Theia Mania: A Diagnosis of Knowledge and Ecstasy

The dialectic of the Phaedrus revolves worshipfully around the subject of erôs, though it also muses philosophically on dichotomies of madness and rationality, knowledge and truth, and the body and soul. My purpose in this essay is to illumine the meaning and function of Plato’s madness, to address conflicts in his framework for categorizing it, and to repurpose several of his claims in order to affirm a series of existential objections to its formulation. I will further demonstrate that his attitudes toward art, truth, and love, in the context of divine knowledge, are deeply misguided. Additionally, I maintain that his appraisal of madness in its various kinds is compromised in theory, and that its application constitutes a systematic and spiritually oppressive censure of the human condition.

This dialogue stands alone among the Platonic canon in that its two characters speak at a rural location outside of Athens, rather than at a larger gathering within the city’s borders. Socrates is the main character in the Phaedrus, and here he plays the role of a competing suitor, seeking the company of an adolescent boy for whom the dialogue is titled. Opposite the venerable philosopher is Phaedrus, a handsome youth of the Athenian aristocracy. Their focus in discussion initially concerns the craft of oratory, and indeed Phaedrus is enamored with a previous mentor after receiving a speech by the famed logographer Lysias, who artfully conveyed that it is preferable for a young man to be physically involved with a companion who is not in love with him rather than one who is possessed by the irrational frenzy of erotic madness.¹

Socrates offers a speech of his own in response to Phaedrus’ acclaim for Lysias, which accepts his assumption that the lover experiences a kind of madness, but it does so glibly. Taken at face value, Socrates’ true position is therefore presented in the latter speech, which constitutes a studious and perhaps soliciting endorsement of erotic madness with the intent of persuading Phaedrus to the philosophical understanding that it is in fact a divine gift which benefits the soul. Declared by Socrates as his “Palinode to Love,” the second speech frames his nuanced view of divine inspiration as a vehicle for true knowledge of transcendent form, preparing a schema of madness and its kinds which is tested in my investigation.

From here I shall enumerate the varieties of divine madness as explained in the *Phaedrus*, which yields an underpinning of the concept at the beginning of his second speech as it is related to *erōs*, accompanied by the insight that it comes in two basic kinds: the god-given, and the human variety. Working from this base distinction, I will interpret Plato’s framework where it concerns the function of the divine in generating art, truth, and meaning.

**A Schematic of Insanity**

Following his distinction separating the dual causes of madness, Socrates enriches our understanding of the divinely inspired sort by providing four categories which represent different ways that it can be not only legitimate in its purpose, but also contributive to society. Also included later in the *Phaedrus* is an account of which gods of the ancient Greek pantheon correspond to each respective mania.

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3 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265a.
4 Plato, *Phaedrus* 244b-245a.
5 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b.
1) The first madness is prophetic in nature, and encompasses the afflictions of seers and oracles, who are “are out of their minds when they perform that fine work of theirs for all of Greece […] but they accomplish little or nothing when they are in control of themselves.”6 The deity responsible for the offering of this mystical content is Apollo.7

2) Our second madness is telestic,8 dealing with the spiritual rites of mystery religions it reconciles the guilty through ritual purification and thereby “finds relief from present hardships for a man it has possessed.”9 This strain of mania is said to result from possession by Dionysus.10

3) Third is poetic madness, which is bestowed through possession by the Muses, and produces inspired feats of language which reflect heavenly knowledge.11 Much like the case of the prophet, the human agent here is regarded as an instrument of the divine.12

4) Plato’s fourth madness occurs when a soul is reminded of true beauty by recognizing its lover, and this is named as “the best and noblest of all the forms that possession by god can take for anyone who has it or is connected to it.”13 The divine influence for this kind is Aphrodite.14

As can be seen above, the emergence of mania for Plato cannot be categorized merely on the basis of behavior or disposition; its constitution is determined by the agent’s internal state and their rapport with the gods.15 One can imagine that madness of human source is similarly

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6 Plato, *Phaedrus* 244b
7 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b
9 Plato, *Phaedrus* 244d-e
10 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b
11 Plato, *Phaedrus* 245a
13 Plato, *Phaedrus* 249d-e.
14 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b
15 Daniel Werner. “Plato on Madness and Philosophy.” 60.
diverse, yet outside the scope of Socrates’ inquiry. The above plurality of manias serves to expand upon the otherwise ambiguous mechanism by which madness can manifest in an individual, offering a specification of its kinds, how they arise, and of what is their function.

**Unpacking Plato’s Division of Madness**

Madness, in all its variety save that of human origin, amounts to something of critical importance for progress and truth in the mind of Socrates. Indeed, he states that mania, when a gift from a deity who possesses the agent or otherwise informs them, is responsible for many things that we might consider excellent.\(^{16}\) However, within the dialogue, Socrates does not explicate how one might distinguish the divine gift of madness from the human curse, except for the insight that humans are the accursed. In terms of human perception, they might appear symptomatically identical.

In no example of madness given by Socrates does he establish meaningful criteria for an uninitiated mortal specify the sort of madness in another. We can infer that the categories are mutually exclusive from Socrates’ dual distinction between divine and human origin, but we have no means of navigation to point us in either direction except by recognizing the consulted form (if any) which is material to that person’s madness.

We, ourselves, are not granted the means of discerning the cause of such mental states even while experiencing them. There is an explicit distinction made, but still the epistemological seams which might serve to contrast our divinely inspired thoughts with those of simple disorder, as they are announced in Socrates’ second speech, are not immediately discernable to us.

\(^{16}\) Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a.
Our reading benefits from observing that divinely inspired madness is presented by
Socrates as a desirable condition, as opposed to the ordinary state of an orderly mind which
enjoys self-control, and he differentiates our facility of intuitive prophecy (mantic) from that of
interpretive, conceptual understanding and its necessarily involved tekhnē:

“To the extent, then, that prophecy, mantic, is more perfect and more admirable than sign-
based prediction, oiōnistic, in both name and achievement, madness (mania) from a god is
finer than self-control of human origin, according to the testimony of the ancient language
givers.”17

This is a very sharply articulated statement of cooperation between the mad and the mystical, but
it is also troubling to evaluate at first glance because we encounter an extension of the same
problem in its approach as before: the nature of information conveyed by madness is that it is
outside the realm of comprehension for the uninitiated (by virtue of their sanity), and thus, for
most people, its divine origin is indecipherable from that of human madness.18

Easily the ramblings of one madman can resemble those of another, and yet one might be
divine and the other human; the sane have no way of knowing with certainty. There is, however,
one criterion implied in Plato’s narrative which I deem useful toward resolving this conflict, and
that is by reconfiguring divine madness as a function of truth, an idea which I shall expand upon
later.

17 Plato, Phaedrus 244d.
18 Plato, Phaedrus 249d. “…ordinary people think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, unaware that he is
possessed by a god.”
Only Four, or are there More?

This epistemological confusion is only the beginning of difficulty for those who seek to evaluate madness in others. Suppose that we do suspend disbelief temporarily, and accept that an individual can be possessed by a deity which has the inclination to possess humans: how are we to know which being it is, or whether it professes to deliver mania which regards truth and form rather than a simpler, less productive mania? My assessment is that we cannot. If we subscribe to the four categories as a complete framework for use in diagnosing a particular madness, we should expect that it be one of four gods who offer exclusive benefits to the mad. The problem with that assumption, however, is that Socrates gives us ample reason to believe that his categories are incomplete.

Here I am referring specifically to his repeated mention of the Nymphs, for whom he claims ritual offerings near the setting of the dialogue have been dedicated.¹⁹ Let us turn our attention to a particularly revealing passage of the Phaedrus from a section within Socrates’ first speech, wherein he pauses after a brief description of erotic madness and speaks informally to his partner before proceeding:

Socrates: There, Phaedrus my friend, don’t you think, as I do, that I’m in the grip of something divine?

Phaedrus: This is certainly an unusual flow of words for you, Socrates.

Socrates: Then be quiet and listen. There’s something really divine about this place, so don’t be surprised if I’m quite taken by the Nymph’s madness as I go on with the speech. I’m on the edge of speaking in dithyrambs as it is.²⁰

Aside from the fact that his initial question in interrupting himself diverts from the opinion raised in this speech (a problem of narrative composition, which remains outside the scope of my

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¹⁹ Plato, Phaedrus 230b.
²⁰ Plato, Phaedrus 238c-d.
investigation), which is intended to echo the sentiment—or lack thereof—put forward by Lysias, Socrates alludes to the possibility that spirits known as Nymphs may be present nearby and cause him to suffer erotic madness. A single, off-hand mention of these local spirits derived from a common superstition of his time, which also contradicts the structure of his argument, might be dismissible in the interest of maintaining cohesion in the reading. But, after the first speech is over, Socrates speaks again on the subject:

Didn’t you notice, my friend, that even though I am criticizing the lover, I have passed beyond lyric into epic poetry? What do you suppose will happen to me if I begin to praise his opposite? Don’t you realize that the Nymphs to whom you so cleverly exposed me will take complete possession of me? So I say instead, in a word, that every shortcoming for which we blamed the lover has its contrary advantage, and the non-lover possesses it. Why make a long speech of it? That’s enough about them both. This way my story will meet the end it deserves, and I will cross the river and leave before you make me do something even worse.  

It would seem that Socrates is genuinely concerned that he may be developing a condition understood within spiritual conventions of antiquity as nympholepsy, a madness which is the result of having been possessed by an entity which is principally sexual in its nature, but also augments the subject in rhetorical tekhnē. And indeed, it would seem that he later becomes convinced that this has transpired as he feared, crediting them as responsible for enhancing his speech and inciting within him feelings of lust.

Socrates is here self-admittedly caught in the throes of a madness whose source he neglects to disclose in parallel with the four given later in the dialogue, and thus it necessitates at least one additional category of madness. We can conclude that his division of madness is not exhaustive. We must consider, therefore, a hypothetical taxonomy of discarnate beings,

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23 Plato, *Phaedrus* 263d.
potentially similarly capable of human possession, who may be as numerous as there are conceptual localities on Earth, and who may additionally provide an array of symptoms which are at least superficially equivalent to those acquired from possession by gods such as Aphrodite. To further capitalize upon this contradiction of the four-madness account that Socrates has offered, we might suggest that the manias conferred by Apollo, Dionysus, and the Muses can also be duplicated by non-affiliated spirits. With the introduction of extracategorical entities, Socrates’ framework of understanding mania begins to unravel, and we must therefore cast doubt on the integrity of his four-part division: it is either cosmically insufficient or, as I will later argue, an overcomplication which might be better if consolidated into a singular phenomenon with multiple features.

**When Madness Bears Fruit: A Crisis of Method**

Important for readers to bear in mind is that Socrates details at length a practical component to his understanding of divine madness in that it can be productive within the context of human discourse. Socrates asserts that the Muses’ madness is requisite in creating genuinely inspired works of poetry: “If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses’ madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds.”

Here Socrates issues the qualifier of exceptional poetry (or, if I may generalize, art) as some measure of madness.

We might consider that, even in the modern, popularized conception of clinical madness as we might identify it within profiles of artists, actors, and musicians, their mania is said to invoke

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a creative energy of tremendous potency which guides them violently toward an apprehension of true form. Thus, Plato’s observation regarding madness in the realm of artistic pursuit has aged well, but where the former is attributed to a hopeful prospect of mental disorders which are understood as resulting in neurochemical imbalances, the Platonic schema supposes that the finer elements are the result of external mediation. The consequence of Socrates’ distinction between human madness and divinely inspired madness is expressed in a section of Li Fan’s thesis on “Madness and Art” which extracts the notion that “The humanly autonomous art is inferior to the art of madness (manikē). Divine madness is superior to secular wisdom, so to speak, by the degree that mantic, the art of madness, is superior to oiônistic, a sane pursuit of expertise (244d2-5). An art (tekhnē) must be perfected by a certain kind of madness.”

Therefore, it is a settled matter for Plato that divinely inspired art is superior to anything possible through tekhnē because it is not the quality of craft that lends it meaning, but rather a glimpse into the forms as they are. This seems to conflict with our modern understanding of mental illness, but more troubling is the implication which devalues our facility of composition. Plato is inarguably a masterful writer; his dialogues are sophisticated in expression and contain layers of meaning that have sparked controversy and analysis for centuries. Perhaps he was inspired by a deity, but the characters in his work, the structure, and thematic organization are the result of laborious tekhnē. There is little doubt that Plato is an expert in his craft. While there is a quality in madness, even as we see it today, which lends itself to creative achievement, Socrates would credit these triumphs of ingenuity to the divine. Does this speak credible truth to experience, or is there value in emancipating the human prerogative from a spiritual authority? I

argue the latter, and further, that the distinction of human and divine madness is not so clear as he supposes, and that mantic revelation cannot effectively replace the refinement of tekhnē.

Beginning with the inception of madness in the individual, there emerges a task of relating to others the fundamental truths of heavenly entities which have conspired to supplement their spiritual being. Of course, one cannot simply project this information directly into the minds and hearts of their peers; rather, it must be rendered through a medium such as color and shape, sound, language, etc. This capability is a subtle but profound method of transmission which sets human consciousness apart from other organisms and guarantees that we are communicating in ideas that are basically compatible. Thus, an exegesis of the mad agent is at least in formula comprehensible to the sober, who can see, hear, or speak their language. Without this talent for the crafts of language, music, and art, no truth could be represented which is not apparent to simpler creatures. Plato supposes that tekhnē without divine inspiration is impotent, but I counter that divine inspiration without tekhnē is confined to solitary contemplation.

**A Redemption of Human Talent**

Where the fruits of madness are laid bare for rational minds to perceive and understand, there is *not* a requirement that they recall a heavenly vision in order to do so. Presumably, it is possible to formulate an opinion about a divinely inspired work without necessarily grasping its corresponding true form, and furthermore, there is no rule given which states that one cannot employ philosophical inquiry to synthesize another object of true knowledge. A motivated person could memorize verbatim Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* from start to finish and appropriate its method toward the construction of a new ideology; this is not because they have failed to grasp a truth in the text, but because they pursue another which can only be achieved
through a revolution in their perception of its content. If we presuppose that only the divinely inspired work is true, we negate the dialectical synthesis of new knowledge through derivative work and revised understanding. Madness reveals truth, truth begets art, and art conveys knowledge, but only through the exercise of *tekhnē* is this permitted. Though a work of inspiration, understood properly, may lead back to something for which divine madness is responsible, it is a vitally human process which makes its philosophy intelligible.

Perhaps Socrates has been privy to divine truth during his life, but it is he who constructs a speech about it, rather than a god using his tongue; and it is Phaedrus who receives and understands it. Our *tekhnē* allows us to convey information both personal and universal to establish authentic meaning that is driven by human understanding, without which we would be islands. Meaning, as it congeals within the human mind, cannot be the sole providence of divine powers, for this notion violates our very subjectivity. We are not helpless to receive alien wisdom when it comes to truth, nor are we bound to approach it with uncritical reverence. Rather, we are *responsible* for its representation, for we are the ones who inevitably speak it to one another and to ourselves.

**Truth as Experience: An Object of Mortal life**

Through the duration of this essay there is a common theme which appears at a distance to be a casual mentioning of truth as present in various objects: true forms, true knowledge, divine truth, etc. As a concept, the correlations of truth to Platonic madness are thoughtfully investigated in a Foucaultian treatment by Théo Lepage-Richer. I find that, in every extraction of

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28 Certainly, it can be described as an obsession seen throughout Plato’s philosophy as given in the *Phaedrus.*
meaning from Plato’s narrative, there is the contaminant of truth; but to clarify, there is no casual basis for regarding its subjects. Instead, its deliberate invocation provides an integral context to the privileged relationship between humans and the divine.29

The guidance of truth may be interpreted metaphorically, and truth in madness might be objectified as a force actively determining the spiritual progress of the mad, but there is a rival interpretation with evidence to suggest that it should be read as a foreign entity whose presence in the life of the afflicted is defined in terms of a negativistic role in that it is conveyed through the wisdom of an entity which instructs the agent specifically what not to do. Both Nussbaum and Lepage-Richer share in the observation that Socrates’ daimon represents a manifestation of truth which informs him of his obligation to uphold the sanctity of divine beings but does not coerce him to act upon it.30

In the Phaedrus, this happens after his first speech, prompting him to correct himself by presenting his palinode:

My friend, just as I was about to cross the river, the familiar divine sign came to me which, whenever it occurs, holds me back from something I am about to do. I thought I heard a voice coming from this very spot, forbidding me to leave until I made atonement for some offense against the gods. In effect, you see, I am a seer, and though I am not particularly good at it, still—like people who are just barely able to read and write—I am good enough for my own purposes. I recognize my offense clearly now. In fact, the soul too, my friend, is itself a sort of seer; that’s why, almost from the beginning of my speech, I was disturbed by a very uneasy feeling, as Ibycus puts it, that “for offending the gods I am honored by men.” But now I understand exactly what my offense has been.32

In this passage, Socrates proclaims that he has received the insight of his daimon, and yet he is able to either act upon it or not, in either case with autonomy. Socrates’ purpose in dispatching a second speech which praises divine madness is explicitly stated as a rite of purification to

32 Plato, Phaedrus 242b-d.
redeem himself after having shared the essay in falsehood that was his first speech.\textsuperscript{33} Crucial to recognize, however, is that while it is professed that he became aware of his speech’s erroneous content by supernatural means, Socrates repents of his own free will through the Palinode.\textsuperscript{34} Here he is acting as a self-directed, rational agent when he resolves to issue a rightful testimony of the divine. Rather than a category applied to knowledge or forms which are beheld by the mad philosopher, Plato’s truth is better understood as an existential commitment which governs their soul teleologically and leaves the agent to pursue its representation freely.\textsuperscript{35}

While I previously endeavored to subvert Socrates’ division of madness into several kinds, I will now consolidate them in element: there is but one divine madness, and that is the inculcation of truth in human life. Woven as threads designed to be pulled until the garment’s wearer is utterly nude, truth is wielded covertly through the given modalities of prophecy, ritual, art, and love in the manner which agrees most perfectly with its subject.\textsuperscript{36}

The experience of truth, recognized as such through knowledge of transcendental form, is mediated through the initiation of madness, which operates cognitively as a de facto authorization for the agent. His or her proximity to that truth, in understanding, is the sole qualifier which distinguishes divine madness from human disorder. The spirit is perhaps divine in substance, but the consciousness which extracts its meaning is the enterprise of a mortal being. There is not a complete loss of agency in the maniacal situation; in all madness is contained a radically indebted potency of uniquely human authorship.

\textsuperscript{33} Plato, \textit{Phaedrus} 243a.
\textsuperscript{34} Plato, \textit{Phaedrus} 243b.
\textsuperscript{35} Théo Lepage-Richer. “If Madness Could Speak.” 95.
\textsuperscript{36} Théo Lepage-Richer. “If Madness Could Speak.” 94.
The Solipsistic Soul and its Narcissistic Accessory

As we have identified among the myriad manias, Plato regards erotic madness, that which is conferred by Aphrodite, to be the highest madness of which we are capable. In a healthy, romantic relationship which is guided by temperance and wisdom, this madness arouses in the subject a fleeting glimpse of the form of beauty that once delighted their soul in its superheavenly vision prior to incarnation. The beloved, then, serves to remind them of the form of beauty, and provides a means for the soul’s self-realization. To fall in love is beneficial to oneself, and its side-effect is to the benefit for the beloved, for the philosophical lover cares for and nourishes his or her beloved on the basis that they evoke memory of the divine.

Socrates does not entirely neglect the perspective of the beloved, but he describes a process of courtship in which they are fated to recognize that the lover, who is inspired by a god, can offer them a uniquely beneficial arrangement wherein the lover is reminded of beauty and they, the beloved, in turn, are provided with his or her inspired wisdom. Socrates goes on to illustrate the panorama of confusion and desire present in the subject of the lover under these circumstances which, with proper nurturing from the lover, coalesce into a deeper appreciation for their relationship, through which they acquire the benefits of love in a joining which appears to be mutually interdependent:

“They boy is in love, but has no idea what he loves. He does not understand, and cannot explain, what has happened to him. It is as if he had caught an eye disease from someone else, but could not identify the cause; he does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror. So when the lover is near, the boy’s pain is relieved just as the lover’s is, and when they are apart he yearns as much as he is yearned for, because he has a mirror image of love in him—‘backlove’—though he neither speaks nor thinks of it as love, but as friendship. Still, his desire is nearly the same as the lover’s,

37 Plato, *Phaedrus* 265b.
38 Plato, *Phaedrus* 249d-e.
though weaker: he wants to see, touch, kiss, and lie down with him; and of course, as you might expect, he acts on these desires soon after they occur.” 40

Though the preferred outcome for this relationship is to the betterment of both parties, Socrates elaborates that this isn’t always the case: a soul which was under a volatile persuasion during its time in the heavens might become jealous, even spurned to acts of violence and sacrifice. 41

Crucial to my forthcoming argument is the observation that Socrates outlines the involvement of a lover with their beloved in terms of a philosophical superior and their subordinate, which I term ‘the accessory’ because their function, for the lover, is to provide access to the form of beauty which satiates “their driving need to gaze at the god.” 42

The relationship between lover and beloved is, for Plato, essentially a sort of spiritual transaction which is ideally mutually beneficial but not always. Cultivating a lover as an effigy of heavenly beauty 43 is the representational project of infatuated narcissism, a category from which the mad philosopher is not exempt 44 by virtue of his or her recollection of forms; on the contrary, they are immersed within it even moreso than their beloved, as the unsuspecting latter at least directs their attention toward the representation of beauty, instead of seeing them as an exponent for their own spiritual advancement.

Platonic love is not an authentic or divine substance, it is a resource extracted from an objectified devotee. The philosopher who remembers beauty through beholding a beautiful boy is an egomaniacal lover who methodically supplements his or her being with a marriage of logos and sexual power to the affect of producing delusions of privileged understanding through the exploitation of a subordinate party, one possible implication being that he initiates the beloved

40 Plato, Phaedrus 255d-e.
41 Plato, Phaedrus 252c.
42 Plato, Phaedrus 253a.
43 Plato, Phaedrus 252e.
into an exclusive philosophical cult which regards them as an accessory for *gnosis*. Socrates’ lover pursuing their beloved amounts to an inward and narcissistic gesture that cannot be said to resemble a genuine human connection.

**Toward A Purposeful Madness**

The sum of my efforts has been to challenge and later modify Plato’s understanding of madness which is presented in the *Phaedrus*, and along the way I have investigated flaws at the heart of his conceiving the human experiences of art, truth, and love. At every opportunity, he seeks to praise the achievements of inspired humans as allowances of the divine, granted upon individuals of rare and arbitrary selection. The nature of the relationship between mortals and gods, as Socrates reports it, is complex and at times incoherent, yet my assertions are intended to demonstrate a contrary interpretation to his condemning of humanity: that the human quality in his ascent of the soul cannot be ignored, and in fact, it is the supremely neglected institution which deserves his singular approval.

In the above essay, I asserted that the fruits of madness by necessity involve a sophistication of *tekhnē* and therefore require some measure of human ingenuity, in addition to divine inspiration, for their production. I also concluded that truth leaves to its subject an essential freedom through which to regulate themselves in the pursuit of meaning, arriving therefore at a tangled intersection of ecstasy and *sōphrosunē*. I submitted a critique of his mistreatment of romantic love, predicated on the insight that no such connection manifests between two people for Plato, and that it is instead an exchange of intangible goods. Finally, in addressing his divine madness with the intent of performing a secular revision, we achieve a reading which commits to the liberation of the spirit from the prison of Socrates’ naïve piety.
Bibliography


