

## Reinterpreting the History of Madness in Western Philosophy: From the Age of Reason to Psychoanalysis and Personalization

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**Abstract:** Madness, or unreason, has been a central theme in the history of Western Philosophy, with discussions often revolving around reason as the foundation of human existence. The evolution of this discourse has consistently engaged prominent figures such as Descartes and Freud, whose differing perspectives on the nature of human existence nonetheless contributed to a solid theoretical framework. This research article offers a reinterpretation of their theories, approaching the concept of madness through the principle of personalization. Consequently, while this article presents a distinct perspective on madness, it acknowledges certain conceptual parallels with Descartes' and Freud's analysis. In essence, madness is understood as a mental illness caused by severe injury within the mind-body mechanism, shaping the person's perspective and actions toward reality. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the advancement of psychiatric medicine and cognitive sciences, broadening the framework for understanding and addressing mental health.

**Keywords:** Madness, Western Philosophy, Reason, Descartes, Foucault, Psychoanalysis, Freud, Lacan, Personalization

### 1. Introduction

This paper examines the evolving perception of madness within the discourse of Western philosophy. The distinctions in these perspectives stem from two fundamental conceptions of human existence. The first is shaped by Descartes' theory of Reason, which positions consciousness as the core of human identity. In contrast, Psychoanalytic theory asserts that the foundation of human existence lies not in consciousness, but in the unconscious. These opposing frameworks have significantly influenced the philosophical interpretation of madness throughout history. Thus, the question of what constitutes "madness" remains crucial. Can this phenomenon be adequately explained through the lens of Reason or Psychoanalysis, or does an alternative theoretical framework offer a more comprehensive understanding?

Michel Foucault explored the concept of madness in his seminal 1961 work, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, later translated into English as *History of Madness*. In 1964, he published an abridged version for English readers, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Foucault argues that madness is not merely a medical condition but a social construct shaped by historical and cultural forces. He traces this shift back to the Renaissance, when authorities categorized the mad alongside vagabonds, leading to their isolation from society.<sup>1</sup> This societal "cleansing" of vagabonds, Foucault contends, marked a broader moral transformation, fundamentally altering the way society perceived and treated its most vulnerable members.

Foucault further analyzes the role of psychiatry in shaping societal perception of madness, arguing that psychiatrists were not merely neutral scientific observers but active participants in the broader "cleansing" campaign. In this context, psychiatry functioned not purely as a scientific discipline but as an instrument of authority, reinforcing social order by legitimizing the marginalization of the mad. Had psychiatry approached madness as an objective medical condition, it would not have supported the authorities' treatment of mad persons as societal "parasites." From both philosophical and scientific perspectives, madness and rationality are intrinsically linked—just as reason contains traces of madness, madness itself retains elements of reason. Thus, isolation or attempt at refinement fail to reconstitute an appropriate approach to addressing madness.

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Psychoanalysis offers a distinct perspective on the phenomenon of madness, conceptualizing it through the framework of neurosis and psychosis. These terms were introduced by Freud in his 1924 article, where he defined neurosis and psychosis as manifestations of a fundamental conflict between the unconscious and the conscious mind. Freud explain:

“... neurosis is the result of a conflict between the ego and its id, whereas psychosis is the analogous outcome of a similar disturbance in the relations between the ego and the external world.”<sup>2</sup>

From the psychoanalytic perspective, madness is understood as a psychological phenomenon rooted in mental processes rather than merely a societal construct. Freud further elaborates the phenomenon of madness—reframed in psychoanalytic terms as psychosis—through his interpretation of Daniel Paul Schreber’s memoirs (*Denkwürdigkeiten eines Nervenkranken*, 1903). Schreber (1842–1911) documented his experience with mental illness during his second period of institutionalization (circa 1893–1902). Freud analyzed Schreber’s case in his 1911 work, *Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)*, later republished by Penguin Classics as *The Schreber Case* (2003). In this analysis, Freud consistently emphasizes the fundamental conflict between the unconscious and conscious mind as the root cause of psychosis. From a psychoanalytic perspective, madness is understood primarily as a mental illness with medical implications rather than a socially constructed phenomenon.

This research article conceptualizes madness as a mental phenomenon, while emphasizing the intrinsic engagement between humans and the essence of reality. It argues that humans are fundamentally connected to reality and actively personalize its essence. Consequently, any disruption in this engagement may rise to madness or unreason. This perspective differentiates its thesis from the views of Descartes and Freud, offering a critical reassessment of their frameworks. Specifically, the article critiques the limitations in their approaches, asserting that both primarily engage with reality in material terms rather than addressing its essence. Descartes, for instance, constructs reality through human reason, while Freud conceives it as repression within the unconscious mind—the core of human existence.

## 2. Reason

René Descartes (1596–1650), in his First Meditation, asserts that reason takes precedence over external reality, serving as the foundation of human existence. He argues that external reality is inherently uncertain and susceptible to doubt. For example, my current experience of sitting in front of my laptop and writing this article might merely be a dream. Likewise, as readers engage with this text on their devices, there is no definitive proof that they are not dreaming. According to Descartes, this uncertainty arises from the fallibility of human senses. He contends that sensory perceptions—including touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell—are deceptive and, therefore, unreliable as sources of knowledge. In contrast, he maintains that reason alone provides a secure and indubitable basis for understanding reality. Within this framework, Descartes connects human cognition to the presence of God, whom he considers central to existence.

Descartes states, “However, there is a certain opinion long fixed in my mind, that there is a God who is all-powerful, and by whom I was created such as I am now.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Descartes, reason is the only aspect of human existence that remains undeniably trustworthy. In this framework, he links human reason to the existence of God, who serves as the ultimate source and foundation of knowledge. Since God is inherently incapable of deception, He will never mislead or deceive humans, ensuring that true knowledge remains accessible through the exercise of reason.

Descartes further substantiated his idea that reason is the essence of human existence through his radical method of doubt, as outlined in the Second Meditation. He employed a thought experiment in which one hypothetically doubts everything in external reality, revealing that one undeniable truth remains: the individual who engages in reasoning to question the external world (*ibid*). In this context, Descartes articulates his theory in the well-known phrase, *Cogito ergo sum* - “I think, therefore I am.”<sup>4</sup> Through this method of radical doubt, Descartes illustrates that the perception of the external world is fundamentally shaped by human reason. Accordingly, my presence before my laptop and the existence of readers engaging with this article are not merely objective realities but conceptual constructs formed by reason.

From Foucault's perspectives, Descartes’ theory of reason has profoundly shaped societal perceptions and treatment of persons labeled as madmen or vagabonds. This influence is evident in Descartes’ ambiguous language when discussing the relationship between reason and unreason. Rather than explicitly discussing madness, Descartes frames the issue through concepts such as illusion and dreams, deliberately avoiding direct reference to unreason (Foucault, 2006). As a result, Descartes’ ideas contributed to the emergence of intellectual movements such as rationalism and the Age of Reason, reinforcing the exclusionary approaches society adopted toward madness. Foucault, therefore, highlights a fundamental inconsistency in Descartes’ framework—namely,

the separation of madness from reason, despite the fact that Descartes acknowledges phenomena such as illusion, dreams, and hallucinations, all of which are intrinsically linked to madness and unreason.

Derrida, in contrast, challenges Foucault's interpretation of Descartes' theory, arguing that Foucault's perspective constitutes a misreading. According to Derrida, Descartes employs illusion and dreams metaphorically to represent madness or unreason, rather than explicitly excluding them. While Derrida acknowledges *History of Madness* as a seminal work, he critiques Foucault for neglecting social science and psychiatry in his analysis of madness. From Derrida's viewpoint, this omission is the fundamental flaw in Foucault's argument, distinguishing his perspective from other scholarly approaches.<sup>5</sup> Thus, Derrida contends that Foucault misinterprets Descartes' elaboration on the relationship between reason and unreason. In doing so, Foucault presents a negative portrayal of society and psychiatric treatment, framing them as mechanisms of exclusion rather than therapeutic interventions. As a result, *History of Madness* functions primarily as a descriptive account of social sciences, rather than an analysis incorporating psychiatric insights.

This article underscores a fundamental issue in Descartes' theory—his distinction between reason (the mind) and senses (the body). By establishing this separation, Descartes positions reason as the primary foundation for human comprehension of both the self and the world. He contends that the senses are inherently deceptive, offering unreliable and questionable data about reality. In contrast, reason remains consistently dependable and beyond doubt, as it is intrinsically linked to the ultimate truth through a higher rational order. Consequently, within Descartes' framework, the mind is superior to the body, and madness arises when the human mind becomes disconnected from this higher rational order, rather than from external reality. Thus, madness is conceptualized solely as a psychological condition, independent of sensory or bodily mechanisms.

This article argues that Descartes' concept of reason is insufficient for explaining the reality of human existence, as it appears to reduce the senses and external reality to mere extensions or byproducts of reason. Consequently, his theory becomes entangled in solipsism, isolating reason from the external world and rendering rationality independent of empirical validation. Essentially, Descartes defines humans as spiritual entities possessing sensory faculties, yet he relegates sensory perception to a secondary role. In contrast, this paper asserts that the mind and body constitute a unified entity, with reason functioning as an intrinsic component of bodily mechanisms. This perspective suggests that both cognition and the act of thinking occur within the body as interconnected mind-body processes. In other words, cognition engages both the peripheral nervous system and neural structures, operating as an integrated mechanism rather than an abstract, detached function of reason alone.

While this article defines thinking as a mind-body process, it does not reduce human existence to mere physicality. Instead, it introduces a new duality, distinct from Descartes' traditional dualism. This perspective argues that thinking generates an abstract dimension of human existence, manifesting in one's perspective and actions—a dimension referred to as *persona*. In other words, while thinking and the act of thinking are fundamentally physical processes, the physical realm possesses the capacity to produce non-physical or abstract elements, such as *persona*. Consequently, thinking not only connects humans to a higher rational order but also enables them to personalize that rational order into comprehensible concepts, which become embodied within the person. Thus, this paper defines thinking as a mind-body mechanism that generates *persona* through the personalization of the essence of reality.

Based on the definition of thinking presented in this article, madness is understood as a failure in the process of thinking or personalization—an inability to integrate the essence of reality into human cognition. It arises from trauma within the peripheral nervous system and neural processes, overwhelms the person with sensations or an impersonalized essence of reality.<sup>6</sup> Within this framework, madness—or unreason—is not merely a detachment from a higher rational order, as Descartes suggests, but rather a disruption within the mind-body mechanisms, isolating the person from both rational order and external reality. Essentially, madness occurs when the person becomes flooded by sensations such as pain, fear, or pleasure due to an inability to personalize and integrate their essence. In other words, madness is marked by entrapment in an impersonalized world, dominated by raw sensory experiences. Thus, madness is simultaneously a mind-body condition and a mental illness, rather than solely social construct, as argued by Foucault.

### 3. Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, theorized that the symptoms of madness—termed hysteria in his framework—are triggered by unremembered mental or physical experiences, typically occurring in early childhood.<sup>7</sup> These forgotten experiences, according to Freud, influence a person's behavior by resurfacing in different forms as they seek to bring them into realization. For instance, if an unremembered experience involves fixation on the mother, it may lead the person to form relationships with those who resemble their mother's figure. Conversely, Freud also posited that such forgotten experiences could manifest as phobias. In these cases, painful or fearful experiences drive the person to avoid certain objects or situations. Thus, hysteria—or madness—is understood as a neurotic trauma stemming from early childhood experiences (ages 0–5), shaped by both physical and psychological trauma.

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Freud's analysis of madness is divided into two distinct classifications: neurosis and psychosis. Neurosis refers to an internal conflict within the self, whereas psychosis represents a deeper rupture between the self and external reality (Freud, 1986). While neurosis is generally considered mild, psychosis can range from moderate to severe. Freud's understanding of madness is fundamentally rooted in his understanding of the unconscious as the core of human existence. Within this framework, he argues that the unremembered experiences manifest in dreams, providing valuable insight into the unconscious realm.<sup>8</sup> Freud contends that dream symbols hold unique meanings for each person, shaped by their personal experiences. Furthermore, he regards dream analysis as a therapeutic tool for addressing neurotic trauma, whereas his elaboration on psychotic trauma is most notably developed in his analysis of Schreber's memoirs.

Freud's analysis of Schreber case remains consistent with his broader theory of the unconscious. Specifically, Freud interprets Schreber's transformation into a woman as a manifestation of repressed homosexual desires. In this context, he examines Schreber's memoirs, focusing on the connection between his wife's holiday and his feminization experience. Schreber recounts:

"A further decline in my nervous state and an important chapter in my life commenced about the 15th of February 1894 when my wife, who until then had spent a few hours every day with me also taken lunch with me in the Asylum, undertook a four-day journey to her father in Berlin to have a holiday herself... Decisive for my mental collapse was one particular night; during that night I had a quite unusual number of pollutions (perhaps half a dozen)... Order of the World, according to which a human being ('a seer of spirits') must under certain circumstances be 'unmanned' (transformed into a woman)..."<sup>9</sup>

Freud argues that Schreber's homosexual orientation had long been repressed due to his wife's presence.<sup>10</sup> As a result, her absence served as a pivotal moment, allowing this repressed desire to surface and become consciously manifested.

In Freud's theory, madness is understood as a manifestation of trauma within the unconscious mind, stemming from repression or conflict with the external world. Freud notably employed communication as a method of healing, earning the nickname the talking cure. This approach suggests that conversation can uncover repressed trauma within the unconscious, making dialogue between the analyst and patient a pivotal aspect of treatment. As a result, Freud's analysis is often regarded as more philosophical than pharmacological interventions. However, talk therapy remains a foundational method in psychotherapy, helping persons better understand and regulate their thoughts and emotions. Freud's influence extends to therapeutic models such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), psychodynamic therapy, and interpersonal therapy, all of which integrate aspects of his theories. Fundamentally, Freud defined the unconscious as the essence of human existence, asserting that madness arises from trauma or injury within this unconscious realm. Furthermore, he emphasized that language—whether expressed through symbols in dreams or verbal communication—serves as a crucial bridge to the unconscious.

Freud's analysis was later developed by Lacan, who placed a stronger emphasis on the role of language in psychoanalytic theory. Lacan argued that human existence is inherently structured by symbols, which function as a form of language. Thus, he positioned language at the center of human life. From this perspective, madness can be understood as an internal conflict between one's imagination and formal linguistic structures. In other words, neurotic and psychotic trauma manifest as a disconnection between speech and language. As Lacan stated:

"What is at stake in analysis is the advent in the subject of that little reality that this desire sustains in him with respect to the symbolic conflicts and imaginary fixations as the means of their agreement, and our path is the intersubjective experience where this desire makes itself recognized.

From this point on it will be seen that the problem is that of the relations between speech and language in the subject."<sup>11</sup> Lacan thus builds upon Freud's framework by foregrounding the centrality of language in human existence. From this perspective, madness can be conceptualized as an isolation of parole from langue—a state in which a person is unable to communicate their thoughts and emotions due to a fundamental impairment of linguistic integration.

This research article conceptualized human existence as an interplay between the mind-body mechanism and the person, treating both as equally fundamental. The mind-body mechanisms can only be fully understood through its embodiment within the person, while, conversely, the person's existence manifests through the operation of the mind-body mechanism. In other words, thinking and the act of thinking are inseparable from the embodied experience of I think—just as I think cannot exist independently of cognitive as a physiological process. The mind-body mechanism possesses the ability to personalize or transform the essence of reality into comprehensible concepts, which are then expressed through personal perspectives and actions. In this view, the essence of both the mind-body mechanisms and the external world is communicated through the person's interpretations and behaviors. Thus, this article positions the mind-body mechanisms and the person as the foundational structure of human existence.

The structure of human existence is inherently engaged in interpersonal relationships and reality, an interaction that often leads

to repression, subsequently generating the alter within human existence. This suggests that humans are never entirely conditioned or determined by these relationships and external forces. When conflict arises between the person and the external world, these tensions are frequently reconciled through the alter, manifesting in forms such as art and humor. As a result, humans continuously personalize the essence of reality, transforming it into comprehensible concepts that shape their perspectives and actions. In other words, humans never engage with the external world in a purely “naked” state; rather, they consistently “clothe” themselves in their ability to personalize the essence of reality through perspective and action.

Furthermore, this research article also does not regard language as a direct representation of human thought and emotion but rather as an embodiment of the personalization of reality’s essence.<sup>12</sup> This perspective suggests that language does not directly convey the mind-body mechanisms but instead expresses their transformation into communicable signs. In essence, language does not preserve the raw essence of mind-body mechanisms; rather, it articulates their refinement into comprehensible signs. Within this framework, interpreting language involves tracing the essence of reality as it is filtered through human perspectives and actions. Consequently, the structure of language contains only the residual traces of the mind-body mechanisms rather than their fundamental essence. Therefore, the analysis of language is not an attempt to uncover the essence of reality itself but rather to identify the remnants left behind through the process of personalization.

This article aligns with Freud’s analysis in recognizing madness as an injury within the neurotic and psychotic nervous system. However, it diverges from Freud’s framework by reframing madness not as an occurrence within the unconscious, but as a breach in the personalization process. In this view, madness emerges when the peripheral nervous system and neural processes sustains trauma from a significant event, which then lingers in memory as a persistent sensation or an impersonalized reality (Ruhupatty, 2024). The severity of the injury determines its impact on the person:

- A mild injury shapes a person’s perspective and actions toward the event or object, potentially leading to obsession or phobia.
- A severe injury isolates the person from the essence of reality, impairing their ability to personalize experience.

When this personalization process fails entirely, the person is left exposed to reality in a raw, unfiltered state, ultimately risking mental collapse.

#### **4. Personalization**

Personalization is a theoretical framework that seeks to explain human existence by examining how humans understand both themselves and reality. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, human understanding has often been conceptualized through the principle of representation, as though the mind-body mechanism possesses the capacity to mirror reality, thereby enabling humans to attain a certain or proper comprehension of it. However, the notion of reality itself is pluralistic, shaped by the ways humans approach it. Do humans truly mirror reality or do they merely interpret it? If humans possess the ability to mirror reality, then the mystery of reality could, in principle, be fully revealed. Conversely, if human understanding is limited to interpretation, then how does this process unfold? Does human perception actively construct reality through interpretation, shaping its essence rather than simply reflecting it?

Human understanding of reality neither mirrors nor constructs it but rather engages with it in both physical and abstract dimensions. When humans interact with a tree, for instance, they do not merely perceive its physical attributes but also engage with its essence. The appearance of the tree is registered by the peripheral nervous system and processed neurally as a symbol. However, because this raw symbol is foreign to the mind-body mechanism, the neural system personalized it, transforming it into a comprehensible concept that can be embodied in perspective and action. Thus, human cognition does not operate through reflection or construction, but through personalization—an ongoing process in which reality is understood only insofar as its essence can be meaningfully integrated into personal perspectives and actions. Likewise, an actual tree is understood as the comprehensible concept of a tree, emerging through the process of personalization.

Human existence is fundamentally structured by the ability to engage with the essence of reality and personalize it into comprehensible concepts. This capability manifests through human perspectives and actions, underscoring the unique privilege of shaping reality according to one’s own cognitive structure. Since the human structure differs from reality itself, humans cannot fully reflect its essence, despite being inherently exposed to it. In other words, human existence remains inseparable from the external world, necessitating engagement with both its actual and abstract dimensions. This perspective is informed by the phenomenological tradition, particularly Husserl’s concept of Lifeworld and Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-world. Accordingly, the theory of personalization illustrates humanity’s ability to condition the structure of reality rather than being wholly determined by it. In this framework, reality shapes human perspectives and actions but does not entirely dictate them.

Thus, madness can be defined as a failure within the mind-body mechanism to personalize the essence of reality, resulting from injury or trauma. Consequently, the person becomes trapped within sensations or an unarticulated reality embedded in their

memory. Madness, therefore, arises when a person's perspectives and actions are governed by the sensory imprint of reality, whether in the form of pain or pleasure. This suggests that madness is shaped not by reality's intrinsic structure but by the overwhelming sensory experience of it. From this perspective, Schreber is not conditioned by the physical presence of those around him but rather by the sensations within his memory—the sensations rooted in severe trauma. Thus, the core issue does not lie in external reality but in the person's memory, where these sensations persist. The challenge for the analyst, then, is to liberate the patient from the confinement of these sensations, enabling them to restore a balanced engagement with reality.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research article offers a philosophical overview of the history of madness as examined in Western philosophy, framing the concept through the principle of personalization. From this perspective, madness is understood not merely as a mental illness but as an injury within the peripheral nervous system and neural processes—a breach in the mind-body mechanism that disrupts humanity's fundamental ability to personalize or condition the essence of reality. Consequently, the person is no longer directly engaged with reality but instead becomes conditioned by distorted or unresolved memory imprints of it. In essence, this interpretation of madness demonstrates a reconceptualization—a personalization—of theories of reason and psychoanalysis, providing an alternative framework for understanding its origins and effects.

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