

A Sick Imagination: Pathologies and Errors in Judgment

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Abstract

In this paper I will develop an investigation of mental illness in relation to errors of judgment. Even based on the rational/irrational opposition, during the 18th century reason is seen appropriating madness, and not only whenever it classifies mental illnesses and develops special scientific knowledge about them. More importantly, madness lurks in the very workings of modern reason. And of course, it sneaks into the error of judgment, making all border between the two very thin. A case can then be made for the complementarity between reason and madness. In this sense, madness finds a place in Kant's project, from its very foundations. Recognizing the finiteness of the human intellect and stating accordingly the need for an exact survey of its limits means at the same time recognizing the possibility of error in judgment and the danger that knowledge may turn into madness. Provided one is to accept the methodological assumption that there is a continuity between the *Transcendental Dialectic* and the section of the *Anthropology* on judgment and mental illness, a constellation of essential Kantian notions comes to the fore as underpinning the overall transcendental project. A picture unfolds based on which error can affect, at the very least, perception, imagination and judgment. Errors of judgment, illusions, and madness are thus never far apart in Kant's accounts on human faculties, their dialectical drifts, and the possibility of psychopathy.

Keywords

madness, transcendental illusion, judgment, dialectic, anthropology

Madness is commonly seen as the opposite of reason, especially based on the notion of mental illness first defined in the eighteenth century in the wake of the development of modern psychiatry. Among the most famous promoters of this idea, Michel Foucault, in his famous *History of Madness* points out how modern society no longer communicates with the insane (Foucault 2009). Rational people, who find their essence in enlightened reason, delegate doctors in the dialogue with the mad person. As a result, a fracture ensues which

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generates a clear opposition: on the one side, scientific knowledge, endowed with abstract universality; and on the opposite side, the person of madness, who rambles off and breaks with social order and conformity. Any exchange between madness and reason is thus interrupted.

However, Foucault's interesting and well-argued position, insisting on the absence since modernity of a form of language below reason, is no longer the prevailing one in the current debate and in the specialized studies on mental illness in the eighteenth century. One could probably still maintain, with Foucault, that madness is to be understood as "absence of work", and that from the Renaissance onwards, madness is gradually confined to the realm of mental illness. However, as I will attempt to show with regard to Kant's texts, in particular the *Anthropology*, the transition from madness to mental illness does not rule out many elements of contact between rational knowledge and the definition of psychopathy. On the contrary, the border between reason and absence of reason turns out to be much thinner than one might think. It is within this framework that I would like to develop an investigation of mental illness in relation to errors of judgment. In truth, a cue in this theoretical direction can already be found in the *History of Madness*. Foucault, in fact, acknowledges a link between madness and knowledge where too much knowledge or useless knowledge leads to madness. Madness and science are intriguingly mixed in the famous painting by Hieronymus Bosch housed in the Prado Museum in Madrid.



In the painting one sees not only the madman who turns to science to have his illness eradicated, but also the doctor who, perhaps madder than the madman, is engaged in a completely useless surgery. Bosch's painting says a lot about madness: it narrates the transition toward its medicalization; it also illustrates blind and dogmatic scientific knowledge attempting to stretch beyond its limits. This picture is not so much about the mad person as about the errors of judgment of science, which believes to be unconditionally true. All of these elements, though, emerge, rather than through the language of reason, through the symbolism of the language of the image, that is to say, the aesthetic language that only in part can be traced back to clear and distinct knowledge.

Taking our cue from Bosch's painting, it is then possible to formulate the question of how knowledge on its way to become science, at least since Descartes, finds its limit in madness. Even based on the rational/irrational opposition, it would be hard to locate madness outside of reason. On the contrary, reason is seen appropriating madness, and not only whenever it classifies mental illnesses and develops special scientific knowledge about them. More importantly, madness lurks in the very workings of modern reason, in Descartes' doubt, in Hume's skepticism, in the inventions of the imagination that preoccupy Montaigne, in the creation of the aesthetic illusion that for Lessing captivates spectators in the theatre (see Feloj-Giargia 2012). And of course, it sneaks into the error of judgment, making all border between the two very thin. A case can then be made for the complementarity between reason and madness. In this sense, madness finds a place in Kant's project, from its very foundations. Recognizing the finiteness of the human intellect and stating accordingly the need for an exact survey of its limits means at the same time recognizing the possibility of error in judgment and the danger that knowledge may turn into madness. It is not by chance, therefore, that Foucault himself, in a text very distant from the *History of Madness*, namely in an essay on Kant's *Anthropology*, is able to link the dialectical errors discussed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* to some paragraphs of the *Anthropology*.

1. The problem of illusion

Provided one is to accept the methodological assumption that there is a continuity between the *Transcendental Dialectic* and the section of the *Anthropology* on judgment and mental illness, a constellation of essential Kantian notions comes to the fore as underpinning the overall transcendental project. A picture unfolds based on which error can affect, at the very least, perception, imagination and judgment. Errors of judgment, illusions, and madness are thus never far apart in Kant's accounts on human faculties, their dialectical drifts, and the possibility of psychopathy.

Among recent Kantian studies, Michelle Grier's book, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, argues convincingly for the "inevitability thesis," that is, it embraces the idea that illusion is a necessary derivative of reason (Grier 2004). Needless to say, caution is due here and one should also keep in mind what exactly transcendental illusion is for Kant. It is true, however, that as soon as mental illness is investigated from the viewpoint of

anthropology, a close connection between potential errors originating in human faculties, illusion and madness becomes clear.

Even more clarity can be achieved by following, step by step, the path that leads from the *Transcendental Dialectic* to the paragraphs on madness in the *Anthropology*.

In the *Dialectic* we read:

Even the wisest of men [...] will never be able to free himself from the illusion [*Schein*] which unceasingly mocks and torments him. (KrV A339 | B397)

Michelle Grier recalls how Kant admits that metaphysical doctrines derive from an inevitable and necessary illusion, and that criticism is developed as a remedy for metaphysical errors. It is metaphysical illusion, namely the mistaken belief that one can access the unconditional, that provides the foundations of error. Grier's inevitability thesis finally links transcendental illusion to systematic unity and the critical project as a whole.

Despite not having been met with unanimous consensus, Grier's claim closely fits the purposes of this essay and an interpretation of Kant's doctrine of transcendental illusion as aiming both to limit the metaphysical claims of reason and to define the necessary and regulative role of illusion. The metaphysical temptation to go beyond the limits of experience, one should bear in mind, is "grounded in the nature of human reason, and which gives rise to an illusion which cannot be avoided" (KrV A341 | B399).

The errors of judgment to which metaphysical illusion gives rise can of course be classified into various types. One should remark, however, that the doctrine of transcendental illusion is intended to provide a unified view of metaphysical errors in terms of misapplication of faculties. Nevertheless, transcendental illusion is not identified with error in judgment, as it is, if anything, its foundation (see the opening sections of the *Dialectic*).

Whereas errors of judgment are a misapplication of the faculties and especially of the intellect (see KrV A296 | B353), the transcendental illusion concerns the very essence of reason and ensues from a transcendental use of rational ideas, maxims, and principles (KrV A297 | B354).

Transcendental Illusion [*Schein*] [...] does not cease even after it has been detected and its invalidity clearly revealed by transcendental criticism [...] This is an illusion [*Illusion*] which can no more be prevented than we can prevent the sea from appearing higher at the horizon than at the shore; [...] or to cite a still better example, than the astronomer can prevent the moon from appearing larger at its rising, although he is not deceived [*betrogen*] by this illusion. (KrV A297 | B354)

The transcendental dialectic will therefore content itself with exposing the illusion [*Schein*] of transcendent judgments, and at the same time take precautions that we be not deceived [*betruge*] by it. (KrV A298 | B355)

Kant discusses errors in judgment in numerous texts. However, the *Transcendental Analytics* of the First Critique, which will be briefly summed up here, is certainly the main reference on this topic. For Kant, there are primarily two types of errors in judgment: those that arise from confusing sensible principles and intellectual principles (the surrections) and those that arise solely from the intellect. The error of surrection, which leads to mistaking what pertains to the object for what belongs exclusively to the subject is based on a metaphysical consideration confusing sensible objects (phenomena) and intellectual objects (noumena). Surrection, which involves phenomena collapsing on the things in themselves, is closely related to transcendental illusion, even though the mode of their connection remains essentially obscure (Grier 2004, p. 70). What is clear, however, is that the error of judgment arises from the rational temptation to go beyond the possible objects of experience and to place a metaphysical object as the foundation of appearances.

In the *Transcendental Analytic*, Kant mainly warns us about the risk the intellect runs as soon as it makes material use of its pure and formal principles, and as soon as its judgments do not correctly distinguish their objects, including objects that are not given to us or that can never be given to us either. The *Transcendental Analytic* is in this respect a statement on the limited nature of the intellect, showing that its judgment cannot be generally and unrestrainedly applied whenever formed, based on the pure intellect alone, synthetically and a priori. In this respect, the use of the intellect has to be seen as dialectical (KrV A63-64 | B88). And the task of Kant's *Transcendental Dialectic* is precisely to expose the metaphysical sophistries and their corresponding arguments.

2. *Errors of judgment and Anthropology*

Granted that what has been accounted for so far is convincing, namely, that errors of judgment are mainly about errors of surrection or mere inventions on the part of the intellect and that these errors are rooted in the transcendental illusion of being able to access the unconditioned, one should now have a look at the paragraphs in the *Anthropology*. In the section of the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* on the faculty of knowledge, Kant states that "correct understanding, practiced judgment, and thorough reason constitute the entire range of the intellectual cognitive faculty; especially if this faculty is also judged as competence in promoting the practical, that is, competence in promoting ends" (Anth, AA VII, p. 197).

Kant also adds that "correct understanding is healthy understanding, provided that it contains an appropriateness of concepts to the purpose of its use," judgment is the ability to think the particular underlying the general, "it proceeds in accord with 'sound intellect and acts as a link between it and reason," while "wisdom, as the idea of a practical use of reason" is guaranteed by the three maxims, thinking for oneself, thinking in the place of others, and always thinking in accord with oneself (Anth, AA VIII, p. 200). To these three "healthy" uses of the faculties correspond their distortions.

As Kant states in the opening of §52 of the *Anthropology*, "it is difficult to bring a systematic division into what is essential and incurable disorder". The section titled "On

the weaknesses and illnesses of the soul with respect to its cognitive faculty" aims to bring order and classify the deviations of the three higher faculties of knowing, while building on what has already been achieved in the pre-critical writings and based on Kant's long and frequent engaging with the scientific knowledge of his time.

First, a distinction is introduced between deficiencies of the faculties and diseases of the soul. The deficiencies of the faculties seem to correspond, though not exactly, to some of the errors of the faculties that already appeared in the First Critique. The deficiencies of the faculties are numerous and varied in their empirical manifestations: dullness, stupidity, simplicity, distraction, imbecility. These deficiencies, which are very common, can degenerate into diseases, for example, the inability to distract oneself from a representation of the imagination can lead to delirium.

Illnesses are then divided into hypochondria and mania. Hypochondria is the illusion of being sick when one is healthy, mania corresponds to madness and can be reduced to three species: amentia, in which the representations do not correspond in any way to the connections of experience and are communicated in an incomprehensible way; dementia, in which the sick person is able to communicate in a coherent way but the representations produced by the imagination are mistaken for perceptions; insania, in which the imagination gives the illusion of universality and analogies between incompatible representations; vesania, in which the sufferer "flies above the criteria of experience" and deludes himself into understanding the incomprehensible.

These types of unreasonableness are essentially distinguished from deficiencies in that they are not simply a lack of reason, but rather a positive form: "there is not merely disorder and deviation from the rule of the use of reason, but also *positive unreason*, that is, *another rule*, a totally different standpoint into which the soul is transferred, so to speak, and from which it sees all objects differently. And from the *Sensorio communi* that is required for the unity of life (of the animal), it finds itself transferred to a faraway place (hence the word 'derangement') – just as a mountainous landscape sketched from a bird's eye view prompts completely different judgment about the region than when it is viewed from level ground" (Anth, AA VIII, p. 216).

Madness is finally provided with a general definition as what corresponds to a use of reason in which the relationship between representation and object is elevated to universality, as happens in the errors of surrection defined in the *Transcendental Analytic*. Kant states it clearly: unreason "is, just like reason, a mere form into which objects can be fitted, and both reason and unreason are therefore dependent on the universal" (Anth, AA VII, p. 218).

What distinguishes madness from reason is thus only one general trait: the absence of communicability, or, in transcendental terms, an illegitimate claim to universality.

The only universal characteristic of madness is the loss of *common sense* (*sensus communis*) and its replacement with *logical private sense* (*sensus privatus*); for example, a human being in broad daylight sees a light burning on the table which, however, another

person standing nearby does not see, or hears a voice that no one else hears (Anth, AA VII, p. 219).

In this regard, it is interesting to remark that precisely within the framework of the *Lectures on Anthropology* the relationship between genius and madness, later further developed by the Romantics, is first articulated. In the *Anthropology Friedländer* one reads, in fact, that imagination can go beyond perception and can become "erratic" making us see what is not there. For example, through the action of passion, the imagination can push us to see a beautiful forest as terrifying because of our state of mind (V-Anth, AA XXV, 514). Imagination is therefore pushed to go beyond the limits of experience and in this sense it can give rise to madness as a tendency to assume images as real objects. The imagination becomes fantasizing. Fantasizing, however, is also the capacity of the genius who is able to transform images and poetic inventions into real objects. In this sense, their fantasizing is even twofold since the genius creates both concepts (ideas) and sensations (objects): "This perfect concept of a thing is the idea, but if one fabricates an image in keeping with this idea, then this is an ideal" (V-Anth, AA XXV, p. 529). The genius, according to the definition provided in the *Critique of Judgment*, is in fact the one who is able to create an aesthetic idea and give it expression through the creation of an archetype, or an ideal. The creation of the work of art therefore seems to be a kind of legitimate fantasizing that allows the imagination to move beyond the limits of experience and to confront the supersensible. What, however, distinguishes the activity of genius is precisely its communicative capacity: it is not a private fantasy, but an expressive activity of public character that is recognized by the community of reference (KU, AA V, p. 313-17).

The communicability of the activity of genius then allows us to highlight even more how the public or private character constitutes a discrimen between the healthy and the sick intellect. And, even more, it allows us to emphasize how the tendency to illusion is typical of the very development of reason.

The general definition of insanity and its distinction from reason taking place in common sense suggest a connection not only with errors of judgment but also with the inevitability of the transcendental illusion of reason. It is therefore possible to read the paragraphs of the *Anthropology* devoted to madness in the light of the *Introduction to the Transcendental Dialectic* in the First Critique.

3. Madness and transcendental illusion

In defining dialectics in general as the "logic of illusion," Kant sets out to expose the illusions that reason incurs in its transcendental use, concluding that "hence truth, as much as error, and thus also illusion as leading to the latter, are to be found only in judgments, i.e., only in the relation of the object to our understanding" (KrV A 293 | B 350).

The illusion of reason therefore refers to "principles that actually incite us to tear down all those boundary posts and to lay claim to a wholly new territory, that recognizes no demarcations anywhere" (KrV, A 296 | B 352). In its empirical translation, this tendency

echoes Kant's anthropological insight, according to which unreason consists precisely in crossing the line: insane is the person who crosses the line of sensibility.

Nevertheless, the transcendental illusion, which does not disappear even when revealed, "cannot be avoided at all," in the same way that madness in the *Anthropology*, though a "degeneration of humanity," is "entirely natural" and must be duly taken into account in an empirical inquiry of reason. The "natural and unavoidable" dialectic "irremediably attaches to human reason, so that even after we have exposed the mirage it will still not cease to lead our reason on with false hopes, continually propelling it into momentary aberrations that always need to be removed" (KrV A 298 | B 354).

In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, what is at stake is "a natural and unavoidable illusion, which itself rests on subjective principles and passes them off as objective" (KrV A 298 | B 354). Reason, in its transcendent use, "seeks the universal condition of its judgment" (KrV A 302 | B 358), that is, it seeks to demonstrate that the judgment is universally valid, without the verification of experience, nor of the concept of the intellect. The judgment bridled in the transcendental illusion mixes up objective and subjective, becoming entangled in surrection. The task of the *Transcendental Dialectics* will be to demonstrate whether the propositions that extend to the unconditional have objective and universal validity.

In madness, understood as unreason, judgment mixes up objective and subjective, applies a rule in the juxtaposition of representation and object, and wants to enforce it as universal. The most important means of correcting our thoughts is through the comparison with others (according to the second maxim of judgment):

For it is a subjectively necessary touchstone of the correctness of our judgments generally, and consequently also of the soundness of our understanding, that we also restrain our understanding by the *understanding of others*, instead of *isolating* ourselves with our own understanding and judging *publicly* with our private representations, so to speak (Anth, AA VII, p. 219).

And again, in the *Anthropology* Kant goes on to define madness:

For we are thereby robbed, not of the only, but still of the greatest and most useful means of correcting our own thoughts, which happens due to the fact that we advance them in public in order to see whether they also agree with the understanding of others; for otherwise something merely subjective (for instance, habit or inclination) would easily be taken for something objective. This is precisely what the **illusion** consists in that is said to deceive us, or rather by means of which we are misled to deceive ourselves in the application of a rule.

He who pays no attention at all to this touchstone, but gets it into his head to recognize private sense as already valid apart from or even in opposition to common sense, is abandoned to a play of thoughts in which he sees, acts, and judges, not in a common world, but rather in his own world (as in dreaming). – Sometimes, however, it is merely a matter of terminology, through which an otherwise clear-thinking mind wishes to communicate

his external perceptions to others that do not agree with the principle of common sense, and he sticks to his own sense. (Anth, AA VII, p. 219)

As Kant recalls quoting Lawrence Sterne, “Let everyone ride his own hobbyhorse up and down the streets of the city, *as long as he does not force you to sit behind him*” (Anth, AA VII, p. 204). What is at stake here is the same mechanism that governs transcendental illusion, a term that is explicitly mentioned. Of course, the task of anthropology is quite different from that of transcendental dialectics: it is not a matter of delimiting the use of reason but of describing the empirical effects of its misuse. There is no need to go so far as to claim that unreason and the transcendental use of reason are one and the same. One would risk to have to conclude that anyone who falls into transcendental illusion is to be considered insane.

What I wish to argue, however, even if only briefly, is that the *Transcendental Doctrine of Illusion* provides the transcendental foundation to the anthropological account on the deficiencies in the faculties of knowing and mental illness. This amounts to saying that Kant's interest in madness as unreason does not only match the scientific trends of his time but is also key to an empirical account on the distortions of reason.

This interpretive idea has at least two consequences. First, it establishes a strong link between the *Anthropology* and the first Critique, providing systematic support to Kant's empirical observations. What is at stake then is not only a matter of making order in the classifications of madness, but also of explaining unreason as a misuse of reason in juxtaposing representation and object in judgment, mixing up objective and subjective, claiming universality for what is private.

This approach also has another, decidedly more general consequence. If one accepts transcendental illusion as inevitable, and if one agrees with the idea that the doctrine of illusion provides the foundation to errors of judgment and even insanity, then Kant seems to be decisively eschewing the opposition between rational and irrational. Illusion, error, and even insanity are included in the very definition of the use of reason. However, this does not mean, as Foucault claimed, that the Enlightenment advocates a submission of madness to reason according to a process of assimilation to mental illness.

Rather, it seems to me that the Enlightenment encompasses even the darkest degenerations of reason. The Enlightenment reveals, perhaps more than contemporary thought, an ability to make peace with the fact that healthy and sick do not belong to two distinct worlds. Madness, error, and the ill use of faculties are instead theoretically unavoidable for reason and are necessarily to be posited as empirical possibility. As Kant writes in the *Lectures on Anthropology*: “Mad children do not exist, rather madness arises with reason” (V-Anth, AA XXV, p. 528). The condition of possibility and ground of error is the transcendental illusion of reason, which is natural and inevitable. In this perspective, in which Kant fits well, to lose one's wits is not to lose one's reason. Madness rather means losing the sense that we have in common with others, losing the ability to communicate one's own

judgment to others, locking oneself in one's own way and going against the Enlightenment idea of the universality of reason.

What emerges then is not an abstract reason devoid of obscurity, but rather a universal reason shared by all, even empirically.

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