

Psychosis as a Transformation of the Flesh: Some Merleau-Pontian Musings on Madness

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Abstract. Psychosis is often understood in one of two ways: as a breakdown of cognitive circuitry, which has nothing to teach us as far as phenomenology is concerned and that can be treated only by focusing on the underlying causal processes that bring it about (reductionism and the ‘madness-as-nonsense’ view), or, alternatively, as a different interpretation of reality, one with nothing distinctly pathological about it (relativism). In this paper, I outline a different approach, drawing largely on Merleau-Ponty’s work, which aims to encompass both the properly unintelligible (pathological) and intelligible (expressive, phenomenologically informative) aspects of psychosis. By applying Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of expression to the problem of psychosis and psychotic language, the latter can be understood as an *attempt* at expression – a kind of *speech without language* that is most often incomplete, but that *can* under specific circumstances be made intelligible to others, often to significant therapeutic benefit. The present paper thus aims to complement and conceptually elucidate recent work in phenomenological psychiatry, which has demonstrated the clinical significance of enabling patients to express various aspects of their psychotic episodes.

Key Words: psychosis, phenomenology, philosophy of psychiatry, Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology of language

Psihoza kot preobrazba mesa: merleau-pontyjevska refleksija o blaznosti

Povzetek. Psihozo se pogosto razume na dva načina: bodisi kot kognitivno »okvaro«, ki ni dovzetna za fenomenološko analizo in ki jo lahko obravnavamo samo na ravni kavzalnih procesov, ki jo povzročajo (redukcionizem, »norost kot nesmisel«), ali pa zgolj kot drugačno interpretacijo realnosti, v kateri ni ničesar patološkega (relativizem). V tem prispevku predstavim drugačen pristop k psihozi, ki se povečini

opira na Merleau-Pontyjevo fenomenologijo in si prizadeva upoštevati tako dejansko neinteligibilne (patološke) kot inteligibilne (ekspresivne, fenomenološko informativne) vidike psihoze. Skozi prizmo Merleau-Pontyjeve analize izražanja predstavim problem psihotičnega izražanja kot neke vrste »govor brez jezika«, ki je najpogosteje zelo pomanjkljiv, a ga je mogoče v določenih okoliščinah narediti razumljivega za druge, kar pogosto prinaša pomembne terapevtske učinke. Namen pričujočega prispevka je tako razširiti in konceptualno podpreti novejšo raziskave na področju fenomenološke psihiatrije, ki so pokazale klinični pomen omogočanja bolnikom s psihozo, da izrazijo in osmislijo različne vidike svojih izkustev.

Ključne besede: psihoza, fenomenologija, filozofija psihiatrije, Merleau-Ponty, fenomenologija jezika

Introduction

Madness is rife with paradoxicality.¹ From hallucinations of things that both are and are not there to thoughts that both are and are not one's own, the casual disregard that madness shows for such matters as logical axioms and coherence of thought have often relegated it to the realm of the utterly unintelligible. To make matters yet more perplexing, even this status of madness itself has something paradoxical about it, for madness has throughout history been both praised and made sacred as *theia mania* and shunned to the dishonourable and untouchable outskirts of society (nowadays, of course, it is rather the isolation cell, conveniently hidden from view, where the attempt is made to *fix* it with pharmacological means, irrespective of any collateral damage to the mental life of the person thus afflicted – sometimes calling to mind the way one would *fix* a microscopic sample by replacing the water inside hitherto living cells with conveniently static resin). It is no surprise, then, that contemporary philosophical literature abounds with many mutually incompatible and radically different accounts of madness, which cover its phenomenology (e.g. Kusters 2020; Fuchs 2024; Gipps 2022), neurobiology (e.g. Sumiyoshi

¹ I am following Kusters (2020, xv–xvi) in using the terms *madness* and *psychosis* interchangeably to designate what is nowadays more commonly described by the many neatly classified terms under the umbrella of Schizophrenia Spectrum Disorders (SSD). While the medical and psychological classification of these disorders is invaluable in its own domain, uncritically transferring it to philosophy would be more likely to give us a false sense of understanding the phenomena at hand, outweighing any potential positive effect of such jargon.

et al. 2024), and the status, role, and legitimacy of psychiatry (e.g. Garson 2022).

The phenomenology of madness will be the primary focus of the present paper, though the arguments presented here will have significant implications for the philosophy of psychiatry. More specifically, I will be addressing the question of what it is that is affected in the prototypical examples of madness, namely those involving delusion, formal thought disorder and hallucinations, along with a host of other positive and negative symptoms. I will begin by presenting and then criticizing the ‘alternative framework’ view, according to which psychosis consists in the assuming of different logical schemes to those accepted by the majority in a given society, such that the content of delusional experience and expression would still make sense for the psychotic, while its unintelligibility to us would merely be the result of the fact that we are living in different worlds, so to speak. While the sharp rejection of this view would seem to leave us with no choice but to forgo any attempt to understand or learn anything from the psychotic (thus making phenomenological psychiatry a rather hopeless enterprise), I will attempt to show in the second section that there is a promising avenue for the phenomenology of psychosis that draws mainly on Merleau-Ponty’s work, namely his understanding of the structures of meaning, thought and consciousness developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) and the posthumously published *Visible and the Invisible* (1968). By making use of his notions of the *flesh* and the *invisible* as enactive replacements for the conventional representationalist framework, we can fruitfully describe some paradoxical aspects of madness without reducing them to something that is merely a superficial modification of non-psychotic experience (i.e. without giving up the sense in which they are beyond understanding in the way argued for by Jaspers (1963, 363)). Finally, in the third section I will sketch out a Merleau-Pontian approach to the problem of psychotic language, drawing on his differentiation between *speaking speech* and *spoken speech* developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Prose of the World* (1973), and *Signs* (1964).

Worlds Apart: Madness as an Alternative Logical Scheme

It seems very natural to describe the prototypical aspects of psychosis – delusion, loss of reality contact, and hallucination – by saying that ‘a new world has come into being’ for the psychotic patient (Jaspers 1963, 284). But what, precisely, does this mean? One straightforward way of under-

standing it would be to claim that the paradoxicality of madness results from the patient's taking up of a different logical framework from the one employed by non-psychotic subjects. Thus, while we typically come to conclusions regarding relations of identity and causality based upon a clear demarcation between logical subjects and predicates (from 'All men are mortal' and 'Socrates is a man,' we conclude that 'Socrates is mortal,' not 'All men are Socrates'), the psychotic subject alters the grounds on which such judgements can be made, such that a phonetic resemblance, for instance, is likewise a valid reason to posit an essential connection between different concepts. As Kusters (2020, 225) puts it:

The words float in the air like fluttering leaves. With no contextual footing, there's no reason not to connect Bonaparte with blownapart. Nokia becomes associated with 'no key.' [...] Language becomes a seductive game of building blocks, for who is able to hold back the torrent of expanding forms, and on what grounds? There's no dictionary or grammar, and no other authority that can lay down the law for us. All grammars, all words, are convention, and it's conventions that we've dispensed with.

There is thus no question that language functions differently in psychosis – which is a topic that I will return to later on – but the view under consideration here, which I will call 'relativism' (following Gipps 2022, 191), is more specific, namely that this change consists in a different logical structure of thought that, while containing axioms that we might find un-intuitive, is nevertheless as valid as any other, especially given the fact that our own rationality is likewise grounded in a bedrock of rationally unjustifiable certainties.² This view aims to offer destigmatising recognition to the psychotic patient, but it does so at no small conceptual cost. Leaving aside the fact that it would completely undermine psychiatry and the grounds for any (self-)ascription of psychosis (hence 'relativism'), there are two important reasons why it fails to do justice to the structures of thought and experience, whether psychotic or not.

First, as Gipps (2022, 192–194) has pointed out, it is not at all clear that it is even coherent to claim that psychiatrist and patient could have truly

² Gipps (2022, 204) suggests that Kusters (2020) holds something approximating this view, but I find this reading implausible. I would argue instead that Kusters remains largely neutral regarding this question, and that he can likewise be read in a way that is in accordance with the Merleau-Pontian view presented in the next section (e.g. Kusters 2020, 123–124, 252).

incommensurable logical schemes. If we say, for example, that the patient comes to conclusions regarding similarity based on phonetic resemblance rather than essential properties, we have to know that both patient and psychiatrist share the *same* understanding of such matters as ‘similarity,’ ‘essential properties,’ ‘identity,’ etc., which is tantamount to reducing the patient’s putatively radically different logical scheme to that of the psychiatrist (the only alternative being that no communication is in fact possible between patient and psychiatrist). Moreover, it is hard to see how we could even know anything about our *own* logical scheme, let alone alternative ones, since ‘to have such a scheme just is for one’s thought to be constrained by it’ (p. 193), making the attempt to grasp it by somehow stepping *outside* of it completely impossible.

To this Wittgensteinian difficulty we can add a second, more phenomenological and Merleau-Pontian one. To talk of logical schemes in this way is to understand language as fundamentally a system of propositions aimed at representing the world (typically paired with a notion of thought as an ‘inner’ system of propositions, which must then be ‘translated’ into language), but this is a phenomenologically naïve account of the genesis and role of language. As Merleau-Ponty argued in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, both crucial relations in play here – namely that between thought and its expression on the one hand and that between expression and meaning on the other – are misconstrued on such a view. Rather than both being external relations, such that words would be merely arbitrary designations that thought is translated into, he argues that both are *internal*: speech is thus not a translation of thought but its *accomplishment*, and the meaning of words does not pick out logical objects in a kind of free-floating space of possible representations (which would make phonetic resemblance as a marker of essential similarity in psychosis wholly unintelligible), but rather derives from an affective *gestural signification* that precedes and grounds fully fledged conceptual systems (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 182–185; Romdenh-Romluc 2011, 186–188; Lewis 1966). The upshot of this is that language is an essentially embodied activity, grounded not in a logical scheme but in the subject’s lived body and its coupling with the environment. Phrased in a way that is very similar to the Wittgensteinian point above: ‘expression is not one of the curiosities that the mind may propose to examine, but the mind’s existence as act’ (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 79, translation modified).

If the notion of alternative logical schemes – and with it, the view according to which paradoxical mad thought is merely a different (but

equally valid) conceptual system – is thus shown to be unjustified, we seem to be left with no choice but to conclude that the paradoxical expressions in psychosis do not constitute any form of thought at all. They are instead only examples of *ersatz* thought, a consequence of the mind's 'short-circuit' (Gipps 2022, 93), neither true nor false, but completely unintelligible. A similar point can be made regarding the status of hallucinations and delusions, namely that they are not forms of perception and belief, but merely illegitimate pretenders to those titles (pp. 57–59, 140–144). Being thus exiled from the realm of the rationally intelligible, such phenomena can only be understood in psychological or motivational terms, i.e. as an escape from an unbearable emotional predicament. In other words, psychosis is not a coherent alternative form of thought and experience, but merely a short-circuit into which the psychotic subject retreats when he or she is unable to cope with the realities of life.

The consequence of this, then, is that we have nothing to learn *from* psychosis (i.e. from first-person accounts and phenomenological investigations into the structure of psychotic experience); the only knowledge that can relate to it is wholly from the outside, namely in the form of a motivational understanding of the circumstances which bring it about. Epistemically speaking, everything functions almost as if psychosis were a nonconscious physiological state: we may inquire into its causes and learn how to treat it (not necessarily by pharmacological means), but there is nothing fruitful to be gained by listening to what the psychotic patient has to say, other than perhaps to learn something about the triggers which brought about that particular episode, but this is, once again, not learning about psychosis itself but only about matters causally related to it.³

While the relativist view goes too far in the direction of reducing psychotic experience to our own, this alternative 'madness-as-nonsense' account throws the phenomenological baby out with the delusional bathwater by negating any possibility of learning about structures of experience from psychosis. Such an approach risks making psychosis into too much of an 'all or nothing' affair, ignoring less pronounced phenomeno-

³ I should highlight that I do *not* take this to be Gipps' (2022) view, although he can at least partly be read in this vein. In fact, I am not sure to what extent (if at all) the ideas developed in the following section are incompatible with his account, except perhaps for the fact that my approach to phenomenology is at least partly explanatory rather than purely expressive (pp. 106–111).

logical changes that have been shown to occur in the prodromal stage of schizophrenia (Parnas et al. 2005; Parnas et al. 2016), as well as features of experience that are common to both psychotic and non-pathological states. Furthermore, there is ample precedent in the phenomenological literature of using pathological alterations of the structure of experience to elucidate distinctions and functions which would otherwise be harder to shed light on in non-pathological experience; it should suffice to point out the famous example of Schneider, of whose symptoms Merleau-Ponty made ample use in describing such matters as the ‘categorical attitude’ and the *Greifen/Zeigen* distinction (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 123–127 passim). Partial (but very real) unintelligibility, which was certainly characteristic of Schneider’s case, thus does not have to be an obstacle to phenomenological understanding.⁴ What would be necessary, however, is a different way of fleshing out the structures in question, one that is free from the representationalist presuppositions that characterise much of the literature and lead us inevitably into either the untenable relativist view or the equally unappealing biomedical model (e.g. Gipps 2022, 92).

Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology of the Flesh

As a segue into a Merleau-Pontian approach, we should note one further difficulty with the views presented above, namely that both leave the connection between madness and philosophy – noted since antiquity and powerfully presented recently by Kusters (2020) – wholly unexplained. While the relativist model could at least be read in such a way that both madness and philosophy would represent similar shifts in one’s logical scheme, it would still leave completely open the question of why those shifts should in any way resemble one another (though even explaining that would not help much given the model’s incoherence, of course). As for the alternative, madness-as-nonsense, account, any connection here would have to be completely arbitrary. Thus, while racking one’s brains over Husserl’s account of time-consciousness could have something to do with the onset of psychosis (e.g. Kusters 2020, 243–255), that would only be due to the (pre)psychotic subject’s frustration with the matter, playing nothing more than the same motivational role that could likewise be

⁴ It is interesting to note in passing that some of Schneider’s symptoms closely resemble those of schizophrenia (e.g. his context-insensitive understanding of stories; see Merleau-Ponty 2012, 126–128). As for the aetiology of his symptoms being due to shrapnel rather than primary psychosis, this matter is irrelevant for the purposes of phenomenology.

taken up by, say, exceptionally pronounced dissatisfaction with the outcome of a particular football match.

If there is to be any kind of connection between madness as the unrestrained ‘passion for infinity’ (Kusters 2020, xxii) and philosophy as a restrained form of that same passion – in other words, if it makes sense to understand madness as ‘cogitating your head off’ (p. 37) – then this connection must be made intelligible from *within* psychosis, leaving us no alternative other than to boldly step into the epistemically perilous terrain of trying to understand how the structures of experience become altered in madness. Given the untenable representationalist presuppositions of any talk of logical (or conceptual) schemes, which could hardly do justice to radical changes in experience anyway, I propose that a fruitful avenue would be to make use of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the *flesh* and the *invisible*, developed in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). I will not be focusing here on his much better-known *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) for two reasons: because its better-known status means that much of the work, in any case compatible and complementary with what will be presented here, has already been done (e.g. Kusters 2020; Fuchs 2013), and because I believe that his later and often ignored work can yet shed new light on some otherwise unintelligible aspects of psychotic experience.⁵

To begin, we need to get a grip on what Merleau-Ponty means by these mysterious-sounding notions. Inevitably risking oversimplification for the sake of brevity, *the invisible* can be understood as his account of *ideality*, but an ideality that is ‘not a set of principles or laws, but rather a system of levels posited in the sensible field by our body in its primal assuming of position before the tasks of the world’ (Lingis 1968, li). This immanent perceptual logic, prefigured in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, is termed the invisible because it is not something *that* we see, but rather that *by which* we see and which is moreover not understood dualistically as something wholly apart from the visible; instead, the visible and the invisible are ‘the obverse and the reverse of one another’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 152) – they are continuously (and can only exist as) intertwined with one another. The flesh, on the other hand, is the lived body *qua* visible seer, audible hearer etc. – it expresses the inextricably Janus-faced nature

⁵ While Merleau-Ponty’s work is primarily situated within the phenomenological tradition, it draws on a very wide range of authors, including Gestalt theorists and structuralists. For a thorough overview of his relationship with structuralism, which is particularly relevant to his understanding of language, see Schmidt (1985, 102–167).

of mindedness, which gives us access to a world only because we ourselves are enmeshed in it (p. 152).⁶

The relevance of these concepts for the phenomenology of psychosis lies, among other reasons, in the fact that they allow us to unify some seemingly paradoxical symptoms as alterations of the same structure. A prime example would be the oft-referenced dual movement of an ‘objectivization’ of thoughts and ‘subjectivization’ of perception: ‘Mad thoughts, unlike normal thoughts, are “visible”. The perceptible outside world is “thought” or “invented” by the psychotic. That is to say, what normal people regard as a shared outside world is, in the experience of the psychotic, a manifestation of his “private thinking”’ (Kusters 2020, 80). If we understand this literally, as two distinct changes, whereby thoughts are somehow experienced similarly to external objects, while the latter are assimilated to the status of thoughts, it becomes exceedingly difficult to make sense of why this would be an apt description without referencing a questionable epistemology that understands the mind as populated by sundry ‘inner entities’ or, alternatively, taking this sort of expression so loosely that it loses all meaning (Gipps 2022, 54). Here we would do much better by focusing not on discrete perceptions and thoughts as two distinct classes of putative inner entities, but rather on the flesh as the *chiasm* where the subject-object structure itself emerges (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 146). On this reading, it becomes much clearer why a loss of the ‘natal bond’ of perceptual faith – elaborated almost universally as a movement of ‘withdrawal from the world’ characteristic of schizophrenia (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 32–36; Parnas et al. 2005) – would bring with it a change that can be described as an ‘objectivization’ of thought. For, if all thought is essentially *expression* – drawing on an ideality that does not float free in a self-enclosed conceptual universe, but rather pervades the visible itself – then the loss of ‘solidity’ on part of the perceived world will necessarily have as its reverse side an ossification of expression, one that can aptly be described as objectivization. In other words: it is not that a change to the structure of perception *causes* a correlative shift in thought, but rather that the very differentiation of the two, as two sides of the same flesh (one accessible only to me, the other implicating other subjects) is compromised.

It is here that the relationship between madness and philosophy becomes more than an arbitrary one of motivation. If philosophical (and

⁶ An exceptionally good introduction to the concept of the flesh, though in a different context (namely a phenomenological critique of panpsychism), can be found in Bitbol (2016).

especially phenomenological) reflection involves a sort of ‘loosening’ of the intentional threads that bind us to the world of perceived things (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxvii), then psychosis consists in their *undoing* – not, to be sure, a complete *rupture* that would leave a worldless subject cut off in a putatively private world, but rather a dedifferentiation of the structure that gives rise to both perceiver and perceived.

Similarly, the nature of delusion can be reconnected with the most fundamental structures of our embodied being-in-the-world through the notion of the invisible. What we are dealing with here is not a sphere of ideality completely cut off from embodiment – an arbitrary ‘logical scheme’ that can be replaced by an alternative one – but rather ‘an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions’ (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 152). On this view, systems of logical propositions, geometrical relations and the like (which form the content of delusions), are grounded in embodied perception: “‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things’ (p. 152). If this is the case, then we should expect full-blown delusions to be preceded by changes in the subject’s experience of these fundamental axes of perception, which is precisely what we find in madness (Kusters 2020, 129):

In normal life, our minds are deeply rooted in a foundation of common past experiences and shared meanings. In psychosis, this depth is replaced by an ecstatic, blistering, endlessly deep superficiality. There is no longer any normal depth, any normal perspective, either in time or in space. Everything is equally close or far away. The feeling of familiarity in a known space disappears. Without depth, there is no anchoring. Without the difference between foreground and background, there is no foundation.

The shift from ‘normal life’ to psychosis is thus couched in *perceptual*, rather than cognitive, terms. Indeed, even when fully fledged, delusions are described not as logical schemes, but rather as the ‘earthly, fragmented exterior of sublime inspiration or enchantment’ (Kusters 2020, 578) – an enchantment that is at the very heart of one’s bond to the world, that is, *in the flesh*.

The Language and Experience of Paradox

One question, vital to the validity of the whole undertaking of the present paper, remains unaddressed: what do we make of the paradoxicality of

mad *language*, and how can we base any claims on the phenomenology of psychosis based on such paradoxical speech? A seemingly straightforward hermeneutic approach is to understand psychotic language as *metaphorical* in nature, but this has been heavily criticized recently (e.g. Gipps 2022, 167–173).

In brief, the difficulty here is the following: metaphor requires that the subject making it understands the difference between its two terms (the *tenor* or *target*, to which the properties borrowed from the *vehicle* or *source* are applied), which implies an understanding of its metaphorical as opposed to literal meaning, and it also requires that the content of the metaphor be such that it can be *understood*, i.e. that the metaphor is *apt*. Neither of these requirements is fulfilled in the case of mad language; while we can understand why it is apt to say that the world is a stage (and Shakespeare surely knew that it is not *literally* a stage in a theatre), we cannot make any analogous sense of the free-associating ‘crisscross connections,’ linking such things as a cup of tea, political debates, and hardware stores, that pour out in bursts in the language of madness (e.g. Kusters 2020, 221).

The metaphorical reading thus breaks down, not just because mad would-be metaphors are not apt or intelligible to others, but because the very distinction between the literal and the metaphorical (as a precondition for the latter) simply is not present in psychotic language. This in itself is not too contentious – indeed, those who have undergone psychotic episodes themselves often claim that metaphor misses the mark (Kusters 2020, 221–223) – but the question then becomes where this negative conclusion leaves us. One claim would be that the psychotic subject has somehow *transcended* metaphor (if not language in its entirety), but this is taken by some authors to be an example of the *pre/trans fallacy*, i.e. the unwarranted conclusion that, just because X is not present in a particular state, X must have been transcended in that case. An alternative, which Gipps (2022, 172) takes to be more convincing, is that psychotic language is *pre*-metaphorical: it lacks the conditions for metaphor to even arise, let alone for it to be transcended. What this view misses, however, is that the *pre* side of the *pre/trans fallacy* is just as problematic and potentially even more misleading: while we cannot claim without further justification that the psychotic subject has transcended metaphor, it is even less plausible to claim that he or she – say, up to that point a fully-functioning adult with a perfect grasp of language – has suddenly become in this respect indistinguishable from a toddler that has not yet

learned what metaphors are.⁷ If the pre/trans fallacy thus cuts both ways, we might do better to look elsewhere for a grasp of mad language.

A promising conceptual candidate here is another one of Merleau-Ponty's analyses, this time one developed primarily in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, namely the distinction between secondary or *spoken speech* (*parole parlée*) and primary or *speaking speech* (*parole parlante*), which is Merleau-Ponty's (2012, 202; 1973, 13) rendering of the distinction between *language* and *speech*.⁸ Briefly put, spoken speech refers to the linguistic and cultural world of already sedimented significations (pp. 202–203), i.e. the kind of language that one would find condensed into a dictionary. This type of language cannot be the whole story, however, since constituted meanings must have come to be constituted somehow, namely through speaking speech, where 'the meaningful intention is in a nascent state,' giving rise to new significations and transforming the meaning of already established linguistic signs (pp. 202–203). While speaking speech is perhaps most evident in poetry and literature, it is active even in the most ordinary of everyday conversations, for all expression necessarily entails the '*surpassing of the signifying by the signified* which it is the very virtue of the signifying to make possible' (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 90, emphasis added). Language thus presupposes speech, but might it not be possible to understand some forms of mad language as forms of nascent expression that cannot be sedimented into stable significations due to the particularities of the experience in which they take shape – in other words, as *speech without language*?

To see what this strange designation would mean, it would be informative to consider the parallel with a different (but just as paradoxical) sort of discourse, namely that of mysticism,⁹ focusing here more specifically on the well-known example of Zen Buddhism. In the classical texts of

⁷ Merleau-Ponty (1968, 203–204) makes a similar point when discussing Piaget.

⁸ It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty uses three terminological distinctions, namely that between spoken speech and speaking speech, between secondary and primary speech, and, finally, between language and speech. All three are equivalent (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 13) and strongly influenced by Saussure's (1997, 91) seminal work on the distinction between language and speech. For an overview of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's analysis of language diverges from Saussure's – an important topic that nevertheless falls outside of the scope of the present paper – see Lewis (1966, 37–40).

⁹ I use the term 'mysticism' to designate a particular aspect of religion, which focuses on contemplative/meditative practices and gives special attention to mystical experiences, i.e. ones in which the subject-object structure of experience is altered in some way (in line with Vörös 2013, where examples from various other traditions are discussed).

Zen, we encounter a host of unusual expressions that are sometimes described as metaphorical, but that are just as far from being true metaphors as the paradoxical locutions of madness. Thus, while we know what is meant with Shakespeare's slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, we would be hard pressed to understand how Dōgen's 'one thousand eyes on top of a stick' could be a metaphor (Tanahashi 2012, 556), and yet, such expressions are far from arbitrary nonsense. Instead of designating a particular mental representation (or an amalgamation of two representations in the case of metaphors), the seemingly nonsensical language of Zen serves to point out or, better yet, *symbolise* certain aspects of experience that are brought about by intense meditative practice (Sivić and Vörös 2022, 173). The expressions utilised are thus not arbitrary, because they are indeed understood by those familiar with the experiences in question – even being able to *evoke* such experiences in those that are 'on the brink,' so to speak (p. 174) – but their distance from ordinary everyday speech and experience makes them completely meaningless to anyone unfamiliar with Zen (Izutsu 1982, 90).

It is crucial to note here that such examples are *not* a kind of (speaking) speech without language: even though the genesis of each expression (most obviously in the case of *kōans*) must have displayed the creative power of speaking speech to bring forth new meaning to a remarkable degree, the existence of a *tradition* of Zen, wherein such expressions are passed down and understood centuries later, attests to the existence of a *Zen language* or *spoken* speech, albeit one that is indecipherable from the outside. What is essential for the parallel with madness is this unintelligibility or, better yet, the remarkable fact that the unintelligibility admits of exceptions. In other words, phrases as unusual as those of Zen would be described as nonsense in most contexts, even if they are bona fide attempts to describe highly unusual aspects of experience. What allows such locutions to be understood once they are uttered and thus form a sedimented part of a living tradition is the fact that *both* interlocutors (and, later on, an entire community) share those unusual experiences due to their shared commitment to decades of meditative practice within the same doctrinal, institutional and liturgical context. Both Dōgen and the monks to whom his talks were addressed lived in the *same world*, which has continued to be inhabited (or, more accurately, instituted) by Zen practitioners through the centuries.¹⁰ This, precisely, is what the psy-

¹⁰ The concept of institution is meant here in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the term, i.e. as the

chotic subject lacks. Mad language is unintelligible not because of any inherent logical feature of the utterances themselves, but rather because the highly unusual experiential context in which it arises, and which it attempts to express through a creative act of speaking speech, is not shared by any linguistic community, rendering it speech without language – one that is destined to fall on deaf ears.

At this point an important cautionary note is in order, for the claim that mad utterances are speech without language can all too easily be mistaken for the well-known (and extremely problematic) notion of ‘private worlds’ that is a different guise of the relativist view discussed above. Much like the notion of alternative logical schemes, the ‘private worlds’ view would claim that the psychotic subject lives in a solipsistic world (of perception, thought and expression, complete with a private language) that is just as coherent, vivid and rich as (if not incomparably more than) any other, while being in some way incommensurable or at least inexpressible to anyone else (Gipps 2022, 61). This, however, is *not* the claim being made here. For, just as the creative thrust of speaking speech is an essential aspect of expression, so too is the ability of nascent meanings to be *understood* and thus sediment into a language, instituting a cultural and linguistic world together with other speaking subjects. If mad speech lacks the latter function, it remains but an *incomplete* expression, deprived of the shared fabric of meaning through which a world can come into being. To the extent that we talk of the psychotic as living in a different world, this – much as in the case of alternative logical schemes – should not be taken too literally.

While the present view thus differs from relativism, it is also at odds with the madness-as-nonsense approach on two important counts. First, although speech without language cannot constitute complete expression, it is nevertheless *not nonsense* even if it is merely an *attempt* at expression. Indeed, on a Merleau-Pontian understanding of the centrality of expression to human experience (e.g. Merleau-Ponty 1964, 79), the claim that psychotic language is truly nonsensical would be tantamount to excluding psychotic subjects from the sphere of human experience –

‘establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions (in the general, Cartesian sense: system of references) in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel*, a history’ (Merleau-Ponty 2010, 8–9; 1973, 121). Note that a similar point applies not only to mysticism, but any highly specialised realm of discourse. It is particularly evident in examples such as particle physics, psychoanalysis and Heideggerian phenomenology, to name a few.

it would be nothing short of the claim that they *are not subjects* at all (i.e. the ‘nobody-at-home’ account criticised by Gipps (2022, 92)). Second, the present account does not condemn the madman or madwoman to perpetual isolation from any linguistic community; the question of whether mad speech can at least exceptionally allow for the intersubjective understanding necessary for *language* remains open. If such understanding is unlikely due to the peculiarity of the experience involved, it is (much as in the case of Zen) by no means impossible. Providing opportunities in which such comprehension can arise is thus an important therapeutic task, one that has already been undertaken, for example, in the work of Škodlar and Ciglencečki (2021, 21–70), where patients with schizophrenia were able – with the help of a philosophically trained psychiatrist and Parmenides’ texts – to communicate aspects of their experience that would be inexpressible in ordinary language, providing relief from the social and linguistic isolation that exacerbates psychosis.

The Merleau-Pontian proposal explored in this section is thus an attempt at a middle way between the relativist view, according to which psychotic language is always a perfectly adequate form of expression, and the madness-as-nonsense view, which denies madness any form of expression whatsoever. The problematic implications of these two extremes – namely the notion of a private language on the one hand and the exclusion of psychosis from the sphere of recognisable human experience on the other – can be avoided by understanding mad speech as a form of expression, albeit one that is most often incomplete. Under favourable circumstances, at least some forms of mad speech can become *bona fide language* and thus function as adequate means of expression in a similar way to the seemingly paradoxical language of Zen (or the likewise difficult language of Parmenides, for that matter). If this is not possible, then expression remains incomplete, a speech without language that can rightly be termed pathological. It is, in fact, only on this view that we can give full weight to the term *pathological speech* (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 17), unlike in the relativist account, which denies its pathological nature, taking it to be merely an unusual form of speech, or the madness-as-nonsense view, which denies that we are dealing with anything expressive at all, hence understanding it as a pathology *without* speech.

Conclusion

Psychotic experience is a wellspring of insights into the most unusual (and hence most fascinating) facets of man’s being-in-the-world, but

many philosophical and clinical approaches reduce it to either just another form of experience, with nothing particularly pathological about it (relativism), or else to a simple neural or cognitive short-circuit with nothing to teach us as far as experience is concerned (the madness-as-nonsense account). In this paper, I have attempted to sketch out a middle way between these two extremes, drawing largely on Merleau-Ponty's analyses of ideality and expression, in order to account as much as possible for both the intelligible (phenomenologically informative, expressive) and the properly unintelligible (pathological, radically different) aspects of madness.

One consequence of charting such a middle way is giving up the comfort provided by both reductionist and relativist accounts, which make psychosis either not the *psychiatrist's* problem per se (being merely a neurobiological issue) or *not a problem* at all (being merely an alternative interpretation of reality). Instead, a Merleau-Pontian acceptance of the fundamental ambiguity of psychosis puts responsibility back in the hands of the clinician, who must attempt to comprehend each individual patient in their brokenness *and* their human expressiveness, thus determining not just decisions about pharmacological treatment, but also such matters as whether a given mad utterance can be brought to full expression in the proper environment, perhaps to considerable therapeutic benefit (Škodlar and Ciglencečki 2021, 60). Here it is often a case of comprehending 'by coexistence, laterally, *by the style*' (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 188) – an effort that is a far cry from the simple rules of reductionism, but one whose difficulty is both understandable and justified in light of its aim.

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