposing order through the authority of a sovereign power. Madness, in this Hobbesian framework, represents the breakdown of this social contract. It disrupts the rational calculation and mutual agreement that underpin civil society, allowing chaos to resurface. This perspective ties madness to the broader theme of disorder, not only in the personal realm but also in the structures that govern human interaction. The mad individual, unable to conform to societal norms or laws, becomes a destabilising force, necessitating external control through institutional mechanisms.

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[24] Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul."
[25] Plato, *Phaedrus*, 28-31.
[26] Plato, "Republic," 223-229.
[27] Hobbes, Leviathan, 78.
[28] Ibid, 46-48.

Immanuel Kant extends the concept of order into the metaphysical realm. He frames madness as a challenge to the unity and coherence of rational thought. In his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant describes madness as "the inability to bring ideas into mere coherence necessary for the possibility of experience,"[29] a condition in which the individual loses their capacity to organise perceptions into a unified and rational framework. For Kant, this loss of coherence not only affects the individual's ability to reason but it also leads to an individual not being able to participate in the shared rationality that constitutes human community. Madness is thus being seen as the antithesis of his structured order.

Foucault provides an alternative, more physical, view on the relationship between madness and order. In the chapter 'Passion and Delirium,' Foucault discusses how madness was perceived as a disorder of the 'humours' or bodily substances thought to govern health and behaviour.[30] He highlights how this physical imbalance was seen not merely as a medical problem but as a threat to the broader moral and social fabric, justifying institutional intervention and confinement. Foucault emphasises that this framing of madness as a disruption of internal and external order was instrumentalised to uphold societal stability.[31] Institutions like the asylum became spaces where the chaotic nature of the insane was controlled by a regime of discipline.

Lack of Reality-Orientation

The relationship between madness and reality has been a recurring theme in Western philosophy, where reality is often framed as a stable, knowable entity. Madness, within this context, has frequently been conceptualised as a detachment from this reality, a state in which the individual loses the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, which leads to delusions and hallucinations. Philosophers have grappled with the nature of reality and its distortions, revealing how madness challenges not only perception but also the philosophical foundations of truth and existence.

Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' provides an early exploration of reality and illusion. In *The Republic*, Plato describes prisoners chained in a cave, mistaking shadows cast on the wall for reality. The journey out of the cave represents the ascent to the real knowledge,

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[29] Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, 112.
[30] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 85-91.
[31] Ibid, 209.

where the philosopher escapes illusion and perceives the forms – the ultimate reality.[32] Madness, in Platonic terms, can be interpreted as a failure to transcend these shadows, a condition where the individual remains trapped in false appearances. Yet, Plato also acknowledges the potential of 'divine madness,' as seen in *Phaedrus*, where madness inspired by the gods leads to prophetic or creative insight. This dual perspective highlights the complexity of madness as both a detachment from and a potential reorientation toward higher truths.

In Wouter Kusters *Filosofie van de Waanzin* (*Philosophy of Madness*) he introduces the concepts of 'hypo-' and 'hyperreality'. These ideas elaborate on the understanding of madness as a disruption of reality-experience. Hyporeality refers to a state where the world appears drained of vitality and significance, leaving the individual in a diminished connection to their surroundings. Conversely, hyperreality amplifies perception to an overwhelming degree, where even the mundane is imbued with profound meaning.[33] We can connect this to Plato's allegory. Just as the prisoners in the cave mistake shadows for reality, the mad individual experiences reality either as unbearable intensified or as stripped of coherence and meaning. The disjunction between perception and understanding mirrors the prisoners' difficulty in accepting the world outside the cave as real. In both cases, the challenge lies in reconciling subjective experience with an external reality that seems either too distant or too overwhelming to grasp.

Michel Foucault described how, during the Classical Age, madness was redefined as a fundamental loss of orientation in reality. Madness represented a state in which the boundaries between truth and illusion collapsed, resulting in a detachment from shared, rationally constructed reality. He argues that madness is not merely an internal deviation but a symbolic condition, one that reveals the fragility of human efforts to maintain a coherent understanding of the world. Foucault describes madness as "the purest, most total form of qui pro quo; it takes false for the true, death for life, man for woman, the beloved for the Erinnys and the victim for Minos."[34] This inability to distinguish between what is real and what is not renders madness a radical break from the norms of rational perception. In this way, madness becomes a site of self-deception and illusion, where the mind creates an alternate reality but is simultaneously trapped by its distortions. The role

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[32] Plato, "Republic," 206-210.
[33] Kusters, *Filosofie van de Waanzin*, 70-76.
[34] Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, 33.

of imagination is central to Foucault's account, but he does not think that madness and imagination are completely the same: "Imagination is not madness. (…) madness begins only beyond this point, when the mind binds itself to this arbitrariness and becomes a prisoner of this apparent liberty."[35] For Foucault, imagination retains a degree of freedom and creativity, while madness occurs when the mind becomes fully ensnared in its own constructs, losing the ability to distinguish invention from truth. By exploring these dynamics, Foucault connects madness to a collapse of logical structures and the suspension of reason's laws.[36] Hallucinations, delusions, and fantasy blur the boundaries between art and reality, between invention and delirium.

This chapter has explored how Western philosophy predominantly frames madness as a deficiency, a 'lack' in relation to rationality, self-control, order, and reality-orientation. Rooted in dualistic frameworks, these conceptualisations often reduce madness to a deviation from valued norms, stripping it of complexity and meaning. Thinkers from Plato to Foucault reveal how madness has been historically marginalised, both philosophically and institutionally, as a threat to the ideals of reason and order.

However, the conceptualisation of madness is not universal. Eastern philosophies offer alternative frameworks, where madness is sometimes seen not as a deficiency but as an integral aspect of existence, a manifestation of cosmic balance or spiritual awakening. The next chapter will explore these Eastern perspectives, offering a broader, more holistic understanding of madness.

[35] Ibid, 93.
[36] Ibid, 100.

Chapter Two
Concepts of Madness in Eastern Thought

While Western philosophy often conceptualises madness as a deficiency – contrasting it against reason, self-control, order, and reality-orientation, as we have seen in chapter one – Eastern traditions tend to approach madness in a more holistic and fluid way. In early Chinese philosophy, for example, madness is not merely a deviation from the norm but can signify a profound disconnection from or realignment with natural harmony (*Dao*) and social order (*li*). Here we can use madness as a lens through which we can examine questions of health, morality, and spiritual cultivation.

This chapter focuses on the conceptualisation of madness in Eastern thought, particularly in Chinese philosophical and medical traditions. Drawing on Daoist, Confucian, and medical texts such as the *Zhuangzi*, *The Analects*, and the *Huangdi Neijing*, this chapter examines how madness is interwoven with ideas of balance, harmony, and the self's relationship to nature and society. Unlike the dualistic framework of Western thought, Eastern approaches often integrate madness into broader processes of self-cultivation, suggesting that it may contain wisdom or insight.

Daoism, for instance, embraces the paradoxical nature of madness, viewing it not simply as disorder but as a potential pathway to alignment with the *Dao*. They believe that madness might reveal deeper truths obscured by conventional norms. Confucianism, in contrast, tends to regard madness as a disruption of social harmony and moral cultivation, requiring reintegration through ethical practice and ritual (*li*). Additionally, ancient Chinese medicine, as outlined in the *Huangdi Neijing,* links madness to physical and energetic imbalances in the body, presenting it as a condition to be healed through restoring internal harmony.

By exploring these different frameworks, this chapter seeks to uncover how Eastern traditions conceptualise madness not merely as a pathological condition but as a phenomenon deeply embedded in metaphysical, social, and medical systems. This discussion tries to give an alternative to the deficiency-based models prevalent in Western thought.

Madness in Confucian Thought

Madness occupies a complex and often ambivalent place in Confucian philosophy, where it is approached not as a pathological deviation from norms but as a phenomenon deeply intertwined with the relational and ethical order of the individual, family, and society. In Confucianism, the self is not autonomous but embedded within a web of relationships and responsibilities. The cultivation of *ren* (goodness/humaneness) and *li* (ritual/propriety) is essential to maintaining harmony within this network. A person's mental state reflects their alignment, or lack thereof, with these ethical and relational principles.[37] Confucian thinkers often framed madness (*kuang*) within a moral framework, emphasising its connection to personal and societal harmony. Rather than treating madness as an isolated mental condition, they associated it with failures in self-cultivation or strategic responses to untenable circumstances.

Madness, in this context, is seen as a disconnection from the moral and social frameworks that sustain relational harmony. The *Analects* emphasises the centrality of ethical roots: "The gentleman applies himself to the roots. 'Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.' Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness?"[38] Within this framework, madness can be understood as a deviation from these foundational virtues, resulting in disharmony within both personal and communal contexts. This deviation is not simply a personal failing but a reflection of a broader misalignment with ethical and cosmic principles.

One of the most distinctive features of madness in Confucian texts is the motif of feigned madness (*yangkuang*).[39] Figures such as Jizi and the Madman of Chu epitomise this phenomenon. The feigned madness of Jizi, an advisor during the Shang dynasty, for instance, is presented as a calculated response to political chaos during the Shang dynasty. Faced with a ruler, King Zhou, who ignored remonstrations and punished dissent, Jizi chose to feign madness, letting down his hair and adopting disordered behaviour, thereby avoiding direct confrontation and preserving his life. As described in the *Hanshi Waizhuan* and other early texts, this act was seen not as a retreat from moral responsibility but as an innovative way to uphold Confucian principles while navigating an oppressive environment.[40]

[37] Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 1-3.
[38] Ibid, 3.
[39] McLeod, *The Dao of* Madness, 108.
[40] Ibid, 112.

Another interesting figure in early Confucian thought is the 'Madman of Chu,' who appears in the *Zhuangzi*, a text often associated with Daoism but deeply engaged with Confucian themes. The Madman of Chu is depicted as a social outcast who sings cryptic, seemingly nonsensical songs that critique the corruption and hypocrisy of the ruling elite.[41] While at first glance the Madman of Chu seems to represent irrationality and chaos, his madness serves a symbolic and philosophical function. Rather than being a mere deviation from social norms, his madness exposes the flaws in the very systems that Confucianism seeks to uphold. The Madman's critique suggests that societal order, when corrupted, may itself be the source of disorder, and that madness can function as a mirror reflecting this broader disharmony. This depiction aligns with Confucianism's acknowledgment that madness is not always a sign of personal failure but can also indicate the failure of moral and social institutions. While the Confucian solution typically involves reintegration through ethical cultivation, the Madman of Chu raises important questions about the limits of this framework, suggesting that madness can also be a form of resistance or an alternative mode of insight.[42]

The Confucian attitude toward madness is marked by a tension between suspicion and acknowledgment of its potential utility. While madness is often framed as a deviation from proper conduct, it also serves as a vehicle for critique and survival. Feigned madness allows individuals to navigate oppressive conditions without fully abandoning Confucian values.[43] This duality highlights the adaptability of Confucian ethics in addressing the complexities of human behaviour and societal disorder. By embedding madness within a framework of moral cultivation, Confucianism challenges purely pathological understandings of mental states. It paves the way for nuanced discussions about the interplay between personal agency and societal constraints.

Madness in Daoist and Zhuangist Philosophy

Unlike the Confucian focus on societal harmony and moral cultivation, Daoist thinkers often embrace madness as a rejection of rigid norms and as a means to access deeper, alternative realities. Through this lens, madness becomes a vehicle for spontaneity, creativity, and the exploration of paths beyond conventional thought.

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[41] Zhuang Zi, *De volledige geschriften*, 299-312.
[42] D'Ambrosio, "Imagination in the *Zhuangzi*," 30-42.
[43] McLeod, *The Dao of* Madness, 122-124.

One of the central tenets of Daoism is the critique of rigid social conventions and artificial constructs that constrain human behaviour.[44] Madness, in this context, symbolises the rejection of these constraints and a return to a more natural and unmediated state of being. Zhuangzi's writings provide rich examples of the perspective, where madness is portrayed as a form of liberation from the structures and expectations of society.

The concept of *wu wei* (non-action/non-interference) is fundamental to Daoist thought.[45] It emphasises a state of being in harmony with the natural order, where actions arise effortlessly and spontaneously. Madness, as interpreted in Daoist texts, can embody this spontaneity, representing a release from the calculated and artificial patterns of rational thought. In the *Zhuangzi*, the tale of the 'useless tree' highlights how unconventional or seemingly irrational qualities can lead to greater freedom. The tree, deemed useless by carpenters because of its twisted shape, is left untouched and grows freely, avoiding the fate of being cut down.[46] Similarly, those who are perceived as mad or unfit by societal standards may evade its pressures and live in alignment with the Dao. Madness thus becomes a metaphor for the creative potential of stepping outside normative frameworks and embracing a more fluid, unrestricted way of being.[47]

Zhuangzi also explores madness as a pathway to accessing alternative perspectives and realities. In his dialogues, Zhuangzi challenges the boundaries between dreams and waking life, truth and illusion, often using madness as a means to disrupt conventional ways of knowing. The 'Butterfly Dream' passage exemplifies this theme, questioning whether Zhuangzi is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man.[48] This blurring of boundaries echoes the experience of madness, where distinctions between reality and imagination dissolve. Madness, in Zhuangist philosophy, is not confined to the realm of pathology but becomes a space of transformation and discovery. It allows for a departure from the fixed frameworks of logic and reason, opening up possibilities for new ways of perceiving and engaging with the world. Madness it not a limitation but an expansion, a way to transcend the narrow confines of conventional thought and connect with the boundless nature of the Dao.[49]

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[44] Ivanhoe and Van Norden, *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 161-162.
[45] Ibid, 162.
[46] Zhuang Zi, *De volledige geschriften*, 255-256.
[47] McLeod, *The Dao of* Madness, 132-134.
[48] Zhuang Zi, *De volledige geschriften*, 71.
[49] McLeod, *The Dao of* Madness, 169-172.

In conclusion, in Daoist and Zhuangist philosophy, madness is not merely a state of deficiency but a profound symbol of freedom and transformation. It challenges societal norms, embodies spontaneity, and opens the door to alternative ways of experiencing reality. Through the lens of Daoism, madness becomes a pathway to liberation, a way of stepping outside the confines of conventional life and embracing the boundless potential of the Dao.

Madness in Early Chinese Medicine

In early Chinese medicine, madness was not framed as a moral or intellectual deficiency but as a manifestation of imbalance within the interconnected systems of the body and mind. This perspective, rooted in texts like the *Huangdi Neijing* (The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon), provides a holistic understanding of madness as part of the natural spectrum of health and illness.[50] Madness, or *kuang*, as earlier described, was treated as a temporary disruption of harmony rather than an absolute deviation from normative states.

The *Huangdi Neijing* describes madness as arising from disturbances in the flow of *qi*, the vital energy that circulates through the body. According to this tradition, *qi* flows along meridians and is balanced by the complementary forces of *yin* and *yang*. When this balance is disrupted – by external factors such as climate, emotional stress, or internal organ dysfunction – it can manifest in both physical and mental disturbances, including madness. For instance, the text identifies excess *yang* energy as a cause of manic states associated with *kuang*. This excess heat drives the mind into hyperactivity, resulting in erratic behaviour, delusions, or agitation. Conversely, a deficiency in *yin* may fail to anchor the mind, leading to symptoms like restlessness and confusion. Importantly, this framework does not isolate the mind from the body; instead, it views madness as the interplay of physical, emotional, and environmental factor, all of which contribute to the overall state of the individual.[51]

Unlike the dualistic separation of body and mind in many Western frameworks, Chinese medicine views the body and mind as a single, interconnected system. The *Huangdi Neijing* described how organ function plays a crucial role in emotional and mental health. For example, the heart (*xin*) is considered the seat of the mind (*shen*) and

[50] Ibid, 201-202.
[51] Ibid, 202-206.

governs clarity of thought and emotional stability.[52] When the heart is imbalanced – due to excessive heat, insufficient nourishment, or blockages in *qi* – it can lead to symptoms of madness. Similarly, the liver (*gan*), associated with the regulation of emotions, can cause outbursts of anger or mania if its energy becomes stagnant or excessive. This emphasis on organ function and energy flow offers a nuanced perspective: madness is not an isolated mental condition but part of a broader systemic imbalance. By addressing the root causes of this imbalance – whether through dietary adjustments, herbal treatments, or acupuncture – healing becomes a process of restoring harmony, rather than merely suppressing symptoms.[53]

In contrast to Western approaches that often treat madness as an aberration from the norm, early Chinese medicine integrates madness within the natural cycle of health and illness. The *Huangdi Neijing* frames illness, including mental disturbances, as a natural occurrence within the dynamic interplay of *yin* and *yang*, reflecting changes in the body's internal and external environment. This cyclical view normalises madness as a temporary state that can be brought back into harmony, rather than a permanent deviation requiring moral or social correction.

These Eastern philosophies and medical traditions offer a rich tapestry of perspectives on madness, emphasising its integration within broader systems of harmony, balance, and self-cultivation. In Confucianism, madness reflects disruptions in ethical and social order, yet it also serves as a critique of societal failures, as seen in figures like the Madman of Chu. Daoism frames madness as liberation from rigid norms, embodying spontaneity and alignment with the Dao. Early Chinese medicine views madness as an imbalance of body and mind, treatable through restoring harmony. These perspectives contrast with the Western deficiency-based models explored earlier, laying the groundwork for Chapter Three, where Eastern and Western approaches will be juxtaposed to uncover new insights into the nature of madness.

[52] Ibid, 36, 217.
[53] Lo, Yang and Stanley-Baker, *Routledge Handbook of Chinese* Medicine, 230-231.

Chapter Three
Rethinking Madness: Different Philosophical Perspectives

The ways in which madness has been conceptualised in Western and Eastern traditions reflect many differences in their philosophical underpinnings, yet they also share some similarities. This chapter examines these perspectives in dialogue, exploring how they approach madness as a phenomenon of human existence. By critically comparing these frameworks, we will also try to think about the possibilities that could open for rethinking madness beyond narrow cultural or philosophical confines.

In Western philosophy, madness has often been framed as a deviation from valued norms such as reason, order, self-control and reality-orientation. Rooted in the dualistic thinking of Plato and Aristotle, this tradition privileges clarity and rationality while relegating madness to the realm of deficiency. In Plato's *Republic* we have seen that madness was depicted as the failure to govern desires, leading to the fragmentation of the soul. However, Plato's *Phaedrus* complicates this view by introducing the idea of 'divine madness,' which transcends rationality and reveals higher truths. Foucault, in his *Madness and Civilization*, critiques the philosophical and institutional marginalisation of madness, tracing how it was systematically excluded from rational discourse during the Classical Age. Madness, he argues, became the 'other' against which rationality defined itself, a silenced voice that nonetheless reveals the limits of reason.

Eastern traditions, by contrast, tend to approach madness with greater fluidity, resisting rigid dichotomies. Daoist and Confucian perspectives exemplify this difference. In Daoism, madness is often viewed as a liberation from societal constraints. Zhuangzi's writings challenge normative judgments of utility and rationality, suggesting that what society deems mad may, in fact, align more closely with the *Dao*. Madness here is not a deviation but a liberation, a state where conventional distinctions dissolve and the individual moves effortlessly with the rhythms of nature.

The Daoist concept of *wu wei* further illuminates this perspective. Madness, in its spontaneous and uncalculated nature, exemplifies the Daoist ideal of alignment with the *Dao*. This contrasts sharply with Western frameworks, where madness is often treated as a disruption requiring intervention. In Daoist philosophy, the dissolution of reason and social norms through madness is not a threat but a potential pathway to freedom and transformation. By disrupting conventional thought, madness reveals the limits of

language, logic, and societal constructs, offering glimpses into alternative modes of existence.

Confucianism, while less celebratory of madness, offers a nuanced view that situates it within relational and ethical contexts. The self in Confucian thought is deeply embedded in a network of relationships and responsibilities. Madness, or *kuang*, is seen as a disruption of these relationships, a sign of misalignment with the principles of *ren* (humaneness) and *li* (ritual propriety). Yet Confucianism also recognises the potential of madness as a critique of social and moral failure. Figures such as the Madman of Chu exemplify this duality. His cryptic songs, though seemingly nonsensical, expose the hypocrisy and corruption of the ruling elite. Madness here serves as a form of resistance, a way of speaking truth to power when conventional channels are closed.

This interplay between critique and disruption is echoed in Western thought, especially in Foucault's analysis of how madness exposes the fragility of rational systems. However, where Western philosophy often seeks to reintegrate madness within frameworks of rationality and order, Confucianism and Daoism suggest a broader tolerance for its ambiguity. Madness in Eastern thought is not confined to the margins but is interwoven with questions of ethics, harmony, and cosmic balance. This integration challenges the Western impulse to categorise and control madness as an anomaly.

When we take a look at the medical traditions of early China we will also see this integration. Unlike the Western separation of body and mind, Chinese medicine views madness as a holistic phenomenon arising from imbalances in *qi*. Texts like the *Huangdi Neijing* situate madness within the natural cycles of health and illness, treating it not as a permanent deviation but as a temporary state that can be harmonised. This cyclical view contrasts with the linear narratives of recovery or correction prevalent in Western medical and philosophical traditions. Madness, in this framework, becomes part of the dynamic interplay of *yin* and *yang*, reflecting the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, and environmental factors.

The philosophical implications of these differences are profound. While Western thought often constructs madness as the 'other' of reason, Eastern traditions invite us to see madness as a relational phenomenon, one that reflects broader patterns of harmony and disruption. Michel Foucault's critique of Western dualisms resonates with this Eastern openness, suggesting that madness might be understood not as a deficiency but as a site of possibility, a space where the boundaries of thought and existence are tested.

At the same time, the Eastern emphasis on balance and integration raises questions about whether madness is fully embraced as a form of freedom. Daoism celebrates the liberatory potential of madness, but Confucianism seeks its reintegration into ethical and social harmony. These tensions reveal the complexity of madness as a philosophical concept, resisting reductive interpretations in both traditions.

By placing Western and Eastern perspectives in dialogue, this chapter highlights the ways in which madness challenges the assumptions of reason, order, and normativity. It tries to move us beyond simplistic binaries – madness versus reason, harmony versus disorder – and toward a more nuanced understanding of madness as a multifaceted and multi-interpretable phenomenon. Whether as a critique of societal structures, a manifestation of cosmic imbalance, or a pathway to liberation, madness transcends cultural and philosophical boundaries, inviting us to rethink what it means to be human.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the concept of madness through both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions, highlighting their contrasts and similarities. In Western philosophy, madness is often cast as a deficiency: an absence of qualities like rationality, self-control, or order. Within this dualistic framework, madness becomes the 'other' of reason, a disruption that must be corrected or excluded. Thinkers such as Plato and Descartes link madness to a lack of rationality, while Foucault critiques this marginalisation, showing how systems of thought and institutions have historically silenced madness to maintain rational norms.

In Eastern traditions, particularly Daoism, Confucianism, and early Chinese medicine, madness is approached in more integrative ways. Rather than seeing it as simply a deviation, these perspectives consider madness as part of a broader dynamic of balance and harmony. Daoist thought embraces madness as a potential liberation from societal constraints, associating it with spontaneity and alignment with the natural flow of the Dao. Confucianism, while more focused on social order, treats madness as a reflection of moral or societal shortcomings, often using it as a form of critique. Meanwhile, early Chinese medicine views madness as an imbalance in the body's flow of qi, something that can be addressed holistically through restoration rather than punishment or exclusion.

Bringing these traditions into conversation reveals the limitations of viewing madness through narrow binaries such as rationality versus irrationality or order versus disorder. Instead, madness appears as a layered and multifaceted phenomenon, challenging dominant assumptions about human nature, social structures, and reason itself. It shifts from being a mere problem to be managed to a point of tension and reflection—an opportunity to question and rethink existing norms.

Ultimately, this thesis suggests the need to move beyond rigid frameworks and embrace more nuanced ways of understanding madness. Drawing on multiple philosophical perspectives allows us to see madness not just as a disruption, but as a lens for re-examining the boundaries of reason and the human experience. Madness reminds us that these boundaries are not fixed, but are constantly shaped and reshaped by the interplay of cultures, philosophies, and contexts.

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