

**Masters Thesis**

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**'Madness and Mysticism'**

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**Due February 13 2008**

**This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the necessary requirement for a**

**Master of Arts**

**at the**

**University of New England**

**I certify that the substances of this thesis has not been submitted for any degree, nor is being currently submitted for any degree other than the M. Arts. - Philosophy.**

**University of New England.**

**The content of this thesis is my own work. All sources used in the preparation of the text have been appropriately acknowledged. All those interviewed in the course of research for the work have given consent for their views to be included and have accordingly been acknowledged in the text.**

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**Feb 2008**

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## Abstract

From the beginning of recorded thought human beings have been passionately interested in the issues of madness, mysticism and the possible relationships which may exist between the two. Much of the debate centres on whether there may exist an Ultimate Reality inaccessible to our ordinary consciousness. As far back as the Pre-Socratics, sceptics have claimed that there is either no such thing, or that if such a thing exists, it is inaccessible to ourselves due to the limitations of our mind and body. This, nevertheless, has not deterred the many from believing in its existence and offering suggestions as to its nature and how it can be reached. Plato and the many he influenced, held that Ultimate Reality could not be reached by reason alone but rather must include the difficult cultivation of morality and humility. Nevertheless, even the best among us are likely to suffer from mental anguish due to the intensity of the experience and especially during the initiation, or 'transitional period', wherein the mystic's psyche must adapt to its new situation and become permanently changed. Throughout this thesis we have suggested, nevertheless, that once the individual regains her equilibrium she can be contrasted with that of the mad even if her subjective inner experience *seems* like it is pathological. The difference between the two can be measured by such yardsticks as control, virtue and the ability (or inability) to flourish in society at large. The true mystic, advocated by Platonism and its derivatives, is moral, rational and healthy. Of course not all agree with this analysis. Nietzsche and those he influenced, held that spirituality is a virtue of the powerful and has nothing to do with reason or morality at all. The cultivation of 'Individuation' is brought about by self-overcoming and self-mastery. The existentialists likewise rejected Platonism, holding that there is no such thing as Ultimate Reality at all. Instead they held that one could be both 'healthy' and yet be, in actuality, mad (in terms of living a life of illusion and self-deception). To the Nietzschen, the highest form of spirituality known to human existence – the mystical - transcends all reason, morality and pity. And to

the existentialist, it is better to be true to oneself (live authentically) and be psychologically 'ill' than be healthy and live in bad faith (self deception). Due to the force of these objections, when it comes to asserting whether there exists a genuine mystical experience, as Plato proposed, which is good, beautiful and of the highest of truth - the question is not easily answerable and in the end may not be decided by reason at all. True mysticism may well be exceedingly rare and involve a cleansing of the doors of perception - a self-discipline, faith, and humility at odds with the proud, materialistic and closed ignorant minds of ordinary individuals.

## Introduction

What is madness? What is mysticism? Are these two questions linked in some way? Who decides? These will be the important questions this essay attempts to address.

To a modern audience living in this age of unprecedented technological advances, with thick lengthy 'objective' and 'scientific' knowledge on 'mental illness', the question of madness should be easily answerable. Certainly there will be borderline problems – where does one illness end and another begin? At what point do we insist on compulsory medication or hospitalization? But these are not philosophical problems. The psychiatrist, needle in hand and armed with years of text book reading and personal 'experience' within this contemporary system has little use for philosophical speculation. The term 'madness' has been outdated – no longer politically correct and potentially insensitive – she injects the drug into the 'client'. This client may have lost his right not to be medicated. This right, like the right to not be detained (hospitalized), is not decided in a court by a jury nor a judge but, at least initially, is left to the psychiatrist to decide. We give criminals a court of appeal. Clients can be medicated and hospitalized on the spot. This uncomplicated procedure is a case of addressing the issue of 'mental illness'. Just as our body can suffer physical illness - the doctor explains 'objectively' then so too can our brains suffer illness, that is, mental illness. The term 'madness' has been replaced with 'chemical imbalance'. Potentially all problems of imbalance can be addressed with the appropriate technological substance, or drug, to re-balance these chemicals in the brain. To the ordinary psychiatrist there is no question as to what is madness, there is only a problem of correctly 'identifying' the particular strain of mental illness and fixing it with the drug that works best with the client.

But to some of us this is not good enough.

To some of us, the subject of insanity is full of metaphysical, moral and mysterious question marks. To some of us hearing the voice of God, seeing visions of Angels, or the intense experience of an overwhelming and intoxicating feeling of love cannot be quickly reduced and politely explained away as symptoms of mental illness which need to be treated with medicinal substances. This respect and longing for the spiritual, moreover, is not limited to the religious. Many atheistic and agnostic secular humanists likewise find value in what the psychiatric text books label pathological.

Many of us drink deeply from verses of inspired 'revelations' - works which are celebrated as containing Ultimate Truths recorded from the sights, hearings and feelings of prophets and seers – not the sickly and deluded. Why is it that many voluntarily bow down in sincere devotion at the feet of the 'enlightened', while others are avoided, derided, or even hospitalized when they claim similar powers and experiences? This question is not easily answered. It has concerned thinkers and stimulated thought from the beginning of recorded history and even today, in a world of pills and labels, it remains a subject of fascination for deep and thoughtful minds. So what is madness? And what is mysticism? Against the strict textbook analysis, which fails to offer a distinction between either, we must search elsewhere

This thesis is *not* a complete history of ideas arrived at in a chronological order from ancient times to the present. Rather it is an exploration of different schools of ideas, chosen as they provide fascinating insight into our topic and problematize popular shallow notions. The Ancient Greeks may have lived over two and a half thousand years ago, yet their ideas on the nature of truth retain their validity even into the modern age in spite of revolutionary advances in science and technology. Furthermore, if one is to class madness as a retreat from reality we must have some idea on what reality actually consists of. But as far back as the Pre-Socratic's, the first recognized philosophers in the



western tradition, notions of reality have proven to be problematic.

The second chapter deals with Plato, and at some length. It is difficult to underestimate the importance of this thinker, particularly when it comes to the subjects of madness and mysticism.

Plato's influence on Christianity in Western culture was immense and we will be examining some favoured mystics of the Church to record what they have to say about mysticism and its possible relation to madness. Following this we will briefly examine some Eastern thought.

Next, we leap into the period of modernity. Most of our thinkers fit in or around this period which I have chosen on account of its richness in insight and radical re-evaluation of what it means to be a human (including the aspects of madness and mysticism). This essay will explore the thought of Wittgenstein, Otto, Underhill, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Kierkegaard, Sartre, Bataille, Artaud, and slightly more modern thinkers including Maslow, Winnicott, Becker, John Schumaker, R.D. Laing, Cohen, Huxley, Zaehner, Murdoch, Tuan and Simone Weil.

Now the question may well be asked - why these thinkers and not others? A case could be made for including Daoism, Gnosticism or any other religion. I must confess to a certain partiality in the choice of these thinkers and traditions. There is much here that is challenging, creative and insightful and while it is difficult to say exactly what unites these disparate voices - we might point to a certain courage. Whether it be the bravery of Socrates, the stinging fly, or the existential heroics of Sartre, or even the courage of faith and duty exhibited by saints east and west, all of our chosen figures exhibit the tendency of being honest with themselves, passionate about uncovering truth and courageous enough to publish their views without concern for their personal well-being.

Now the terms mysticism and madness are vague concepts which can cover various ideas. Included in the wide array of theories posited in this essay, mysticism has been considered to be a method on inquiry, contemplation of truth, psychic balance, the notion of the good, psychic health, social impacts, love, obsession and fear. Also, just as there is much diversity in ideas on mysticism, so too is their diversity on the subject of madness. We will examine these ideas of psychic imbalance, lack of social integration, failure to be loved, obsession, inflation, a lack of creativity and an absence of courage. We also wish to explore what Plato termed 'madness as a blessing' and whether there is a possible relationship between madness and mysticism.