'Going Sane': A Mad, Mad World

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus
Oct. 2, 2005

GOING SANE

Maps of Happiness.

By Adam Phillips.

199 pp. Fourth Estate/

HarperCollins Publishers. $24.95.

There are "no famously sane poets," writes the British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips. He might have added that there are no famously sane mathematicians, few notoriously even-keeled guitarists. On the stage of our cultural history, "the sane don't have any memorable lines." So begins "Going Sane," Phillips's unraveling of sanity. This book, like previous ones such as "On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored," brings his original and accessible readings of psychoanalytic thought to bear on some unexamined phrases of daily life. Historically, he argues, sanity has been consigned to one of two fates: it's either been ignored because it's not dramatic enough (Hamlet gets all the good lines), or it's been written off by cultural critics (in a mad world, grumble malcontents from Rousseau to Foucault, only the crazy are authentic). Some of his categorical claims are inflated. Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, for example, spring to mind as imaginatively sane literary characters. Nevertheless, his broad story of sanity's humble position in a madness-crazed culture is persuasive. We have detailed iconographies of insanity, but few compelling definitions of sanity.

Phillips has inherited the tradition of psychoanalysts as philosophers of happiness. His lucid essays reveal a concrete hope that psychoanalytic insight might reduce human anguish. More is at stake, he believes, than just the definition of a single

word. He fears that our reluctance to ask ourselves exactly what sanity means might be thwarting our attempts to attain it.

The problem is our tendency to romanticize madness. The mad "have traditionally been idealized, if not glamorized, as inspired; as being in touch . . . with powers and forces and voices" otherwise reclusive. Sanity, on the other hand, is described -- when it is described at all -- as a matter of moderation, self-control and mechanical rationality. It's easy to absorb the lesson that the mad are idiosyncratic and complex while the sane are pedestrian. Sanity may represent our nominal ideal, but Sylvia Plath and John Nash are the box-office draws.

Phillips thus suggests that the question "Why don't we talk about sanity?" is equivalent to "Why do we talk so much about madness?" His answer is deceptively simple: we find madness captivating because "it can refer to what we most treasure about ourselves, and to what most horrifies us about ourselves."

"Going Sane" explores how our talk about madness embodies this ambivalence. For example, we use a lexicon of insanity to describe the appetites of infants, with their insatiable needs and aggression. Infantile madness is the inability to bear the frustration of unsatisfied desires. From childhood Phillips moves on to our sexual obsessions, another arena pervaded by insanity talk. The "madness of love" entails risks -- of encountering the forbidden, of being swept away by irrational lust -- that no "sane" person, i.e., someone who prizes security and the stable ego, would ever take. "Sane sex," he notes, "is a contradiction in terms." And he takes on three of the most faddish versions of contemporary insanity: autism, schizophrenia and depression. These diagnoses identify madness as the state of mind that doubts the ideals sane people take as self-evident. Autists and schizophrenics keep some distance from human relationships and shared meanings. Depressives lack desires, and thus can't always imagine why life might be worth living.

In each of these cases, Phillips identifies how we've taken what could be normal psychological responses to our unpredictable lives, such as impulsiveness, risk taking, antisociability and malaise, and presented them only as pathological behaviors. We have deeply conflicted feelings, for example, about impulsivity: we

want neither to be as impulsive as infants nor as measured (and uninteresting) as robots. We use madness, Phillips thinks, to hide this troubling ambivalence. Afraid of giving free rein to our impulses, we name rationality as a prevailing value of sanity and ascribe impulsiveness to madmen. Then we glorify these madmen, since they unhesitantly brandish what we've denied ourselves. We would like to have some of these "powers and forces and voices" back in our arsenal.

Phillips proposes that if we stop disguising this natural ambivalence as madness, we might have a better chance of recovering these resources. We might, in turn, lead freer lives. He interprets every pathological symptom as a gambit, every disorder as a survival strategy that has outlived its usefulness and become destructive. A depressive response might be reasonable in adjusting to loss, for example, provided it's not allowed to metastasize into despondency. Mental health becomes less a matter of composure and more a matter of being open to any resource that might help us cope with difficulty. Sanity as it's been historically conceived "allows us neither our full range of emotional reactions to situations -- whether terror, bewilderment or ecstasy -- nor our most effective forms of self-protection against them." Phillips has ingeniously expanded sanity to include madness.

This reclamation-by-expansion is a familiar trope for Phillips. So is his insistence that our linguistic practices -- in this case how we use the word "sanity" -- replace necessary ambivalence with confusing vagueness, and cause more suffering than they need to. In an earlier book, "On Flirtation," he similarly reinterpreted one word's role in our language game. Like madness, flirtation contains what we simultaneously dread and desire: in this case, uncertainty. We often dismiss flirtation as the saboteur of commitment, but Phillips suggests we diminish ourselves by doing so. Flirting with possibility is often just a way of reminding ourselves that we own our own decisions. By intensifying the feeling that we choose our commitments, uncertainty strengthens them. Phillips's airy linguistic treatments coalesce almost imperceptibly into practical hints: flirtatious behavior can deepen fidelity; it's appropriate to feel crazy sometimes. He's useful in a way that most philosophers rarely are.

A lthough it's one of Phillips's finest and most broadly appealing books, "Going Sane" suffers from a curious repetitiveness. His other writing is economical to the point of aphorism, but here he overstates his case: sanity is "something we can't get excited about," it is "dull," "uninspired" and so on. And on. Phillips describes unconscious cunning so convincingly, however, it's hard to read him seriously and still interpret this tic as a mere error. What is it about sanity-as-blandness that made Phillips so defensive? Sanity is a goal of psychoanalysis. Phillips seems to fear that if we perceive sanity as uninspiring, we will perceive psychoanalysis as banalizing. Psychoanalysis, in this view, could strip us of our eccentricities and tailor us to the uniform requirements of sanity. But that fear makes sense only if we persist in portraying the sane as well-adjusted but boring. By redefining sanity as an ever-widening horizon of possibly successful behaviors, Phillips recoups peculiarity for sanity. His sanity is anything but boring.

This defensiveness is thus unnecessary. Like the best of his writing, "Going Sane" begins with abstract semantics and ends with a specific tale of how we might be better off if we used some basic words in some different ways. With each new book, Phillips has made psychoanalytic thought livelier and more poetic than ever; he has nothing to apologize for.

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is deputy editor of The Threepenny Review.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section 7, Page 26 of the National edition with the headline: A Mad, Mad World