

Mental Illness, Technology and Modernity

By Louis Jackson

Ernest Hemmingway once provided exceptionally useful advice when he said, “When you are writing, leave yourself out of it.” Although I agree that this is a good idea and I do try to adhere to it when I can, in this particular essay I will inevitably need to refer to some of my own experience in order to paint a fuller picture for the reader. In addition to considering my own life history, I will find it useful to discuss a few philosophers who have assisted to illuminate my understanding of the modern world and its psychological woes, mainly Robert Pirsig, Michel Foucault and Ted Kaczynski. These three writers has assisted me greatly at different points in the evolution of my own philosophical outlook on the topics of “mental health” and industrial civilization.

What I am hoping to establish in this essay is to give the reader an understanding that mental illness and most of our psychological issues that afflict modern society only exist due to the absurd and unnatural way in which we are forced to live. I must emphasize at the outset that I do not claim to offer any definitive solution for this within the short space of this one essay. I only seek to highlight, as strongly as I possibly can, just how insane the modern world is. It is modernity itself which is making most people miserable and unwell, yet I promise to illustrate in this essay that it has not always been this way.

First, I shall emphasize that my own understanding of mental illness could probably be divided into three phases. In the first phase, I was convinced that mental illness was due to some defect in the individual that needed to be “fixed.” In the second phase, I began to understand mental illness as more a problem of adjusting to society, as I will try to explain in greater detail later in the present essay. In the third (and, I believe, final) phase, I outright objected to the first two phases, realizing that the the blame for our modern psychological issues rests with modern society itself and, in particular, with modern technology.

When I was sixteen years old, I was diagnosed with Schizophrenia. While I do not find it necessary to go into the details over why that happened, I will emphasize that the end result was that I was placed on antipsychotic drugs, which I remained on for the next twelve years. At some point, however, I realised that the antipsychotic drugs themselves did far more harm than good. In addition, I found that that the purpose of these drugs was not at all to “fix me.” Their purpose was simply to make me adjust to the society I was born into, however arbitrary or historically anomalous its demands might be. I cannot stress enough how important it is for people to grasp; the vast majority of what we call “mental illness” is a phenomenon of civilization plain and simple. With the rise of modern civilization, the problem has become far more acute over the last few centuries and continues to accelerate at a frightening pace. “Mental illness” is, in many ways, nothing more than a reaction to the unnatural way in which humans are forced live in the modern world.

This phase of my understanding of mental illness was probably the most mainstream concept that people have of the term, at least in the Western World. Under this view, there is an

issue with the individual, who needs to be helped or fixed as a result. There are a range of different therapies compatible with this approach, including medication and counselling. These are designed to help people to cope with the modern world. The biggest problem with this approach, however, is that it leads people to ask the all-too-common question why there are so many people suffering from mental illness today. I am far more inclined to ask the question why *all* people don't suffer from mental illness. I am seriously skeptical of anyone who claims to suffer from no mental illness whatsoever. Basically, such a person is saying that he or she is completely okay with the way we all have to live today. Does such a person really think, however, that it is normal to sit in front of a computer screen for eight to ten hours per day, five days per week? Our society's response to this blatant historical anomaly is to instead ask the question why it is that so many people are on some form of psychological medication. As the underlying problems get worse, we miss the point by instead searching for ever-more 'advanced' medications to help people to adjust, without ever thinking about the questionable conditions which are causing people to need the medication in the first place. This is simply wrong. Every treatment for mental illness has the same goal. Whether the treatment be pills, therapy, meditation, or counselling, the goal will always be to coerce the individual who is suffering from mental illness to adjust to the society that he or she lives in, no matter how unreasonable its demands might happen to be.

It is fair to say that ever since I took myself off the medications I was prescribed, I have indeed struggled to live a 'normal' life. However, this has only been the case when I was forced to live in the artificial pseudo-environments of the city. I am most at peace when I am in nature. When I am out on the river and connected with my environment as humans had been for the vast majority of history, I find that I get to live the way that we all should be living. For this reason, I came off my medications with the determination to fix myself without taking any more prescribed drugs. Instead of opting for the "quick fix," I went on a path of self-discovery, as one might call it. I started with self-help gurus, but I was disappointed to find that they were all a waste of time. Next, I moved on to a study of the Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophers. Afterwards, I read Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, and then discovered Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. I studied Sigmund Freud, Rollo May, Scott Peck, and Victor Frankl. Yet the most important literary discover at this time was Robert Pirsig's two books *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as well as *Lila*. I read them over and over again.

Despite my best efforts, I fell into madness and I had to dig myself out of it at which point I decided once and for all that it was not me that was unwell – it was society itself that it was unwell. To put it simply, I am never anxious when I am in nature, nor am I depressed when I am living naturally. I am at peace because I am connected to it on every level. Spending time in nature for me is always a spiritual experience, something that I cannot replicate anywhere else.

The first author that assisted me in illuminating my understanding of mental illness was Robert Pirsig. His philosophy was influenced by Zen Buddhism and the Ancient Greeks. Pirsig's first book *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was written in the 1970s. He had been diagnosed with Schizophrenia earlier in his adult life and placed into an asylum for three years,

where he underwent the so-called treatment of 'shock therapy.' His two books focused on a range of different philosophical ideas but mostly dealt with mental illness and technology. In retrospect, I realize that Pirsig did help me to understand that mental illness is not a defect of the individual, as it is the society itself that causes the psychological issues which later manifest themselves in a given person. I continue to agree with him on this part. I am not quite as sure, however, about his belief that people can adjust to the society despite its artificial and technological characteristics. To support this claim, he argues that a lot of our modern issues are based on a lack of understanding of modern technology. On an individual level, if we can improve our own understanding of it, then we can indeed reconcile ourselves with it and live harmoniously with it. To illustrate this questionable idea, he uses the motorcycle as an example.

At this point, the second phase of my understanding of mental illness began. I moved from an understanding of mental illness as a defect in the individual to instead understand that modern society is itself the issue; however, the individual can still adjust to it, provided he or she does so "the right way." While Pirsig saw that there were issues with humans' relationship to technology, he wrote his book as an attempt to solve them. His first book made an attempt to merge art and science. He concluded that they were two opposing forces that were at war with each other and he felt could be merged and in fact needed to be. He made an attempt to create a harmony between nature on the one hand and technology on the other. Zen represents art and nature and the motorcycle represents science and technology.

I held onto this concept for quite sometime and, in all honesty, probably a lot longer than I should have. Pirsig, I think, was naive about technology and it is now my belief that it is not possible to reconcile oneself with it. The reason for my pessimism on the issue is that I realized that technology is in itself utterly hostile towards nature. Despite his shortcomings, Pirsig still raised some very interesting and important points. In his first book *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, he used the motor cycle as an example of how someone can work with technology and be in harmony with it. Just as an Ancient craftsmen or sculptor could use technology without losing his sanity, Pirsig claimed that he himself could work on his own motorcycle in much the same way that a craftsman would work on a statue.

Nor was this limited to recreational activities. Pirsig claimed that a factory worker could theoretically achieve this sort of balanced and harmonious relationship with technology while on the clock. This particular argument, however, marked the point where I started to become more sceptical of his ideas. As an example, he noted that when Japan was industrialising, because they already had this Zen culture, the workers were able to work long hours, on repetitive tasks but in a meditative state all the while. He used this as an example of how modern technology and humans can indeed coexist harmoniously. Now, I grant that maybe his anecdote is true and the Japanese industrial workers in the early to mid-20th century were indeed able to do this. I don't claim to actually know the answer to that, but I can say that in my own experience I worked in an abattoir doing repetitive tasks. As hard as I tried, I was still unable to find my Zen. The only thing I felt while working there was anxiety and frustration, as well as horror at the sheer number of animals that are processed there each day, though that's another story altogether. One thing I

am sure of is that the only time I can ever find my Zen is when I am in nature. It is one thing to say that a craftsman can build a table or that a person can even work on a motorcycle in his or her spare time and reach in a Zen state while merging art and technology into one. It is another thing entirely to work ten hours per day, five days per week staring into a computer screen or standing on an assembly line doing monotonous tasks whilst having every single movement throughout the day monitored by either a video surveillance system or by a supervisor.

If nothing else is certain, there is something that is seriously wrong with modern technology. This realisation for me was itself a really big problem. Because technology is such a huge part of our lives, if we are unable to find some way to live harmoniously with it and if it is indeed true that *this* is the root cause of our modern psychological issues, then perhaps we need to just get rid of it and start over. Technology, I think, is not only at the root of our psychological issues, but also of our environmental crises and our social and economic injustices as well. I think that Pirsig was hopelessly naïve to think that we could ever compromise with it and adjust to its ever-more-unreasonable demands.

I think it is important to move on now to hopefully provide the reader with a historical understanding of the concept of mental illness. For this reason, we shall briefly move away from discussing technology as such, though we will revisit the topic later on to give the reader some sort of reasonable conclusion of how the two topics relate to one another. My discussion of the history of mental illness shall begin with an analysis of Michel Foucault's book *The History of Madness*. Foucault wrote what is arguably the single most important book on mental illness that I have ever come across. The work is known as *The History of Madness* or *Madness & Civilization*, depending on the translation. In it, Foucault demonstrated how rapidly the definition of mental illness/madness had changed over the course of the last few hundred years. In order to trace the concept's genealogical development over time, Foucault began his study with an analysis of materials dating back to around the start of the Renaissance. At this time, mental illness was referred to as "madness." In fact, the term "mental illness" is relatively new and came about at roughly the time of Sigmund Freud, give or take a few decades.

As Foucault demonstrated, in the time of the Renaissance, the mad were actually revered by the masses. Rather than be thought of as unwell, they were recognized as simply being different. I personally think, though, that it ran a bit deeper than that and the mad were seen as some sort of intermediary between the physical world and the spiritual world. The Renaissance, however, seems to be around the last time that these views of the mad were commonly held, at least in European culture. According to Foucault, from this point forward the understanding of madness/mental illness has been a constant debacle and has continued to change quite rapidly over the last few hundred years. The following quote from his book summarizes this stance quite nicely:

"One simple truth about madness should never be overlooked. The consciousness of madness, in European culture at least has never formed an obvious and monolithic fact, undergoing a metamorphosis as a homogenous ensemble. For the Western consciousness madness has always

welled up simultaneously at multiple points, forming a constellation that that slowly shifts from one place and form to another, its face perhaps hiding an enigmatic truth."

The reader might recall from our discussion of Robert Pirsig's work earlier in this essay how he tried to reconcile art and science or nature and technology. There is in fact a similar theme that I noticed throughout Foucault's work, though I'm not sure whether he noticed it himself. Modern technology, as I mentioned earlier, is fundamentally hostile towards nature, which includes not only animals but human beings as well. Modern technology is of course an offshoot of science. It is true that science has helped humans to gain a greater understanding of the world, but we have to ask the question, "At what cost?" I think that if we use mental illness as an example, we can illustrate the hostility that modern science can have towards human beings. We may then discover that it is not only impossible to reconcile nature with modern technology, but even with modern science itself.

Foucault explained that over the centuries following after the Renaissance, madness continued to be misunderstood as the relationship between society and the mad continued to change. According to Foucault, these changes first started to take place around the start of the 16th century when leprosy disappeared in Europe. When leprosy was no longer a problem, cities were left with the same large buildings that used to hold all of the lepers. With no lepers to fill these spaces, society started looking for other people that could be housed there. This, according to Foucault, marks the moment when the mad began to be confined. It also is an interesting point in the history of madness because this is when society's relationship to the madman started to change and has continued to morph ever since. Not only were the mad confined but also many other people who were considered a nuisance to society. The homeless, the disabled, homosexuals began to be placed into confinement, often indefinitely. Over time, madness began to take on a moral component as well. People who no longer adhered to arbitrary social norms were considered insane and placed into confinement.

Even this, however, was not the biggest change to the relationship between society and the mad. This came in about the 17th and 18th centuries, during what is nostalgically called the "Scientific Revolution" or the "Enlightenment." This is when madness began to be put under the microscope of scientific knowledge. In hindsight, this experiment has been a complete and utter disaster, though that has not stopped modern psychiatry from continuing to look at mental illness through this lens.

Bossier de Savages, for example, was a scientist who came up with the idea of categorising the different types of madness in a similar way to how plants were categorized in the field of botany. It only seemed natural to de Savages that psychiatry should adopt the methods of categorisation which the "hard sciences" had already applied to the study of plants and animals. It appears that no one since, at least in the mainstream, has ever thought to question this idea, let alone reverse it. Modern psychiatry continues to be looked at unquestioningly through this biased and reductive lens.

There were a few things going on simultaneously over this period of time. It is my

conclusion that, at least from about the 17th and 18th centuries up until today, treatments for madness or mental illness, though have varied, have always had the same goal: to coerce the individual to fit in with the modern economic and technological society. The most brutal and intense forms of treatment came about in the modern asylum in the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. The purpose of these places was now to fix the mad so they could become a part of the 'normal' society again. If they failed at that task, they stayed locked up. Though a house of confinement prior to this era (in, say, the 17th and 18th centuries) surely would not have been a nice place to end up, at least there the mad were relatively left alone to just "be mad" inside the walls. This was not the case in the modern asylum. Psychiatrists now observed patients with ever-greater scrutiny. This observation-based psychiatry led them to experiment with all sorts of questionable drugs and treatments, a troubling historical trajectory which peaked in the middle of the 20th century with the most appalling innovation of all: 'shock therapy.' The paradox of this time frame is that on the outside, the world was changing at such a rapid pace in the name of technological 'progress,' yet on the inside of the asylum the most regressive and draconian practices were being carried out on a regular basis. One has to wonder if maybe this is what was needed to coerce the human spirit into acting more like a machine and less like a human. It is no coincidence that at a time of the industrial revolution when human beings were now required to be docile and obedient so they could work in coal mines, railroads and factories that those who were not docile and obedient were punished severely.

There is admittedly a possibility that I am over simplifying a huge time frame in history in order to fit my own ideas into a nice, concise theory. One might claim that I am conflating things that are not related at all in order to accomplish this task. Even if this were the case, I think that my analysis of the situation would still be rather valuable to people living in the modern world. One point that I would like the reader to take away from this discussion is that modern humans are really quite different from the humans that lived prior to the industrial revolution. We have been coerced over the centuries to submit to technology. As a result, we have become cogs in a vast, impersonal system and have been forced to advance interests which are not our own. There is a very real relationship between mental illness and the way that we have been coerced into serving the system in order to advance its own progress on a purely technical level, regardless of its negative effects on our mental and physical health. This, above all, is what I have been trying to communicate to the reader throughout this essay. Humans are not machines. We are not cogs in a system. We are intelligent, emotional, creative animals that have much more to us than working forty to fifty hours per week on some monotonous job. I had often thought about the lions in the zoo. When you go and see them, they look so miserable and deflated. All they do is sit around all day and pace up and down their cage. The lion in the cage is a metaphor for humans in modern society. There's nothing that is going to fix it, whether it be a pill, therapy, counselling, group sessions, meditation, journaling, yoga, or a self-help guru. On a social level as well, there is no policy, reform, or social change that is ever going to fix the psychological woes that modern humans face. The only thing that is ever going to fix it is if we bust out of that cage.

To be clear, I am *not* claiming that mental illness is unique to modernity. It does seem to have existed in many societies, even dating back in the Ancient World. There were Roman elites, according to Foucault, who used to suffer from what were called “frenzies.” Based on their descriptions, they sound similar to what we might now call an anxiety attack or nervous breakdown. Similarly, in Homer's epic poem, Odysseus himself falls into madness on his way home after the Trojan War. He even descended into the literary underworld due to his mental suffering, though he eventually found his way out. Although examples like this can indeed be found, it bears emphasizing that such incidents seem to be few and far between in the Ancient World and only seem to be brought about by rather extreme circumstances. This is to be contrasted with the modern world, in which an ever-increasing number of people are more and more miserable and suffer psychologically for no apparent reason. It is also possible that our modern morals and values such as materialism and consumerism as well as our obsession with sports and television contribute to our miserable state as well.

The final piece in the evolution of my own philosophical outlook on mental illness came about only quite recently. As I wrote earlier, the evolution of my understanding of mental illness has proceeded in roughly three phases. At first, I thought that it was a defect in the individual which caused it and that there was nothing wrong with society itself. Under this view, the responsibility lay solely with the individual to fix himself or herself through the help of therapies until he or she is not mentally “unwell” anymore. For me, the second phase consisted of the realisation and acceptance that although society does cause psychological issues, we can adjust to it by gaining a better understanding of the world that we live in. For example, Robert Pirsig claimed that we felt frustrated by technology only because we lacked understanding of it, a view which implies that humans could reconcile themselves with it if they just made the effort to understand it better. More recently, I have completely rejected this second phase because I now see that it *is precisely* modern society and the modern technological system that are responsible for our psychological woes and therefore one does not even have the option to try to reconcile oneself with them in the long term.

I had often thought over the past few years that hunter gatherers would not have gotten mental illnesses. I didn't really do much with that thought, but it was something that I would think about from time to time. I could not, however, articulate the reason for this until more recently when I read Ted Kaczynski's *Industrial Society and Its Future*. In this work Kaczynski makes the claim that the major source of the psychological issues of the modern world are due to the fact that humans have every basic need taken care for us by the system. Everything is provided for us and things like gaining access to shelter, food and clothing have become really trivial to obtain. The irony of technological process is that we have much less control and are much less autonomous in our environment than hunter gatherers were. The stark reality of modernity is that we have deluded ourselves into believing we have more control over the environment than ever before simply because we are surrounded by ever-more advanced technologies. Although this might be vaguely true on a collective level, as individuals we have no control whatsoever over the basic problems of survival. Because of technological automation,

everything in the modern world can be taken care of with very little physical exertion. This Kaczynski believes is one of the major causes of the psychological issues that we currently face. We are less autonomous, less individual, and less free because we are so reliant on the system.

When all of our survival needs are taken care of people pursue what Kaczynski calls "surrogate activities" to replace the survival activities. Surrogate activities include an interest in sports or television or a hobby or even work or the pursuit of some obscure intellectual interest. None of these can give an individual the same sense of autonomy or freedom that one gains from looking after one's own survival needs; they can only, at best, allow the individual to subjectively feel like he or she has something to work on. As we move further and further along the trajectory of technological advancement, life inevitably becomes more and more meaningless as it progressively has less and less purpose. Is it really any wonder, then, that so many people suffer from mental illness when the only thing they can ever hope to accomplish in their lives is to just "play around" at some surrogate activity which become ever-more trivial as the technological system progresses?

In writing this essay, I didn't hope to try to offer any definitive solution to this crisis. I also feel that I may very well be ending this discussion a little abruptly. The purpose of the essay was to relay the evolution of my own psychology and philosophical outlook and to hopefully give the reader an understanding of how we got to where we are today. It may even give the reader some solace in the fact that if they find themselves suffering psychologically that it's not really them but the utterly miserable system they have been born into. Nietzsche once said that "modern man doesn't know why he suffers." I think that is even more true today than in the late 19th century when Nietzsche wrote these words. Modern people really do suffer and many don't seem to know why that is the case.

I think I will wrap it up with this important observation. When I spend time in nature, and especially as the longer that I spend in nature, the more at peace I am with the world around me. My levels of anxiety and psychological issues drift away in nature. The spiritual world and the natural world are inextricably linked or possibly even the same thing. That is an important thing to be aware of when we think about our understanding of mental illness, as well as when we think about society and the modern world and all of its problems.