

# Philosophy of Medicine

## Book Review

### Book Review: *On Madness: Understanding the Psychotic Mind* by Richard G.T. Gipps

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In *On Madness: Understanding the Psychotic Mind*, published in 2022, Richard G.T. Gipps embarks on a philosophical exploration of psychosis. Generally speaking, Gipps's book presents an approach he calls "apophatic psychopathology" (Gipps 2022, 2), borrowing from negative (that is, apophatic) theology and its method of understanding God's nature by seeing how it defeats the predication of even those most supreme qualities we are drawn to predicate of Him. Gipps's central insight regarding psychotic phenomena is that we best come to understand them not positively, by predicating of the psychotic subject this or that rationally intelligible, intentional state, but instead negatively, through seeing how such predications are here defeated. Sitting down with a person suffering from psychosis requires that we develop the capacity to stay with them in their brokenness, rather than projecting onto them an intentional structure that their illness has abrogated. Gipps comments critically on the relativistic tendencies we encounter these days, concluding that people suffering from severe psychosis are not happily thought of as just living in an "alternative reality" as good as the one populated by nonpsychotic people.

The approach Gipps takes to present his work is unconventional. Instead of adopting the dominant perspective of cognitive psychology prevalent in contemporary philosophical and psychiatric literature—which does exactly what he clearly rejects; namely, trying to understand psychotic states with the conceptual apparatus used for everyday psychological phenomena—he presents his argument within a broadly Wittgensteinian framework. This framework is especially sensitive to the limits of reason and sense-making, and thus particularly pertinent to discussions of psychosis. This does not mean he writes as a disciple constantly referencing Wittgenstein. Rather, his Wittgensteinian method involves close attention to the phenomenon at hand, scrutinizing clinical material with the careful, language-sensitive approach that Wittgenstein's philosophy exemplifies.

Those committed to contemporary debates on psychotic phenomena of delusions in psychiatry and cognitive psychology (two-factor versus one-factor theory, predictive processing, and so on) may view *On Madness* as ignorant regarding the state of debate. However, others, and perhaps even some committed to these discourses, will find virtue in Gipps's ignorance—which allows him to develop his ambitious project working within its own frame of reference, unfolding a dense and carefully presented proposal without being



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sidetracked by discussions of many other ideas. In the end, the apparent ignorance may as well be called concentration. A welcome aesthetic side effect of working in such a concentrated frame of reference is that Gipps is able to engage readers to follow him through his thought process, wrestling with psychosis in a vivid style that much of today's philosophical writing is missing. Gipps's book does not align closely with many current mainstream philosophical approaches to psychosis, which makes it both irritating and exciting to read. It is presented in the voice of an experienced clinician, who is at the same time a careful philosophical thinker; not a routinized academic doing philosophy as a business, but the voice of someone wrestling with a phenomenon, someone who engages in the business of philosophy. With this characterization of the project in mind, let us take a look at the book's contents.

Gipps starts his book by addressing the very issue of mental illness. He establishes that unlike physical ailments, mental illness impacts rational agency and engagement with reality. While physical illness disrupts bodily functions, mental illness distorts the mind's capacity for rational thought and the autonomy of those suffering from it. Moreover, he argues for the tendency of mental illness to be "self-maintaining," perpetuating itself independently of external causes, distinguishing it from mere emotional distress or reaction. And, as he finally argues, suffering plays a particular role as well in mental disorders in that the suffering caused by the mental illness is not always obvious to the afflicted person. With these important features of mental disorder in mind, Gipps begins to dive into different psychotic phenomena as presentations of mental disorder par excellence.

In the following chapters, Gipps puts his apophatic approach to work. He elaborates the limitations of our understanding of these phenomena in our usual psychological frameworks, discussing delusion, reality contact, and reality testing; subjective isolation; self-alienation; confusion between self and other; hallucinations; and formal thought disorder. His discussion of these phenomena typically consists of presenting them to the reader in a rich and vivid way, priming them to form their own judgments of what they think about the reasoning he is about to present, followed by the presentation of some typical ways in which the phenomena get thought, argument as to how and why these approaches are misguided, and finally his alternative apophatic approach to the phenomenon at hand.

To pick out two examples from these discussions, consider delusion and reality testing. In his discussion of delusion, Gipps argues, in the spirit of Karl Jaspers, that delusions are inherently opaque to rational comprehension. He critiques the desire to make delusion intelligible by comparing it to mistaken or poorly reasoned belief. This serves as a foundational argument for his apophatic approach, where delusions are not errors to be fixed but states to be understood in their essential estrangement from reason. His discussion of "reality testing" as an issue in psychosis goes beyond what is widely understood by the phrase. Failure of reality testing in psychosis is commonly understood as a failure in the mechanisms of belief verification and updating leading to wrong beliefs. But the loss of reality testing, as characterized by Gipps, involves an ontological blurring of reality-oriented judgments, on the one hand, and engaging in acts of imagination, on the other, such that there is no longer a right answer as to which of these intelligible modes of thought the patient is engaged in.

After proceeding with his discussion along these lines for the different phenomena occurring in the context of psychosis, which discussion makes up the largest part of the book, Gipps turns to two remaining tasks. The first provides an articulation of and reflection

on the psychoanalytic idea of the symbolic meaning of psychotic thought. The understanding Gipps develops here is differentiated from a too simple and potentially confused understanding of symbolism as ordinary metaphor. This chapter is perhaps the most practically relevant for clinicians. Finally, to close his discussion Gipps addresses the well-meaning but intellectually and practically harmful temptations of today's widespread relativistic views. These claim that the world experienced in psychosis is just another equally valid world, and that interfering with subjects having psychotic experiences is simply oppressive. To accept such claims would undermine our own basic understanding of rationality, and perhaps harm individuals who, as Gipps shows us in his discussion of psychosis, might end up alienated and alone in a state of unarticulated suffering, while being cheered on as tokens of diversity.

*On Madness* is a read for anybody interested in psychosis, whether they are a philosopher of mind interested in atypical mental states, or a clinician with philosophical inclinations who would like to go beyond what psychopathology textbooks have to offer, but also philosophically minded readers who may have relatives or friends with psychotic experiences and who would appreciate an additional theoretical perspective on what they hear from those suffering from psychotic states, hopefully supplementing their attempts to understand their significant others more fully.

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### **Disclosure Statement**

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### **References**

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