PLATO ON MADNESS AND THE GOOD LIFE

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What is madness? When does one enter a state of madness? Is it when obsessions, compulsions, moods, or addictions take possession of your motivations, and you no longer decide what you do? Viewed that way, madness is a state that is to be avoided, a state that is irrational in a highly undesirable way: it comes with lack of agency, and thus with a lack of freedom. And yet you might find it boring to be asked to be ‘rational’. Excited and enthusiastic about something, you might insist that a certain kind of craziness leads to the best things in life: love, philosophy, art, science, and so on. You find fault with the instinct to draw a line between rationality and madness. Is not some kind of madness a powerful ingredient of a good life, as one might rationally pursue it?

These questions frame Plato’s views on madness. It would be naive to consider all madness bad, or to consider madness a remote phenomenon, absent from the lives of most of us. Madness is deeply connected to rationality and to irrationality. Plato’s approach has much to recommend it: it addresses madness from the point of view of agents who aim to lead a good life. From this perspective, the relationships between rationality, irrationality, and madness are crucially important. We do not want to lapse into kinds of madness that impede our lives, taking us captive to obsessions, compulsions, mood disorders, and the like. We also do not want to miss out on forms of madness that make life richer and more interesting.

I shall discuss three phenomena—phenomena that, for Plato, all count in one way or another as madness: rational madness (1), god-given madness (2), and disordered desiderative states or mental illness (3). (1) and (2) are beneficial; they increase our powers of agency. (3) is destructive; these conditions are serious impediments to agency. The surface of Plato’s discussions, populated by gods and Muses, might appear alien to us. Metaphors

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Plato in effect discusses criteria similar to those scientists employ today, and arguably he offers detail that can help us formulate these criteria in particularly compelling ways.¹

Most fundamentally, Plato’s criteria concern themselves with desire, or, in other terms, with the question of what kinds of things look good—or bad—to agents in a given condition. Throughout many of his dialogues, Plato explores an idea that is known as a Socratic Paradox: everyone desires the good. In being motivated to perform such-and-such an action, one sees the action (or something relating to it, such as its outcome) as good. Otherwise one would not be moved to act. In comparing Plato’s accounts of (1) rational madness, (2) god-given madness, and (3) mental illness, I shall pursue the general question of how these conditions fit in with the general directionality of motivation toward the good. (1) and (2) enhance the pursuit of the good; though they add complexity to the theory, they fit perfectly into the general claim that motivation is for the good. (3) raises difficult questions. First, there is the question of whether someone who, say, sees the relief a compulsive action promises as good, is motivated toward the good, even though she herself might be aware that she pursues something harmful. Plato discusses this kind of issue in terms of conflicts between different motivational powers, each with its good. Second, there is the question of what should be said about an agent who no longer pursues the good of any motivational power typically relevant to human action: reason, spirit, and desire. Suppose that a power could grow in an agent that is even lower than desire, and suppose the agent became motivated by the good of that power—a power than Plato characterizes as monstrous. Would there still be a sense in which the agent pursues her good, given that the monster is arguably not who she used to be, and that she is inhabited by a force that is alien to the typical patterns of human motivation?

I shall refer to several dialogues—the Ion, Symposium, Republic, Phaedrus, and Philebus—as making distinct proposals. But I shall not emphasize the differences between these texts. Instead, I am trying to put together a sketch of those states and conditions that Plato associates with madness. My approach should not be mistaken for the view that there is one Platonic

¹ Psychiatrists are working with philosophers to advance definitions of central concepts such as autonomy, in the hopes of applying them in court and in other contexts where much hangs on whether a person is assessed as mentally disturbed or not (cf. Bernard Gert’s consultant work for the revision of 3rd edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III–R) of the American Psychiatric Association, 1987; see also (http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jun/29/mental-health-patients-decisions)).