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THE MEANINGS OF MADNESS: THROUGH FOUCAULT TO HUSSERL

Abstract

This paper has three objectives: first, to propose that it is philosophically propitious to understand madness as a problem of the order of meaning. Second, to illustrate the intrinsic link between madness and meaning in Michel Foucault's *History of Madness*,¹ in which he suggests that the changing nature of madness renders impossible any talk of the meaning of madness. Third, to foreground the shortcomings of Foucault's account and to provide an alternative approach to the meaning of madness, drawing on a handful of key concepts from Edmund Husserl's work and centering on a notion of madness as meaning-distortion.

Keywords: Michel Foucault; Edmund Husserl; a phenomenological approach to madness; madness and meaning; meaning as constituted and meaning as form; meaning-rupture and meaning-distortion

I. Introduction

In this paper, I wish to lay out an approach to the question of madness that would render it possible to approach madness as a *philosophical problem*. Such approach, I will propose, would pivot around the solidarity between meaning and madness; it would enable us to understand the very possibility of madness as intrinsically tied to the possibility of meaning (as well as to the possibility of ruptures and distortions of meaning). I will first identify the intrinsic link between madness and meaning in Michel Foucault's groundbreaking *History of Madness*,² in which Foucault indicates not only the inherent relation between madness and meaning, but also how the meanings of madness are but unintended side-effects, resulting from historical practices both specific and random, which effectively forestall the possibility of tracing the meaning of madness in a historically cohesive way. I will juxtapose Foucault's emphasis on the

breaks and ruptures of the meanings of madness with a phenomenological approach to madness that puts a premium on madness as a form of meaning-distortion. To this end, I will rely on two key concepts of Husserlian phenomenology—the notion of meaning-externalization borrowed from Husserl’s *Crisis of the European Sciences*³ and the notion of the horizontal nature of experience.⁴

My paper will be composed of the following parts: first, “A Note on the Title by Way of Biography, Followed by a Confession”, in which I aim to elucidate the relation between Foucault and Husserl, thereby also clarifying the title of my paper. Next, “Foucault’s History of Madness: Madness without a Subject”, in which I indicate the links between madness and meaning that Foucault traces in his *History of Madness* as well as the possible shortcomings of Foucault’s approach. This section is followed by “Husserlian Tools: Meaning and Reduction”, an introductory section, in which I delineate those core concepts of Husserl’s phenomenological project which pertain to the phenomenological elucidation of the problem of meaning. Next, in “Madness as Meaning-Distortion: Three Examples”, I seek to motivate an understanding of madness as meaning-distortion with the aid of examples drawn from a variety of sources, both fictional and non-fictional. Then, in “Madness and Phenomenology”, I intend phenomenologically to account for the possibility of meaning-distortion, relying on two key ideas of Husserlian phenomenology, that of the possibility of “meaning-externalization” and that of the horizontal nature of experience. Lastly, in my “Conclusions”, I will indicate a possible direction for future research.

II. A Note on the Title by Way of Biography, Followed by a Confession

When Michel Foucault was born in 1926, Edmund Husserl—who was by then almost 70 years old and was teaching at the University of Freiburg—had already established himself as one of Germany’s most eminent philosophers. Husserl had done so by introducing a new mode of doing philosophy and thus founding a new philosophical movement: that of phenomenology. Not only within Germany but also internationally, the novelty and promise of Husserl’s philosophy had begun to capture the attention of young philosophers who flocked to Göttingen and then to Freiburg to attend Husserl’s lectures: Hannah Arendt, Hans-Georg

Gadamer, Hans Jonas were among them, as was the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka and the Lithuanian-French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who came to Freiburg at the age of 22 to study with Husserl and who would subsequently write the first book-length introduction to Husserlian thought in French.⁵ It was Levinas' book—together with his translation of a series of lectures which Husserl gave in Paris in the late 1920s, the so-called *Cartesian Meditations*—which introduced Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, amongst others, to phenomenology, influencing both of them deeply.⁶

In 1926, the year Foucault was born, Husserl was also presented by one of his former assistants and collaborators with the public dedication of a forth-coming book: Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Though Heidegger had read Husserl's most important published works closely, the two only met around 1916, when Husserl took a position at Freiburg where Heidegger was a non-tenured lecturer (*Privatdozent*). Soon, the two thinkers seemed to grow closer philosophically, and Husserl, who was thirty years Heidegger's senior, began to support Heidegger in his academic career and successfully petitioned for Heidegger to receive a tenured position at Freiburg. By 1926, the year of Foucault's birth, Heidegger had taken up a position at the university of Marburg, which he would leave in 1928 to succeed Husserl at Freiburg when Husserl had reached retirement age and was made an emeritus professor.⁷ With the rise of National Socialism in the 1930s, life became increasingly difficult for the Jewish Husserl: his teaching license was revoked, he was no longer permitted to publish any new material and, eventually, he even lost his German citizenship.

In other words and to return to my topic, Foucault and Husserl never met. Foucault was 12 when Husserl died in 1938, (leaving behind approximately 40 000 pages of manuscripts written in shorthand), and when Foucault was entering the philosophical scene of France in the 1950s and 60s, Husserlian phenomenology was if not a thing of the past, at least in some way belonging to the establishment. Though originally taken with phenomenology, Foucault very soon turned against it, especially against its Sartrean version, which he thought mistaken in its subject-centeredness. We could even say that it was in part his critique of phenomenology that led Foucault to write his first major work, *The History of Madness*, which was published in 1961.⁸ As we will see shortly, Foucault argues in *History of Madness* that the idea of the subject is untenable when it comes to the experience of madness. Instead, Foucault submits an alternative notion

of experience (and of meaning) that stresses the ruptures and breaks that constitute the history of a meaning (more on that soon).

To revert to the title of this paper, why then would I suggest that we return to Husserl through Foucault? First, what I do not propose: that Foucault, though explicitly stating otherwise, remained a phenomenologist at heart.⁹ Rather, I suggest making a detour through Foucault and then coming back to Husserl because Foucault provides us with an important clue as to the connection between the meaning of madness and the formation of meaning in general. In this respect, I will follow Foucault's lead, although I will ultimately argue for the need of an alternative notion of meaning as more than just form in order to capture something about the meaning of madness.

Before I turn to Foucault, an important confession: Husserl had very little to say about madness. This leads to the question why I would turn from Foucault—who is one of the few recent philosophers to address madness—to Husserl. But though Husserl does not expand on madness, he gives us an intricate notion of meaning, and of the subjective achievement that meaning always is. In particular, we can find, within Husserl's philosophical projects, the resources to account for the possibility of meaning-distortion and thereby for a phenomenological understanding of madness. Moreover, since for Husserl, meaning is always both subjective and objective—not merely an achievement, but a potential presence in the world—, madness, from a Husserlian perspective, can never be reduced to mere subjective pathology, but must also have to do with the world that we live in.

III. Foucault's History of Madness: Madness without a Subject

If there is one thing that deeply troubled Foucault, it is our thoughtlessness and lack of critical attitude when it comes to the present. We accept the present as inevitably given, as the benevolent and orderly outcome of centuries of historical progress, through which the true nature of things and of ourselves is gradually revealed to us. Our unfounded belief in history comes out particularly clearly in the case of madness: for who would dispute that the modern notion of mental illness, with which madness entered the realm of positive diseases, was not a vast improvement over previous ideas of madness, which were saddled with prejudices and unscientific beliefs? Who would argue against the idea that

mental illness, the medicalized version of madness, was not a scientific, objective, presuppositionless idea—in other words, who would deny that mental illness was the truth of madness?

In *History of Madness*, Foucault wants to do precisely this. To this end, Foucault turns to the history of madness, in order to expose how throughout history, the meanings of madness have undergone so many shifts and breaks that it is impossible to uphold the idea that what we have today is the result of a linear progression of knowledge. Foucault contends that the meaning of madness does not somehow guide the process through which madness is further and further determined as what it truly is; rather, that madness is an effect, an outcome, of specific historical practices and discourses.

Thus change the questions that history seeks to answer. From “what are the essential structures of this historical object that are incrementally revealed by the movement of history?”, the question now becomes: “what are the conditions of the specific historical appearance of objects?” A concern for essence is replaced by an investigation of the historical appearance of an object, not to indicate a schism between essence and (historical) appearance, but because this specific historical appearance is all that can be encapsulated by the meaning of an object as it emerges in discourse—for it is all there is to an object.

More precisely, *History of Madness* pivots around Foucault’s inquiries into the meanings that come to accrue to the notion of madness in the historical period he designates as the “classical age”, which spans roughly from 1650 to 1800. Foucault aims to show that the meanings of madness underwent a profound change in the classical age—or the age of reason—and that these changes paved the way for the modern understanding of madness as mental illness. Foucault’s point is precisely that there is no underlying logic to this meaning-precipitation and that the representation of madness that resulted from the classical age was but the conglomeration of random bits and scraps of meaning, which we have come to mistake for madness’s essence.

In *History of Madness*, Foucault identifies a number of key determinations, a series of what he will later designate as “discursive events,”¹⁰ which were at work in the classical age and there began to produce and organize different forms of knowledge about madness, which then began to form “the face” of madness. One of these organizing practices was the establishment of an asylum structure, which I will use

as an example to illustrate how Foucault thinks historical meaning comes to be.¹¹

In Foucault's view, one of the things that marked the classical age was the establishment of houses of confinement, in which the mad were locked away—importantly together with many other groups who were also considered disruptive such as the idle, the drunk, the money-squanderers. Houses of confinement, and this is crucial, were punitive places, not places for the sake of curing someone, with the objective of locking away those that were regarded as potentially disruptive for society. The end of the classical age saw the establishment of asylums, which came to replace houses of confinement, and which were reserved for the mad alone. Very often, the change from houses of confinement to asylums is seen as the liberation of the mad, as a major step towards a more humane, more scientific treatment of the mad. Again, Foucault's stance is to unhinge the comforting narrative of taking the opening of asylums as a sign for a more and more truthfully determined grasp of the meaning of madness. What he offers instead is an account that emphasizes the historical situation preceding the introduction of the asylum-structure, with an emphasis on the way in which madness became equated with physical disease.

According to Foucault, what lies at the root of the desire to establish an institution for the mad alone was not a humane impulse; it was a rumor. What preceded the construction of asylums was the "great fear" of the mad that in the middle of the 18th century seized the general population, a fear of contamination, both moral and physical, that in the form of "prison fever" would spread from houses of confinement to the city. Thus in their minds, people began to equate the mad with the almost mythical images of disease, rot and decay they had once associated with a very different group of outcasts: the lepers. It was in the realm of the fantastic, and not the realm of medicine, that a kinship was first suggested between madness and disease, between the pollution fermenting behind walls of houses of confinement and the contamination festering within leprosariums. The fantastic proved a fertile breeding ground for the kind of meaning-designation that would turn out to be the most determining: that madness is a form of disease of the mind.

The imaginative association between madness and disease that was forged in the time of the "great fear" in the mid-18th century put the first doctors to be called into houses of confinement—places, we should recall, that had been conceived not to cure the mad, but to lock them away—in a strange position. As Foucault writes:

If a doctor was summoned, if he was asked to observe, it was because people were afraid—afraid of the strange chemistry that seethed behind the wall of confinement, afraid of the powers forming there that threatened to propagate. The doctor came, once the conversion of images was effected, the disease having already assumed the ambiguous aspects of fermentation, of corruption, of tainted exhalations, of decomposed flesh. What is traditionally called “progress” toward madness’s attaining a medical status was in fact made possible only by a strange regression. (*HM*, p. 205)

Thus the question facing the authorities at the end of the classical age was not how to find a more suitable place for the mad, but how to reassure the general population that measures were being taken to neutralize the potential danger the mad represented. The great reform movement, which was soon lauded for charting a more humane way of treating the mad as mentally ill, began as a movement of purification: how to reduce the threat of contamination and pollution evading from houses of confinement and spreading throughout the city. As a solution, houses of confinement were to be more isolated; in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the declaration of the Rights of Man, they were also gradually depopulated, as more and more inmates were set free—with the exception of the mad and of convicted criminals. As the practice of confinement was scaled down with regards to those suspected of moral transgressions, and criminals and mad were increasingly separated, the space of confinement that had originally been carved out to remove from public life a wide range of transgressors now came to be the exclusive domain of the mad. Thus the liberation of madness that tends to be associated with the dismantling of houses of confinement and their conversion into asylums should not be taken as the triumph of a more objective, medical notion of madness over unscientific meaning-elements that had sprouted from the seedbed of fantasy and myth. It was precisely the classical age’s obscure groundwork that made possible the prodigious postulate declared at the end of the 19th century and that was taken to set an end to all unscientific, stigmatizing notions of madness that had preceded it: “that madness, after all, was only madness” (*HM*, p. 277).

Although Foucault’s approach is persuasive, especially in drawing attention to the historical plasticity of the meaning of madness, there are certain things it foregoes, to my mind, in its emphasis on both madness and meaning as the results of larger, anonymous processes. First, following Foucault’s lead, we are bereft of any possibility of talking about the

experience of the mad subject (since all three—madness, experience, subjectivity—are considered as a non-intentional side-effect of rather than as central to the movements of history). Second, this leads to the question whether there is not more to meaning (and to madness), for is not meaning the way in which the world and things in the world come close to us? Husserl, to whom I will turn at present, will make precisely this point.

IV. Husserlian Tools: Meaning and Reduction

Before outlining a phenomenological approach to the meaning of madness, I will briefly delineate some of the basic ideas of Husserl's phenomenology necessary to my project. When Husserl began to lay out what would become a new philosophical method, he was deeply concerned with the way in which philosophical approaches to knowledge, meaning and the world remove us from the world rather than giving a truthful description of the way in which the world and things in the world are inextricably close or given to us. When we experience something, for Husserl, we experience something other than ourselves. When I experience a tree (when I perceive a tree), I perceive that tree—I do not perceive an idea of the tree that I have, I do not perceive a mental image, I do not perceive myself as a tree. I perceive this tree, which is other than myself. This seems to lead to two questions: how is it possible for me to experience something other than myself? How is it possible for me to somehow go outside of myself?

These questions presuppose two things: 1) that I (whatever I am) am first and foremost inside (my mind) and somehow need to get outside and 2) that as a result of this, there exists a gap between me and the world, a cleft I need to overcome if knowledge is to be possible. If I do not overcome this gap, then there is no guarantee and perhaps even no possibility that knowledge even refers to that which it is about. Husserl's answer to the questions: "how can I perceive something other than myself? How can I overcome the gap between myself and the world?" is to overcome the very presuppositions, which give rise to these questions in the first place. For Husserl, to assume that we are first and foremost inside of ourselves and somehow need to get out is a construction, and not a description of how we actually relate to the world because for Husserl, we are always already in the world. To describe this "being outside of oneself", Husserl uses the notion of "intentionality": by its nature, consciousness is intentional

(consciousness is the term which Husserl uses to describe what the subject most fundamentally is).

In an instructive and stunning essay on Husserl, Jean-Paul Sartre expresses the sense of liberation awakened in him by Husserl's philosophical approach, in particular by his groundbreaking notion of intentionality:

To know is to "burst out towards", to wrest oneself from moist, gastric intimacy and fly out over there, beyond oneself, to what is not oneself. To fly over there, to the tree, and yet outside the tree, because it eludes and repels me and I can no more lose myself in it than it can dissolve itself into me: outside it, outside myself. Don't you recognize your own exigencies and sense of things in this description? You knew very well that the tree wasn't you, that you couldn't take it inside your dark stomach, and that knowledge couldn't, without dishonesty, be compared to possession. And, in this same process, consciousness is purified and becomes clear as a great gust of wind. There is nothing in it any more, except an impulse to flee itself, a sliding outside of itself. (...) Imagine now a linked series of bursts that wrest us from ourselves, that do not even leave an "ourselves" the time to form behind them, but rather hurl us out beyond them into the dry dust of the world, on to the rough earth, among things. Imagine we are thrown out in this way, abandoned by our very natures in an indifferent, hostile, resistant world. If you do so, you will have grasped the profound meaning of the discovery Husserl expresses in this famous phrase: "All consciousness is always consciousness of."¹²

As intentional, consciousness is always consciousness of. How are we to understand this? If we think about an experience, for instance, perception, then we notice that perception always involves the following structure: a perceiver who perceives something perceived. There is a structure of referring at play: every perceiving refers to something perceived just as every imaging refers to something imagined and every judging refers to something judged.

If you consider this an odd way of thinking about thinking, then Husserl would agree with you. He also thinks that paying attention not to what is perceived but rather to the relation between perceiver and perceived is unnatural. This is because we have a tendency to lose ourselves in things, and thereby to self-obscure. When we experience something, then we primarily pay attention to what it is we experience, and not to the act of experiencing it: when I imagine the great dinner I am going to have

tonight, I imagine the dinner and do not pay attention to my imagining the dinner although my imagining the dinner is the precondition for the dinner as imagined. This state of being immersed in things is what Husserl calls the natural attitude, which is the attitude that we live in in our everyday life and that we need to overcome or rather modify in order to do phenomenology.

There is yet another side to the natural attitude that we equally need to set aside in order for phenomenology to get off the ground, and which will have to do with meaning. If I were to ask you, my reader: "what is it that makes an object an object?", it is likely that you would respond: "what makes an object an object is that it exists". And if I then were to ask: "what is it to exist?", you might say: "to be out there in the world, as an actually independently existing object". Your responses reflect a tendency that pervades our everyday natural attitude: namely, the propensity to understand existence as actuality. When viewed from the natural attitude, for us and for things to exist then simply means "to belong to nature and to be subsumed under its categories,"¹³ to exist independently from consciousness in a transcendent world. But the givenness of the world and things in the world does not imply that we are clear about the being of the world. The existence of the world is a conviction and a commitment, not any kind of self-evident knowledge. Thus the natural attitude is based on a commitment to the fact of the world, for which it is unable to account. Only the phenomenological attitude can account for the possibility of things and of the world given to me in experience.

Husserl's answer to the natural attitude and its problems is the so-called phenomenological epoché or bracketing, which is a methodological gesture that needs to be undertaken in order for phenomenological description to begin. What gets bracketed in the epoché? Existence understood as actuality. If in the natural attitude, we assume that all things around us exist independently from us, in the reduction, we suspend any assumptions that have to do with existence.

To get a firmer grasp on the concept of epoché and consider its ramifications, let us turn to a rather well-used but nonetheless instructive example from Husserl's *Ideas I*:

Let us suppose that in a garden we regard with pleasure a blossoming apple tree, the freshly green grass of the lawn, etc. It is obvious that the perception and the accompanying liking are not, at the same time, what is perceived and liked. In the natural attitude, the apple tree is for us

something existing in the transcendent realm of spatial actuality, and the perception, as well as the liking, is for us a psychical state belonging to real people. Between the one and the other real things, between the real person or the real perception, and the real apple tree, there exist real relations. In such situations characterizing mental processes, it may be in certain cases that perception is “mere hallucination”, the perceived, this apple tree before us, does not exist in “actual” reality. Now the real relation, previously meant as actually existing, is destroyed. Only the perception remains, but there is nothing actual there to which it is related.

Let us now go to the <transcendental> phenomenological standpoint. The transcendent world receives its “parenthesis”, we exercise the *epoché* in relation to <positing> its actual being. We now ask what, of essential necessity, is to be discovered in the complex of noetic processes pertaining to perception and in the valuation of liking. With the whole physical world and psychical world, the actual existence of the real relation between perceiving and perceived is excluded; and, nonetheless, a relation between perceiving and perceived (as well as between liking and liked) remains left over, a relation which becomes given essentially in “pure immanence”, namely purely on the ground of the phenomenologically reduced mental processes of perceiving and liking precisely as they fit into the transcendental stream of mental processes. (...) Here, in the case of perception and also in the case of any progressive concatenation of perceptions whatever (...), there is no question to be raised of the sort whether or not something corresponds to it in “the” actuality. This posited actuality is indeed not there for us in consequence of judging. And yet, so to speak, everything remains as of old. Even the phenomenologically reduced perceptual mental process is a perceiving of “this blossoming apple tree, in this garden”, etc., and likewise, the reduced liking is a liking of this same thing.¹⁴

This is: in the natural, pre-phenomenological attitude, we would say that the apple tree exists out there in a transcendent spatial reality and that our perception of it and the feelings of pleasure it evokes in us are psychic states, which belong to us as real human beings. Between the real human beings that we are and our real perceptions, and the real apple tree exist real relations, the reality of which could however be called into question—we could find ourselves coming down from an acid trip and realize that the apple tree in the garden was but a hallucination and that all along we had been staring at a broom in an otherwise empty hallway closet, in which case the perception of the apple tree would appear to be reduced to itself, as unmoored from reality, there is nothing “real” it can fasten itself onto.

If we now suspend our belief in the actuality of the tree and of the world it forms part of, and thus also set aside any belief in us as actual human beings, then, Husserl surmises, we are in the position to ask what it is of the apple tree scenario that remains, untouched by the bracketing of actuality. What we find is that although the presumed actual relations between our perception of the tree and the tree are suspended, a correlation persists between perceiving and perceived, now thrown into sharper relief. The tree outside the window may or may not exist, but my perception of the tree remains a relation to something other than myself. This relation between perceiving and perceived stands at the heart of a phenomenological exploration of meaning.

It is thus within the phenomenological epoché that we discover certain possibilities of knowledge that have transcendental values when compared to other sources: it is the uncovering of a new sphere of investigation, of an inwardness that belongs to knowledge itself. To put it differently, then, even if we suspend existence, objects continue to be given to us in experiences. But how are they given to us? Husserl's answer is: they are given to us—they appear to consciousness—as or via their meanings. The reduction reduces things to their meanings.

What does this mean? And what is meaning? If we think of an object, or perceive it, or imagine it, or dream it, objects are always given to us in a determined way: the tree appears to us as tree; it is given to us as tree. This "as-structure" is the structure of meaning: the tree is given to us as or in terms of its meaning of being a tree; it is because the tree is in a determined way that it can appear to consciousness. As I perceive more of the object, more of its meaning is determined—potential meaning becomes actualized, knowledge is achieved. But this is something we only realize after the reduction. Thus after the reduction, the traditional question: "why is there something rather than nothing?" becomes transformed into the phenomenological question: "how is it that things are given to us?" And this then becomes the question of meaning: things are given to us in terms of their meaning and so how, then, is meaning possible? The answer to this question, for Husserl, must always be twofold: meaning is always both a subjective achievement and an objective possibility: the world, as potentially meaningful, beckons us to take it up in a meaningful manner. This means that meaning is never something that I impose (or construct) upon an otherwise meaningless entity; but it is also not something that is simply always already out there in the world.

We will return to meaning and its possibilities and impossibilities in the next sections. For now, let's note a few more things on Husserl's method: phenomenology is a descriptive method, returning us to the things themselves. Deploying description beyond its use in the empirical sciences, it is based on the claim that phenomenological description is capable of clarifying and bringing out meaning or sense. Yet in order for phenomenological description to find traction, we require reduction, not because meaning is formed in reduction, but because our view of meaning is obstructed in an unreduced, natural experience. Thus for Husserl, in appearing, things show themselves as what they are. This does not mean that things somehow show themselves all at once—appearance does not equal essence, but it is also not fundamentally divorced from it. This leads to a phenomenological notion of truth as evidence: evidence is the experience of something giving itself as what it truly is.

V. Madness as Meaning-Distortion: Three Examples

How do madness and meaning relate? To recapitulate, for Foucault, madness is an example of the external nature of meaning-formation, as madness is an effect of random patterns of meaning-formation. So the meaning of madness, in a way, is the madness of meaning. From my introductory remarks on Husserl's phenomenology, it should be manifest already that a phenomenological account of madness and meaning will be very different: meaning is not simply a husk which can be filled with more or less random content; meaning is the way in which we connect to the world, and in which things show themselves to us. But how do madness and meaning come together? What I suggest is that we could understand madness as a form of meaning-distortion.

Before sketching out a phenomenological account of how we could understand the very possibility of madness by understanding the very possibility of meaning-distortion, let me give you three descriptions of different mad states that I have gathered from a variety of sources, both fictional and non-fictional. In all three examples, I'll suggest, there is the idea, explicit or not, that madness manifests as a kind of meaning-distortion, or alternative meaning-formation.

Let me begin with a short passage from Nikolai Gogol's 1835 short story "Diary of a Madman".¹⁵ Through his diary, we witness the descent into madness of Poprishchin, a minor civil servant, whose entries include

a conversation between dogs which he overhears (and later, a description of how he proceeds to steal the written correspondence between the two dogs). Until at last, on April 43rd in the year 2000, Poprishchin awakens to find himself a different man: the king of Spain, as we learn from the following passage:

The year 2000: April 43rd.

To-day is a day of splendid triumph. Spain has a king; he has been found, and I am he. I discovered it to-day; all of a sudden it came upon me like a flash of lightning.

I do not understand how I could imagine that I am a titular councillor. How could such a foolish idea enter my head? It was fortunate that it occurred to no one to shut me up in an asylum. Now it is all clear, and as plain as a pikestaff. Formerly—I don't know why—everything seemed veiled in a kind of mist. That is, I believe, because people think that the human brain is in the head. Nothing of the sort; it is carried by the wind from the Caspian Sea.

For the first time I told Mawra [the housekeeper] who I am. When she learned that the king of Spain stood before her, she struck her hands together over her head, and nearly died of alarm. The stupid thing had never seen the king of Spain before!¹⁶

Here, we witness the delusion—the unfounded assumptions—of someone taking himself to be someone he is not and whose meaning-distortions collide with the meaning-assumptions of the people around him such as his housekeeper Mawra.

My second example is taken from Oliver Sacks's *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.¹⁷ Dr P., precisely the man who mistakes his wife for a hat, is an elderly musician of distinction who presents himself to the neurologist Sacks with a number of problems that we could describe as a form of blindness of the mind: an inability to see the world in its concreteness. Sacks proceeds to undertake a number of tests with Dr P., in the course of which he asks his patient to identify a handful of objects. Dr P. does very well when it comes to geometrical shapes, identifying dodecahedrons and more. But he curiously struggles when it comes to everyday objects:

"What is this?" I asked, holding up a glove.

"May I examine it?" he [Dr P.] asked, and taking it from me, he proceeded to examine it as he had examined the geometrical shapes.

"A continuous surface", he announced at last, "infolded on itself. It appears to have"—he hesitated—"five outpouchings, if this is the word".

"Yes", I said cautiously. "You have given me a description. Now tell me what it is."

"A container of some sort?"

"Yes", I said, "and what would it contain?"

"It would contain its contents", said Dr. P. with a laugh. "There are many possibilities. It could be a change purse, for example, for coins of sizes. It could..."

I interrupted the barmy flow. "Does it not look familiar? Do you think it might contain, might fit, a part of your body?"

No light of recognition dawned on his face.

No child would have the power to see and speak of a "continuous surface... infolded on itself", but any child, any infant, would immediately know a glove as a glove, see it as familiar. Dr P. didn't. He saw nothing as familiar.¹⁸

In the case of Dr. P., things have become drained of their meaning. For him, things no longer mean—to recognize a glove as a glove (i.e., in terms of its meaning) also includes knowing what a glove is for, how to use it, what function it fulfills in our life. From a phenomenological viewpoint, objects cut off from the movement of a life bear no meaning; they are reduced to mere form.

In my last example, a description taken from J.H. van den Berg,¹⁹ an early proponent of phenomenological psychology, the meaning of the entire world is implicated in the experience of madness. In the following passage, van den Berg describes a patient suffering from hallucinations (i.e., perceptions that lack external stimuli) and delusions, (i.e., impossible or absurd beliefs held with certainty and incorrigibility). About his patient, van den Berg writes:

He said he was a student but for many months had not attended courses because he had been unable to go into the streets during the day. The one occasion on which he had compelled himself to do so had stayed in his

memory as a nightmare. He had had the feeling that the houses he passed were about to fall on him. They had seemed grey and decayed. The street had been fearfully wide and empty, and the people he had met had seemed unreal and far away. Even when someone passed him closely, he had had an impression of the distance between them. He had felt immeasurably lonely and increasingly afraid. Fear had compelled him to return to his room, and he would certainly have run if he had not been seized by such palpitations that he could only go step by step.²⁰

Van den Berg proffers a description of how the meaning of the entire world shifts and changes; he illustrates how the world in its entirety becomes saturated with a fearful quality, marking the plenum of things of which the world is composed.

Their many differences notwithstanding, all three examples pivot around questions of madness, meaning and the changes, transformations, and breaks that meanings can undergo in an experience of madness; we witness how the meaning of who I am, the meaning of what are things in the world and, finally, the very meaning of the world become a contentious matter. This takes us to the following question: from a phenomenological perspective, how is it possible for meaning not to occur or perhaps to occur otherwise? From a phenomenological vantage point, how can there be madness?

VI. Madness and Phenomenology

I will begin with the following question: phenomenologically speaking, how can meaning fade away, as most explicitly in Sacks's glove example and less explicitly also in the other two examples? As stated earlier, phenomenologically, meaning is never mere form; what gives something its meaningfulness is its connectedness to the movement of a life. To understand the meaning of an idea, we must understand it in reference to the life in which this idea has been taken up and understood. Meaning is dependent on its articulation not first and foremost by an act of speech, but by an experience; it must be taken up into a movement of lived actualization. Lived experience, in turn, depends on its meaningfulness: an experience that articulates nothing (an experience that has no meaning) falls short of being an experience. To this, there is another side, the side of the world: meaning always has a hold on me because it is not something

that I can simply choose to engage with or not; things in the world beckon me to take them up meaningfully; I depend on them just as they depend on me for their meaningful articulation.

Here, we begin to see the outlines of a possibility of meaninglessness: a meaning that becomes cut off from lived experience, and thus morphs into mere form. We could imagine this to be the case in Sacks's glove scenario. A glove that is not connected to a life is no longer a glove; it is an abstract shape with five outpouchings. Yet how can we conceive of a meaning getting divorced from life? Here, particularly helpful proves Husserl's *Crisis of European Sciences*, in which he deals with the problem of meaning-distortion or what he calls meaning-externalization [*Sinnesveräußerung*].²¹ In the *Crisis*, Husserl's explicit focus is on the issue of meaning-externalization or loss of meaning in the natural sciences, which have forgotten or overcome precisely their connection to subjective life that founded scientific achievement as meaningful. In this vein, he writes:

Actually the process whereby material mathematics is put into formal-logical form, where expanded formal logic is made self-sufficient as pure analysis or theory of manifolds, is perfectly *legitimate*, indeed necessary; the same is true of the technization which from time to time completely loses itself in merely technical thinking. But all this can and must be a method which is understood and practiced in a fully conscious way. It can be this, however, only if care is taken to avoid dangerous shifts of meaning by keeping always immediately in mind the original bestowal of meaning [*Sinngebung*] upon the method, through which it has the sense of achieving knowledge about the *world*. Even more, it must be freed of the character of an *unquestioned tradition*, which, from the first invention of the new idea and method, allowed elements of obscurity to flow into its meaning. (*Crisis*, p. 47)

Yet what Husserl seems to indicate—and this is the thought perhaps most instructive when it comes to meditating on the possibility of meaning-distortion per se—is that such forgetting of meaning (as has occurred most manifestly in the natural sciences) is a human propensity; it is a human tendency because in our life, we rely on previous knowledge-accomplishments: for instance, we rely on philosophical traditions and use them as depositories of thoughts already thought, of problems already solved. In fact, this is how knowledge grows: we do not have to solve problems others have solved all over again, but we can use

solved problems to take them further, to build on them in order to think something new. This is why knowledge, for Husserl, is always a gradual cultural acquisition.

To put this differently, when becoming more determined (more worked out over the course of history), meaning also always becomes sedimented, for instance, in traditions.²² Further meaning-determination goes hand in hand with the threat of meaning-externalization, in so far as meaning becomes separated from its source of vitality, namely, evidence (the experience of something giving itself as what it is). Thus Husserl writes in the *Crisis* (in reference to the scientist, but we can generalize this thought):

What was lacking and what is still lacking, is the actual self-evidence through which he who knows and accomplishes can give himself an account, not only of what he does that is new and what he works with, but also of the implications of meaning which are closed off through sedimentation or traditionalization, i.e., of the constant presuppositions of his [own] constructions, concepts, propositions, theories. Are science and its method not like a machine, reliable in accomplishing obviously very useful things, a machine everyone can learn to operate correctly without in the least understanding the inner possibility and necessity of this sort of accomplishment? (*Crisis*, p. 52)

There is a thick layer of accomplishment—a crust of knowledge, of further and further determinations of meaning—that comes to accrue to things in the world, which we encounter precisely as things that have been thought through by others; these layers of accomplishment come to form part of the meaning of things. Yet, the history of a meaning becomes problematic when it threatens to cut us off from the movement of life, the moment of evidence, which makes a meaning meaningful.

To say that meaning-distortion is a human propensity at play in particular in the technization of the natural sciences and going hand in hand with knowledge acquisition of course leads to the following question: what separates the meaning-distortion of a madman from that of a scientist? One way to answer this is with Husserl who posits that for the scientist, it is possible, in principle, to reconnect a meaning with its lost vitality, for instance, through a historical investigation into the histories of a meaning. And this possibility—of a recovery of the meaning-giving accomplishment at the heart of meaning—seems to be closed off in the case of a mad meaning-distortion.

Earlier, I emphasized that meaning must always bear a two-fold structure: a “subjective” side and an “objective” side. Accordingly, the possibility of meaning-distortion must also possess two sides. If the propensity towards meaning-distortion inheres within the life of the mind, we must not forget to ask about the world: if there is a human tendency towards obfuscation of meaning, then the world must somehow lend itself to this obfuscation. If I can hallucinate about the world, the world must somehow be hallucinable. Madness, in other words, cannot be reduced to mere subjective pathology. But how can we conceive of the potential of the world to be itself something distorted?

This leads me to the second part of this section on a phenomenology of meaning-distortion. Let us recall what we earlier termed the natural attitude, which we said required modification through the phenomenological epoché. Yet, the epoché, it bears emphasizing, does not remove us from the world; it merely modifies our relation to the world. If anything, what we notice after the epoché is the extent to which our experiences are always already worldly, saturated by worldliness. Thus we realize the degree to which we rely on the world as something that is always already given to us (I will provide an example in an instant). However, and this is crucial, the pregivenness of the world and of things in the world does not imply that we are clear about the being of the world. (This unclarity is what necessitated the epoché). On the contrary, the world is a clarity that is always shot through with darkness and uncertainty; the evidence of the world is not that of illumination but pervaded with a certain obscurity that, however, continuously tries to illuminate us. Paradoxically, it is only against this backdrop of darkness or potential meaninglessness, I suggest, that meaning unfolds at all.

Let me try to make myself clearer by providing the following example: After the phenomenological epoché, we see how complicated seeing is. For instance, we begin to differentiate the foreground/background structure, which any perception always involves. Thus, when consciousness is thematically and intuitively aware of an object in the foreground, it is simultaneously aware, although non-thematically and non-intuitively, of the background as well. I see the tree in the garden precisely because I do not see the wall that is behind the tree, or rather, I see the wall in an empty or non-thematic way. Of course, I could turn my attention from the tree to the wall and I would thereby actualize the possibility of seeing the wall. But it is the potential to see the background, which structures and situates

the actual seeing (the foreground). The foreground, which is directly or originally given to me, is situated within a network of empty seeing.²³

Thus what we come to realize is that all experiences bear a horizontal structure: that every experience in which something is given to me is surrounded by a horizon or halo of potential experiences, in which things are given to me “blindly” or non-intuitively (i.e., as not yet originally given to consciousness). More, we become aware that the world is the horizon of all horizons, a horizon, which itself can never be fully present intuitively—which can never be given to us in an evident manner, for the world is inexhaustible experientially.

Yet the necessity of the horizontal structure of experience indicates the following: there is no end to seeing, and no end to knowing. The world is inexhaustible, and in this, it is at the edge of meaning, a kind of meaning before it is meaning, both potentially meaningful and potentially meaning-disrupted (as it lacks any sense of being intuitable, and thus of being available to the kind of experiences that make a meaning meaningful). Therefore, what serves as the foundation of meaning is itself not yet meaningful, only potentially so.

This suggestion is not only phenomenologically troubling, but it also lays the ground for the following thought-experiment: might it not be possible for someone to engage with the pockets of pre-meaning, with meaning before it is meaning, that make up the pattern of the world? Might not madness simply be the realization of the world’s potential for meaning-distortion?

VII. Conclusions

If I have succeeded in arguing for the fruitfulness of connecting an understanding of madness with an understanding of meaning, a crucial question remains that I did not approach in this paper: the very possibility of experiencing another’s madness. This lacuna (brought about by time and space constraints) is especially unfortunate because the question of the possibility of the experience of (any) Other stands at the heart of large parts of Husserl’s writings, especially those on intersubjectivity.²⁴ As Husserl was keenly aware, the question of the experience of the Other is one of the most fundamental questions of phenomenology. This is so because the transcendence of the world, the irreducibility of the world to my experiencing it, which is one of the core tenets of the phenomenological

project, implies the possibility of *all* experiences, including also those of the lives of Others; as transcendent, the world also implies that others can experience it just as I can. Thus it is necessary phenomenologically to elucidate the experience of the Other so as to elucidate the transcendence of the world.

Phenomenologically, the question of intersubjectivity becomes the question of how the Other can draw her sense as Other (as that which I am not) *from* me. How can I constitute a sense in me (that of the Other) that goes so emphatically beyond me? Within the context of a meditation on madness, Husserl's notion of the experience of the Other indicates an interesting and crucial direction for future research: is it the case that the experience of the Other (any Other) as an alterity both other than me and constituted in me is different from the experience of the mad Other? If we continue along the lines of the theme of meaning-distortion, does this signify that the mad Other and I ultimately do not hold a world in common? And if this is so, and if it is the world that we hold in common that enables me to experience the (non-mad) Other, then can I never experience the mad Other? Is mad alterity an alterity that goes beyond phenomenological elucidation?

NOTES

- ¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Madness*, transl. by J. Murphy & J. Khalfa, London: Routledge, 2006 [1961]. Hereafter abbreviated in the body of the text as *HM*, p.
- ² *Op. cit.*
- ³ Husserl's concern with the possibility of meaning-externalization (*Sinnesveräußerung*) finds its most thorough treatment in his late *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. by W. Biemel, The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976. Throughout this paper, I will be quoting from the English edition: E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*; trans. by D. Carr, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970. Hereafter abbreviated in the body of the text as *Crisis*, p.
- ⁴ The horizontal nature of experience (perception, in particular) is a common theme throughout Husserl's writings. It is emphasized in particular in *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, trans. by A. Steinbock, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2001.
- ⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *La théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Paris : Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1930. On the impact of Levinas's *La théorie de l'intuition* on the French philosophical scene, see André Orianne's foreword to the second English edition of the work: E. Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, transl. by A. Orianne, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995, "Translator's Foreword," pp. xxxiii-l. Throughout this paper, I will be quoting from the English edition.
- ⁶ For a more detailed account of Husserl's life and legacy, see, for instance, Dermot Moran, "Edmund Husserl (1859-1938): Life and Writings" in *ibid.*, *Edmund Husserl, Founder of Phenomenology*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, pp. 15-42.
- ⁷ For the relationship between Husserl and Heidegger, I am here drawing primarily on Thomas Sheehan, "Husserl and Heidegger: The Making and Unmaking of a Relationship" in *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger*, ed. and transl. by T. Sheehan and R.E. Palmer, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1997, pp. 1-32.
- ⁸ On the historical and philosophical background of Foucault's *History of Madness*, see Jean Khalfa's "Introduction" in M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, *op. cit.*, pp. xiii-xxvii.
- ⁹ On Foucault's changing relationship to phenomenology, see Todd May, "Foucault's Relation to Phenomenology" in *Cambridge Companion to*

- Foucault, ed. by G. Gutting, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 284-311.
- ¹⁰ The term “discursive events” appears frequently in M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, trans. by A.M.S. Smith, New York: Pantheon Books, 1971 [1969].
- ¹¹ In what follows, I will be relying primarily on the chapter “Experiences of Madness” in M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, *op. cit.*, Part One, Chapter IV, pp. 108-131.
- ¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, “Intentionality: A Fundamental Notion of Husserl’s Phenomenology,” trans. by J. Fehl, in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, no. 2, May 1970, pp. 4-5.
- ¹³ E. Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- ¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. Erstes Buch: Allgemeine Einführung in die reine Phänomenologie*, Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlage, 1913. I am quoting from the English edition: E. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, first book*, transl. by F. Kersten, The Hague: Martin Nijhoff Publishers, 1983, pp. 214ff.
- ¹⁵ Nikolai Gogol, “Diary of a Madman” in *ibid.*, *Diary of a Madman and Other Tales*, transl. by C. Field, London: Sovereign Classic, 2014, pp. 7-24.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹⁷ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, New York: Touchstone, 1970.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁹ Jan Hendrik van den Berg, *A Different Existence: Principles of Phenomenological Psychopathology*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1972.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- ²¹ E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- ²² On the problem of the forgetfulness that pervades the natural sciences, see James Dodd, *Crisis and Reflection. An Essay on Husserl’s Crisis of the European Sciences*, *Phaenomenologica* 175, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004, especially Chapter Three, “Galileo and Modern Science,” pp. 79-108.
- ²³ On the interplay between presence and absence that pervades perception and the horizontal structure of experience, see, for instance, Husserl’s account of perception in E. Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis*, trans. by A. Steinbock, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing, 2001, Part 2, “Division I: Modalization,” pp. 63-105. Two excellent secondary sources on Husserl’s notion of horizon are Saulius Geniusas, *The Origins of the Horizon in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, Contributions to

Phenomenology, Volume 67, Dordrecht: Springer, 2012 and Donn Welton, "Constructions: Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Contexts" in *ibid.*, *The Other Husserl. The Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 331-392.

²⁴ I am referring to the three-volume Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, Husserliana 13-15, ed. by Iso Kern, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973 as well as to Husserl's Fifth Cartesian Meditation in E. Husserl, *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vorträge*, ed. by S. Strasser, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973. For an instructive discussion of the problem of the phenomenological experience of alterity, see Paul Ricoeur's "Husserl's Fifth Meditation" in *ibid.*, *Husserl: An Analysis of his Philosophy*, Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1967, pp. 115-142.

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