Laing and philosophy

Douglas Kirsner

Most of Laing's concerns were philosophical. For him, issues of mental illness were an application of fundamental philosophical inquiry. In common with philosophical and religious traditions of inquiry, Laing regarded being human as a mystery.

It strikes me that many of Laing's concerns surrounded the four questions that the eighteenth century philosopher, Immanuel Kant raised about fundamental issues that philosophy needed to investigate. Kant wrote, 'All of the interests of my reason, speculative as well as otherwise, combine in the three following questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What ought I to do?
3. What may I hope?'

To these Kant later added a fourth question that combined the first three, 'What is man?'

Laing was always vitally concerned with such questions and found his patients also to be centrally concerned with such issues. Laing's legacy will, I think, lie in his stance, his approach, his sensibility more than any particular positions he adopted in relation to such questions. This includes, for example, the extent to which schizophrenia is psychological, familial, social or biological. As he said in an interview with me, 'Man is the being whose being is in question to himself. There is this problematic about ourselves to ourselves' (Kirsner 1997, p. 39). What is crucial is questioning and the questions he asked.

Today I think that Laing's idea that schizophrenia could be context-dependent has been integrated into contemporary thinking on mental illness. Laing's view that psychosis could be at least partially psychodynamically intelligible in terms of agency, meaning and context has also been integrated into most approaches. Schizophrenia is an illness yes, but important psychosocial modifiers need to be taken into account as well. Also, the critique of normality as intrinsically related to society is now widely assumed to be a factor to take into account in understanding unusual individual behaviour. In general, the idea of taking individuals seriously as agents is more prevalent. Certainly, putting people directly into institutions for unusual behaviour has declined considerably, to the extent that nowadays it is often difficult for patients to be admitted to psychiatric institutions when they need to be. I think that the kind of critiques Laing made in the sixties have been so successful that many of his direct critiques of psychiatry now seem anachronistic. This happened not just as a direct result of his own work, but partly because of the development of new psychotropic drugs, partly because of the changes in government policies and funding and partly because he was riding a wave.

Laing responded to the fact that psychiatry viewed schizophrenia as 'ununderstandable'—as Karl Jaspers' classic psychiatric text, *General Psychopathology*—has it, and therefore not possible to investigate in terms of meaning

and significance. For Jaspers, psychotic phenomena manifested an 'abyss of difference' between sane and psychotic experience, a dichotomy Laing constantly challenged throughout his life (see Kirsner 1990). In 'The Obvious', his contribution to the Dialectics of Liberation Conference held at the London Roundhouse in 1967, Laing made the point that the 'obvious' was what stood in front of us but we didn't see. He claimed, 'What is obvious to me might not be obvious to anybody else. The obvious is literally that which stands in one's way, in front of or over against oneself. One has to begin by recognizing that it exists for oneself' (Laing 1967). The conference was held during a momentous political period of change and protest. It was the height of the Vietnam War, the period of Alexander Dubcek's 'socialism with a human face', the era of the civil rights movements in the US and the rise of the counter cultural and New Left movements, and the year before the student revolt in Paris. But Laing's contribution to the symposium not only clearly related to the politics of the time but also to the problem of treating psychiatric symptoms as illness rather than as communications, at least partly. His was a fundamental phenomenological approach to understanding what stood in front of us with as few preconceptions as possible. However, it should be asked how many taken-for-granted preconceptions were left unchallenged at the time—and later. What was *obvious,* 'standing in front of us', at the time was the struggle against the 'evil' US imperialist government by the 'wretched of the earth', the 'authentic' New Left and the 'heroic' South Vietnamese National Liberation Front. Yet, if we are to be honest, shouldn't we ask some uncomfortable but *obvious* questions such as—Was the New Left really that good and the US that bad? Was the defeat of the US such a good thing given that South Vietnam became part of a communist dictatorship with an abysmal human rights record, which remains very much in power today? Weren't the USSR really ultimately the bad guys during the Cold War? (I write this as a New Left activist at that time myself). It wasn't hard to attack the modern life or Western governments at that time, especially in a revolutionary atmosphere such as the London Roundhouse where speakers vied with each other to be the most radical. Any approach that challenges preconceptions ought to let the chips fall where they may, not just bolster whatever strongly held beliefs happen to be held, whether anti- or pro-establishment.

Laing had both the strengths and weaknesses of a romantic who believes that things were so much better and real in the old days and also that the only thing preventing the institution of a utopia is a bad social system that produces ills from schizophrenia to poverty. I am referring to the idea that there are no intrinsic flaws in human nature and that evil arises simply from a corrupt society. Laing's approach is reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's view of the natural goodness of noble savages, people who had not been corrupted by civilization: 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains'. This is opposed to Freud's anti-romantic Hobbesian view of the human condition which Sartre shared. Laing's view, at least as expressed in *The Politics of Experience,* is a romantic one: we are inherently and naturally good if only the world would leave us alone, schizophrenics might be in a better state if only psychiatrists would not interfere with them. We find here the idea of a basic goodness in human nature that could supervene in a society that did away with corruption that derived from property ownership, for example. This is reflected in the idea of a state of nature of the noble savage, or of bygone eras when human beings were not as pervasively conditioned by power elites, media and ideology.

I have become increasingly sceptical of the idea that things used to be better than they are now psychologically, that life was real then but that we are now mesmerized by 'Mc-culture'. I think by and large that the vast majority of us, especially in the West, are far better off than we used to be 1000, 2000 or 3000 years ago physically, psychically and spiritually. Clearly, we're far better off physically, but we have far, far better political systems, science, medicine, media, information, justice, political freedom, and so forth. Obviously, there have been truly terrible, relatively recent blots (the Holocaust stands out). Plainly too, with the advancement of science, there has been the development of weaponry that can be used by evil people for evil purposes. However, on the whole, things are incredibly better than a hundred or thousands of years ago. With all their faults, science and liberal democracy are clear pluses for the vast majority of people. Much discussion about the contemporary 'devastation of experience' is markedly exaggerated rhetoric that of course fits a romantic state of mind where people can have their cake and eat it too, enjoying all the concrete benefits of advanced democratic capitalism while abstractly railing against it.

Despite statements that are essentially confined to the late 1960s in 'The Obvious' and in *The Politics of Experience,* Laing was mostly smarter than that. I think seeing society as the cause of human problems was an experiment he tried and which failed. As I argued in *The Schizoid World of Jean-Paul Sartre and R. D. Laing,* Laing was interested in situating our problems in context, and when the social context did not provide the rationale, he moved on to the next context in which to situate the social context—the cosmic or mystical context. Later, after his visit to Ceylon, he abandoned that position and returned to the perspectives he held prior to the mid-sixties. Laing's took liberalism very seriously and was I think principally concerned with limiting society's interference with the individual, which included the designation and treatment of mental illness against the individual's wishes. Much of Laing's work is about protecting the individual from the incursion of other people on individual experience. I remember hearing one of Laing's lectures in 1975 in London in which he said that the main fear people had was 'the fear of other people'. He was far more John Stuart Mill than Karl Marx.

Laing's 'half-in, half-out' positions on issues ranging from the causes of schizophrenia to politics reflect his attempts to wrestle with real ambiguities. Laing argued for the greater social intelligibility of schizophrenia, not for the total explanation in social terms. Laing preferred the dentist to use his or her scientific 'look' in examining his teeth but emphasized the inappropriateness of exclusively using such a 'look' by a doctor at childbirth. The emphasis on the primacy of experience is as a redress to simply looking at outcomes or effects. As Laing argued in *The Divided Self*, science deals, with what is appropriate to it. So the science-based art of dentistry, for example, studies teeth and their relation to the mouth. But the study of a mental illness deals with mind attributes, however 'mind' is defined. This does not imply that there is a mind-body split that Descartes proposed where mind and body are totally separate and function on different principles. Laing was a psychiatrist who never assumed there was no role for biology. Laing was influenced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's position that we are 'embodied subjects'. The starting point for Laing for such a science is that it is a 'science of persons', as first adumbrated in *The Divided Self.* This starting point is the apprehension of the personal, as a self-acting agent who always chooses, whether he or she likes it or not. Laing's commandment: Always treat a person as an agent, a choosing being, not a

thing. Martin Buber's I-thou division as opposed to I-it is central in *The Divided Self* and continued to underpin Laing's future work.

Nonetheless, in this, as in so much else, Laing essentially follows Sartre too. I have read through Laing's very careful and copious notes on his minutely detailed reading of *Being and Nothingness.* Laing together with David Cooper summarized three major later works of Sartre as *Reason and Violence.* Like Sartre, Laing's approach is existential phenomenological, that consciousness is always consciousness of something, that it cannot be seen just as in itself but is always directed and in relation to something or someone. Laing's primary apprehension is that the person cannot be reduced to a thing as the person is always choosing and deciding, which a thing doesn't.

I have emphasised in *The Schizoid World of Jean-Paul Sartre and R. D. Laing* (Kirsner 2003) how very much Laing focused on context and the problems of acting meaningfully within it. As inherently social beings, we are always in significant relationships with others. Social phenomenology is an application of phenomenology that provides better and more detailed understanding of social relationships.

Laing's approach to schizophrenia should be viewed in terms of his focus on the importance of looking at the invalidation of the person and consequent loss of a whole realm of experience of the person's inner world. For Laing, at least in *The Politics of Experience,* violence has been so successful in seeming to take this realm from the rest of us that schizophrenia can be seen as a last-ditch way we have of encountering this lost world. Whether any transcendental experience is mad or mystical, it testifies to the importance of inner experience which has been devastated by the outer but which is so essential to a sane, whole way of living.

Freud thought that slips of the tongue and other marginalia of the psychopathology of everyday life could provide us with important discoveries about the nature of the human mind. I think that for Laing schizophrenia plays a similar role in providing a way into understanding the lost world of human experiencing. I think one of the reasons that Laing so often felt he had been misunderstood is that his project was far larger than understanding schizophrenia. It is as though Freud were saddled with his major achievement as the discovery of Freudian slips—Freudian slips were a way-station and not any kind of end-point. I think Laing's end-point is the role of the loss of the world of valid experience as the problem of our age. This has consequences for our view of the world beyond mental 'normality', such as the place of science and how alienated medicine becomes when we think that it is an achievement for a woman to be able to read a newspaper while she has a baby. Issues about the central denial and violation of the realm of experience in the modern world persisted for Laing until the end of his life. These included his interest in Francis Mott's ideas about pre-birth experience, the importance of the voice of experience and its relation to the scientific 'look', the asylum communities in London, what we do to ourselves and others in order to not see what we experience and lies and deceit in love. Scientific objective rationality systematically contributes to the destruction and invalidation of the primacy of experience as specifically human. In his social phenomenology Laing illuminates a specific type of *sensibility* to experience, a natural way of being alive to oneself and others which has been lost.

Laing was especially influenced by Sartre's later social theory about the constitution and impact of social groups upon the individual. *The Divided Self,* completed in 1956 before Sartre published *The Problem of Method* and *The Critique of Dialectical Reason,* was, among other things, clearly an application of Sartre's early theory of self deception to the schizophrenic. *The Self and Others* concerned the self in relation to the other where Laing moved from a focus on meaning expressed in the intrapsychic life of the individual to the context of the interpersonal space of two persons. It was also strongly influenced by Sartre's early work. *Sanity, Madness and the Family* and other works around the family were based on the later Sartre, especially his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* with its emphasis on the impossible dialectic of individual and group where the individual freedom is an inevitable casualty. In these works Laing located mental illness within the group or family context. Laing was interested in how the family constellation provided the context in which individual schizophrenic experience could be understood as a rational strategy.

The Politics of Experience explores this problem further in the social context whereby Laing saw the individual as almost inevitably at the mercy of society. For Laing this group context existed within a society which was part of the context of the Total Social World System which is in turn part of the cosmos. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing understood the Total Social World System as providing the social context in which schizophrenia was an understandable reaction. In *Knots* and also in parts of *The Politics of Experience* Laing thought that mystical experience might explain seemingly irrational experience and behaviour in terms of the biggest meta-context of all. Mysticism was the limit of contextualizing and Laing went to Ceylon to meditate. Sartre was too much a rationalist to make Laing's next move that situated the social world within the mystical.

However, the methodology of investigating particular 'situations', as Sartre described them, illustrates Laing's basic approach and abiding project because like Sartre Laing appreciated individuals in their singularity at the same time as they represented something more general. Contexts for Sartre and Laing were the conditions of human action that affected the way we understand the field we act in. Insofar as the context provided the parameters within which we could choose our actions, we are all in Sartre's term, 'universal singulars', individuals who could be cross-referenced with their time.

Laing focused on many issues throughout his career: schizophrenia, birth and pre-birth experience, family dynamics, the impact of the modern world of science and technology, social institutions, politics, the impact of psychiatry, patients' rights, the vagaries of love, and many more. But one vital link permeated them all, one which originated with what is central to Sartre—*the distinction between two realms, the human and the nonhuman, and the consequences of treating human beings as though they were objects or things.* Like Sartre who began with the radical ontological division of the world into human and nonhuman, 'being for-itself' and 'being-in-itself', existence and essence, free and unfree, Laing took as his starting-point that no matter how alienated they were, every human being was free and needed to be treated as a free agent. On this premise, it is inappropriate to talk about human beings in 'thing' language and language about things or processes is never appropriate for ultimately understanding human beings. It is as though this was Laing's 'global project', as Sartre might have put it.

Different consequences accrue from whether we initially see someone as a person or as

an object. As the observer is always part of the observational field, how we treat someone impacts on how they react and how they are then viewed. Since for Sartre consciousness was never an independent faculty but always consciousness of something—our stance determined what we saw. This phenomenology of ways of seeing is clear in Laing from the beginning. As Laing put it in *The Divided Self,* 'The initial way we see a thing gives rise to all our subsequent dealings with it' (Laing, 1965, p. 20).

Laing carried the implications of our invariably starting from a point of view much further in his later work, making the concept of 'the normal' itself a focus of investigation and critique. It would be interesting to discover how much his critique of normality affected the post-modern turn where taken-for-granted assumptions about the positions we occupy are challenged. The idea of the identity of the author or agent was under question as was authority and expertise as such during the sixties and seventies. The concept of normality goes right into the centre of social harmony and structure since a norms reflect how most people think and behave. The possibility that sanity is different from normality or even that the mad might be sane opened up fundamental questioning and brought a different yardstick to bear in questioning the intrinsic goodness and rightness of the society. Laing's challenge to normality might have been epistemological, but it was taken on politically by a generation and Laing did nothing to disabuse them of the difference.

When Laing visited the back wards during his medical training in Glasgow, he simply could hear and understand what the schizophrenics were saying. He just had an uncanny ability to be able to hear the communications. As a highly intelligent person, he was able to play with concepts and challenge the ones he used. But I think his therapeutic intelligence went beyond the ability to listen and empathise with others like him or quite different from him. He was comfortable with constantly challenging our mindsets and was able to live with not knowing. That is the attitude of scepticism that came with his fellow Scot, David Hume as well as the Greeks. Dichotomies, such as 'inside-outside', 'mind-body', 'self-other', 'society-individual', 'mad-normal', were, as he constantly put it, 'up for grabs'. Philosophy, especially existential philosophy and phenomenology, suffused his work with the clinical data gleaned from his work as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst as concrete material to further explore the humanity or lack of it in the human world. However, even beyond psychological comfort and attitude is the capability to conceptualise. Laing's uncommon intelligence meant that he was able to think in a complex way. (Masud Khan told me in 1976 that Laing was the most brilliant in his generation of psychoanalysts). He did not use stereotyped, template thinking but thought counterfactually (if x, then y, if not x then z, etc.), using parallel process thinking as described by Elliott Jaques (Jaques and Cason 1994).

A good way of highlighting the philosophical perspectives that Laing adopted is to examine some of the philosophy behind his two most best known and quite different works, *The Divided Self* (1960) and *The Politics of Experience* (1967). Separated by a decade, these two books encapsulate important aspects of his approach and influence and show deep contrasts as well as continuations.

I. *The Divided Self*

The Divided Self (Laing 1960) was a study of schizoid and schizophrenic people; its basic purpose, Laing claimed, was 'to make madness, and the process of going mad, comprehensible'. Laing was also trying to give an existential account of some forms of madness. But Laing was not attempting to present a comprehensive theory of schizophrenia nor to explore constitutional and organic aspects (p. 9).

The publication of *The Divided Self* in 1960 was an important moment in the history of psychiatry. Laing's book was a pioneer in systematically trying to be where the psychotic patient was 'at'. During the 1950s when Laing was working in back wards and later at the Tavistock Clinic, many psychiatrists accepted that the speech of neurosis and not psychosis was intelligible. Freud had insisted that neurosis was intelligible, that dreams, slips and symptoms were disguised expressions of human subjectivity which could be understood using free association. Laing did for the psychotic what Freud had done for the neurotic—Laing listened to psychotic patients and treated their speech and actions as potentially understandable and meaningful. Like all people, psychotics could be seen as agents whose experience could be understood as meaningful. Psychosis is, as Laing says in *The Divided Self,* the product of a disjunction: 'sanity or psychosis is tested by the degree of conjunction or disjunction between two persons where the one is sane by common consent. The critical test of whether or not a patient is psychotic is a lack of congruity, an incongruity, a clash, between him and me' (p. 36). Psychosis always involves problems of communication; 'Schizophrenia', Laing told me in 1980, 'is the name a psychiatrist gives for somebody who can't understand' (Kirsner 1997, p. 50). Never having found difficulty in listening to schizophrenics Laing could not resonate with Bleuler's remark that when all was said and done schizophrenics were stranger to him than the birds in his garden (p. 24). For Laing, such a lack of understanding of the world of the psychotic was not so much given as constructed. In *The Divided Self* the thoughts and actions of psychotics were understood to be expressions of human subjectivity, not simply emanations of psychobiological processes. Seen in context and from the point of view of the patient as agent, madness could be understood as resulting from choices within psychosocial and biological parameters.

We all make fundamental assumptions about the world that determine many of our beliefs and actions. One prevalent modern assumption is that despite our feelings to the contrary, we are in reality complex machines or even computers. Such an assumption has major consequences for our view of the nature of neurosis and madness and how they should be treated. The psychiatrist may collude with the schizophrenic in assuming that he or she is primarily a machine. For Laing, 'one's relationship to an organism is different from one's relationship to a person... one's theory of the other as organism is remote from one's theory of the other as person' (p. 21). But in Laing's view diagnosis is literally 'seeing through', both looking *at* the categories that we see through, and seeing *through* what appears so concrete—the standpoint we adopt conditions what we see, whether we attribute agency or mechanical processes to ourselves or patients. For Laing, attributions of autism, lack of affect and relationship applied at least as much to those doing the diagnosing as those diagnosed. In Laing's view the scientific objective 'look' stands opposed to the empathic approach—one cannot move into an empathetic mode while retaining a view of the patient as an organism. 'To try to find understanding within that way of looking', Laing told me, 'is like trying to buy a camel in a donkey market'.

Laing emphasized the importance of the point of view of the observer who partly determined the observational field: 'the standard psychiatric patient is a function of the standard psychiatrist and the standard mental hospital' (p. 24). In his 1964 Preface to *The Divided Self*, he lamented that he had written 'too much about Them and not enough about Us' (p. 11). Much of his later work would rectify this flaw; he systematically concentrated on contexts and meta-contexts in his project to render mental illness more intelligible.

The Divided Self was a radical book when it appeared—it remains a remarkable one. It is still refreshing in its closeness to schizophrenic experience and in its attempts to find at least part of an explanation in terms of human agency. In a period in which the biological psychiatric standpoint has become dominant, *The Divided Self* remains a powerful reminder of the advantages of a sensibility which adopts an existential, psychodynamic, philosophical point of departure that takes the full significance of human agency into account instead of denying it.

The Divided Self was the first major work in existential psychoanalysis to make a mark on the English-speaking world. The existentialist collection, *Existence* (May et al 1958), with its complex Heideggerian focus, appeared just two years earlier but its influence did not extend beyond a limited number of psychotherapists and academics. In contrast *The Divided Self* became popular, resonating with a far wider audience. Undoubtedly *The Divided Self* is indebted to the object relations theories especially of D. W. Winnicott. Laing's discussions of the 'true self' and 'false self systems' (not one but a number of false selves) owed much to object relations theory, particularly D. W. Winnicott with whom Laing worked. Laing sent his manuscript to Winnicott 'I've written a study (c. 80,000 words) on schizoid and schizophreic states, in particular trying to describe the transition from a sane to a mad way of being in the world. It draws its inspiration very largely from your writings'. Winnicott was so enthusiastic that he read it in two hours (Rodman 2003, p. 243). According to Laing, the schizophrenic's vulnerable true self does not feel it is participating in the activities of the false self systems which mask it (p. 74). Although such an object relations view is, I believe, quite incompatible with Sartre's view which assumes there to be no human nature or essential self with any characteristics except the inevitability of agency and choice, Laing's false self systems or personas can be understood as cases of Sartrean self-deception. In fact, Laing highlighted the importance of understanding truth, deception and mystification in the world of the schizophrenic. Listening as a way of reaching the patient's truth was important for Laing as it was for Freud.

As I have said, Laing's position owed much to the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre had become well-known at the time in Anglophone countries largely through his plays and novels as well as through his role as a public intellectual. Sartre's basic tenet was the ineluctable freedom and agency of all human beings. The world, for Sartre, was divided into 'being-for-itself' (the human world) and 'being-in-itself' (the non-human world). Human beings are characterized by freedom and agency no matter how much we attempt to escape this situation—our being is always in question and, while we are alive, we are never identical with what we have been or done. The non-human world is that of identity, it belongs to things and processes which do not have transcendent goals. Sartre coined the term *'mauvaise foi'* ('self-deception') for our efforts to escape our responsibility as free

agents by treating ourselves or others as things. Given freedom as the point of departure, for Sartre, 'mental illness' can be seen as a way out—perhaps, as Laing was to put it, an attempt to live in an otherwise unlivable situation—no matter how alienated they may be, patients like all other humans, always exercise some degree of choice. The task of existential psychoanalysis is to explore how patients' original and subsequent choices contribute to their present predicaments and self-deceptions (Sartre 1943).

The Divided Self was Sartre's existentialism blended with psychoanalytic object relations theory without the unconscious. Like Sartre, Laing rejects the Freudian unconscious—the Freudian concept of 'the unconscious' is only mentioned in *The Divided Self* to disagree with the application of the concept to a patient's basic existential position of wanting to achieve 'ontological security' (pp. 56-7). Nevertheless, Laing like Sartre respected Freud's inspiration—Freud was 'the greatest psychopathologist', a 'hero' who 'descended to the "Underworld" and met there stark terrors. He carried with him his theory as a Medusa's head which turned these terrors to stone'. For Laing the confrontation with the 'terrors' had distorted and ossified the psychoanalytic vision (p. 25).

Laing was profoundly interested in investigating the patients' experiences of interpersonal relationships, familial, social and psychological situations. In a real sense, his work tried to be a living phenomenology. The households or asylum communities he was responsible for setting up in London from the late 1960s onwards took the primacy of experience of the often psychotic residents as their basic ground. By having their experience taken seriously instead of being invalidated, the patients felt heard, often for the first time. These therapeutic communities were homes or dwellings in which the normal social stigmas and censures did not prevent patients exploring their own personal and interpersonal worlds (Kirsner 1976).

Laing's crucial philosophical concepts of 'ontological security' and 'ontological insecurity' are about our 'at-homeness' in the world and owe much to Martin Heidegger. For Laing, the ontologically secure person feels his or her life as 'real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question' (p. 41). This is not the case for the ontologically insecure person who in ordinary circumstances 'may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question' (p. 42).

It is striking how much *The Divided Self* adopts and develops Sartre's existentialist positions, particularly Sartre's concept of self-deception. *The Divided Self* is structured around ideas such as anxiety, implosion, petrification, engulfment, ontological security, reality, dread, being at home, alienation, agency and responsibility. These existential concepts focus on the vagaries of the relationship of freedom and the self and form part of a phenomenology of mental illness in which interactions between self and others affect the very constitution and experience of the 'self' and 'reality'. More importantly, the psychotic is understood in terms of attempts to solve existential problems through the use of the person's ineluctable freedom and subjectivity. In this Laing is a firm follower of Sartre. The hysteric's dissociations are for Laing best described as Sartre's concept of 'self-deception'. Laing sees much of schizophrenia as

> simply nonsense, red-herring speech, prolonged filibustering to throw dangerous people off the scent, to create boredom and futility in others. The schizophrenic is often making a fool of himself and the doctor. He is playing at being mad to avoid at all costs the possibility of being held responsible for a single coherent idea, or intention (p. 164).

Even in this early work Laing takes note of the family's role in the occurrence of schizophrenia. The mother and the family may 'impede rather than facilitate the child's capacity to participate in a real shared world, as self with other'. For Laing 'schizophrenia is a possible outcome of a more than usual difficulty in being a whole person with the other, and with not sharing the common-sense (i.e.. the community sense) way of experiencing oneself in the world' (p. 189). The development of this approach involving the role of the social context in which schizophrenia takes place forms the axis of Laing's concerns throughout his career about schizophrenia.

Laing's explanations for the phenomenology may be questioned but his sensitive and rich descriptions of schizophrenics' experiences reveal how much of schizophrenic behavior consists of strategies to live in what schizophrenics feel to be an unlivable world; these behaviors are ways out which take the less unattractive and threatening horn of a dilemma. Laing asserts that even the schizoid state 'can be an attempt to preserve a being that is precariously structured' (p. 77). In other words, it is the result of an active choice within certain parameters.

The intelligibility of social events must be seen in the contexts of time and space, an explanation of what seems to present itself must not be taken for granted. One of Laing's most important gifts was the ability to suspend judgment and listen to what was in front of him. *The Divided Self* is a sceptical book which does not so much provide answers as stimulate more questions and challenges. Almost every page of this still very stimulating and lively book challenges us to rethink our conceptions in the direction of reaffirming that both doctors and patients are first and foremost human agents.

However, Laing almost certainly overrated the magnitude of the patient's choices in schizophrenia—by challenging the role of unconscious factors as well as organic ones, he was left with little alternative. But he had tried to redress the balance a little in favour of the schizophrenic not being merely the victim of an organic process. Laing's later ideas which developed the role of the family and society caused much further debate—many clinicians now see psychosis as the result of psychosocial factors together with biological ones.

2. *The Politics of Experience*

Although published in 1967 *The Politics of Experience* represents the development of Laing's views between 1962 and 1967. Here, Laing focuses on the centrality of the concept of experience, evidenced by these chapter titles: 'Persons and Experience', 'The Psychotherapeutic Experience', 'The Mystification of Experience', 'Schizophrenic Experience', 'Transcendental Experience' as well as the end part which dealt with a ten day experiential voyage. For Laing our data are first of all experiential. As I noted above, Laing was influenced by David Hume. For Hume, the archetypal empiricist, all we can know is the experience which provides our starting point. Like Hume, Laing was a profound sceptic, fundamentally questioning given established ways of thinking, moving

from physical and intrapersonal 'reality' to interpersonal space as the given ground of experience.

The Politics of Experience is a mixed bag. From a contemporary perspective, it stands out as part of the climate of sixties opinion and a dramatic clarion call to that generation. The introduction describes our setting in the very New Left terms of the time:

> There is little conjunction of truth and social 'reality'. Around us are pseudo-events, to which we adjust with a false consciousness adapted to see these events as true and real, and even as beautiful. In the society of men the truth resides now less in what things are than in what they are not. Our social realities are so ugly if seen in the light of exiled truth, and beauty is almost no longer possible if it is not a lie. We are still half alive, living in the often filibrating heartland of a senescent capitalism (p. 11).

In this setting it is 'the requirement of the present' to 'provide a thoroughly self-conscious and self-critical human account of man'. But while our starting point is always our 'alienation', for Laing, 'we are all murderers and prostitutes'. Humanity was 'estranged from its authentic possibilities'. Very fiery and relevant language 35 years ago when it became the hallmark of a generation. But, we may ask now if not then, what exactly does all this mean? Does it make much sense? Laing had constantly protested that he had been misinterpreted, which he probably often was, but the introduction to *The Politics of Experience* certainly gives credibility to some of the views of Laing as a counter cultural, new left political radical who added personal and transcendental experience to a location within social and political categories. Our alienation which, for Laing, goes to the roots, forms the foundation of any investigation of the sanity of common sense or the madness of madmen. As 'crazed and bemused creatures' we can barely glimpse our true selves and are strangers to each other.

In *The Politics of Experience* Laing closely linked the idea of the false self or mask with the new left and Marxist 'false consciousness' of the social totality. Combining Marxism and existentialism Laing maintained that our alienation was the social product of the violence of human beings upon one another.

Although it struck a chord with so many at the time, such rhetoric gives Laing a lot to answer for! It was framed in the excessive language of the time, making generalizations about whole cultures by placing all-encompassing, collective abstract nouns as the subjects of very emotive sentences. *The Politics of Experience* is at bottom a work of rhetoric, enjoining us to question our categories—but exactly who are 'us' and who are 'them'? The world seems to be simplistically divided into good and bad. Especially on a rereading the rhetorical power of *The Politics of Experience* is striking. In contradistinction to *The Divided Self, The Self and Others* and *Self and Others,* much of *The Politics of Experience* is really quite extreme. The tone is oracular, prophetic, and full of hyperbole. There are strings of emotional assertion upon generalization upon assertion which struck the mood of the times among 'us', if not among 'them'.

Laing begins the section 'Persons and Experience' with the assumption that we experience only each other's behaviour and that the task of social phenomenology is to relate my experience of the other's behavior with the other's experience of my behavior as inter-experience (p. 15). Once the divide is made between experience and behavior, it

becomes clear that experience must be an intrinsically private event. This is very much an assumption—people can be very unempathic, empathy can certainly be abused, but is empathy intrinsically impossible? Are we so different from each other? We should remember that Laing follows Sartre in claiming that violence dictates so many interpersonal experiences and that attributions of sanity and madness are used in promoting this agenda. Although this is more akin to rave than to argument, I think Laing's point is that we should not *presume* that we know what the other person is experiencing, certainly not without asking him or her, that we should not equate real categories of sanity and madness with the way people behave socially. Laing wants us to adopt an individual sensibility, it is an approach toward another person that brackets out assumed knowledge of them. Yet it should be borne in mind that the radical subjectivity assumed in the experience-behaviour dichotomy makes community impossible except by contract. Throughout *The Politics of Experience* the major thrust is existentialist rather than Marxist. In fact, Laing told me that by the time he was writing *The Politics of Experience,* 'anywhere in any way an ideological Marxist. For me, academically, I had never studied Marx enough to entitle myself in my own view to call myself a serious "in" professional Marxist. I have read most of the major things of Marx, I didn't make a further special study of him because I didn't feel it was worth my while— I couldn't reconcile the tremendous building up of a picture with a serious study of the facts. I was never a Marxist' (Kirsner 1997, p. 44).

For Laing, 'experience is the *only* evidence'. While our experiences of each other are not 'inside' our physical bodies, nonetheless our experiences are invisible to each other. While I do not experience your experience, I do experience you as experiencing, and infer from my experience of your experiences of my experience, etc. The science of social phenomenology is distinct from a natural scientific approach where a science is 'a form of knowledge adequate to its subject'. Laing maintains that the distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer' make assumptions that stand in the way of our making sense of the data of inter-experience.

Laing defines a 'person': 'in terms of experience, as a centre of orientation of the objective universe; and in terms of behaviour, as the origin of actions. Personal experience transforms a given field into a field of intention and action' (p. 20). Often fields of intention and action are treated as objective by natural scientific approaches, the objective becomes subjective through our involvement. We often attempt to escape from the subjective, from being a person, attempting to eliminate experience. With this escape from personhood, once again, although Laing does not say so, we have Sartre's *mauvaise foi* where we treat ourselves and others as though we or they were things, as though we were not responsible for our actions.

Laing claims that Freud's major contribution was his '*demonstration* that the *ordinary* person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be' (p. 22). We have forgotten our dreams, our fantasies, deny the inner world—all of which 'represents a devastation of our experience', based on the divorce of experience from behaviour (p. 23). I cannot imagine that Freud would have agreed—Freud's view was tragic, not romantic. For Freud civilization was inherently flawed in its Mephistopholean pact that exchanged happiness for a degree of security and sublimation for love, all under the influence of the death drive. Even early on Freud thought that the aim of analysis was 'to

transform hysterical misery into common unhappiness' and later argued with Einstein about whether human aggression was innate and was not socially produced. The id was not the repository for what was truly good and the soft voice of reason was significant in keeping the irrational from total domination.

But for Laing, so-called 'normality' is the product of repression, denial' etc. which are destructive to our experience, estranging us from the structure of being (pp. 23-24). 'The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man' (p. 24). Now, since 'normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the past fifty years', the relation between normality and violence demands investigation and the relation between sanity, madness and normality. Since our behavior is a function of our experience, if our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive (p. 24). But all is not lost. Disagreeing with Herbert Marcuse, Laing says, somewhat sentimentally, that every time a new baby is born, there is hope. Again, we find the Sartrean ineluctability of freedom thesis and an emphasis on seeing through deceptions.

According to Laing, the only way we can act is on our own or on the other's experience. In so doing I can confirm or encourage or deny or discourage my or his or her experience (p. 29). We can dissociate ourselves from our own action by using defence mechanisms which can devastate the person's experience. Importantly, another can invalidate my experience by saying it is unimportant, can change its modality from memory to imagination and invalidate its content. This Laing does by borrowing Marx's concept of 'mystification' without attribution (p. 31).

But explicitly following Sartre Laing writes of the centrality of negation, of the injection of nonbeing into the world breaking the plenitude of being. And if we strip away the social 'things' and reveal who we 'really' are, Laing avers there is no-thing between us. Again, this is high rhetoric—there is a romantic vision of the real self or nothingness below, after the diagnosis of mystifications has revealed how ordinary social life is so extraordinarily oppressive. In *The Politics of Experience* Laing himself invalidates and deprecates ordinary experience as was the norm in the 'Little Boxes' era. During the early 1970s after his return from Ceylon, he began to move away from such extremes. But for the Laing of *The Politics of Experience* the creative person was in touch with his or her nonbeing and to that extent estranged from the pseudo-wants, pseudo-values and pseudo-realities of the endemic delusion of life and death and give us 'the acts of creation that we despise and crave' (p. 37). Our fundamental nonbeing is the creative source which must be recognized and tapped. According to Laing, I am disjoined from my behaviour, my behaviour and experience are disjoined from others' behaviour and experience. But this is the beginning point of the schizoid experience—I am never a whole person, my body and mind are quite separate even if somehow related.

'The Psychotherapeutic Experience' again contains a romantic vision of an unalienated situation. Psychotherapy involves 'the paring away of all that stands between us, the props, masks, roles, defences, anxieties, projections, introjections, in short, all the carry-overs from the past... that we use wittingly or unwittingly as our currency of relationships. It is this currency, these very media, that re-create and intensify the conditions of alienation that originally occasioned them' (p. 39).

The aim then of therapy is to eliminate that which stands in the way of fully meeting each other. What we need, according to Laing, are concepts that will enable us to understand the relationship between our experience and behaviour in the context of the relationship between therapist and patient. A critical theory must be able to place all theories and practices within the ontological context of being human. Laing emphasizes the central importance of persons in understanding the relation between experience and behaviour.

Laing believes that the mystification of experience is ubiquitous in the contemporary world, at least of *The Politics of Experience.* Normality is achieved when by the age of fifteen a human being is a 'half crazed creature, more or less adjusted to a mad world'. This ‘mad world’ is characterized by the reign of violence masquerading as love, where violence constrains freedom with a lack of concern. The devastation of experience takes place through violence by the world and by ourselves on ourselves (p. 50-1). In fact, 'only by the most outrageous violation of ourselves have we achieved our capacity to live in relative adjustment to a civilization apparently driven to its own destruction' (p. 64).

In Laing’s discussion of ‘Us and Them’ Sartre’s later concepts in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) are importantly represented. It should be remembered that Laing and Cooper summarized Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* in *Reason and Violence* in 1964. There and here Laing discusses the inherently violent nature of groups, the relations between the individual and the group, and that of series and nexus in the family.

Given Laing’s stance in terms of violence and groups, it is no great step to attempt to locate and understand the role of the major diagnosed mental illness, schizophrenia as a function of social relationships. Laing uses labelling theory to understand diagnosis as an interpersonal event, to explore how roles develop in psychiatrist and patient, and particularly how the experience of the patient is invalidated. Gregory Bateson’s ‘double bind’ theory (which explains the enjoining of contradictory behaviours on different levels) provides an alternative pathway to understanding the confusional states in schizophrenia (pp. 88-98).

But Laing extends this well beyond schizophrenia itself in using the analogy of a formation of airplanes that is observed from the ground. Even if one plane is ‘out of formation’, the whole formation may be off course. Laing suggests that our view of sanity and madness has been similarly skewed. In a condition of alienation, perhaps normals are ‘off course’. Laing regards the most profound change in recent psychiatry to have been the questioning of psychiatric assumptions themselves—if nothing else, schizophrenia is a political event occurring in social space.

Laing goes still further than this too. The schizophrenic may find himself or herself on a journey within the lost inner realm, a voyage which just might be part of a natural healing process. Perhaps, Laing suggests, we should accord the schizophrenic who has come back to us no less respect than returning explorers were in the Renaissance. Laing believes that future generations will view our present age as an age of darkness and that schizophrenia was a way that some ordinary people had of seeing the light break through (p. 107).

I think that Laing’s approach to schizophrenia should be viewed in terms of his focus on the importance of looking at the invalidation and loss of a whole realm of experience of

the inner world. For Laing, violence has been so successful in seeming to take this realm from the rest of us that schizophrenia can be seen as a last-ditch way we have of encountering this lost world. Whether any transcendental experience is mad or mystical, it is testament to the importance of inner experience which has been devastated by the outer but which is so essential to a sane, whole way of living.

The Politics of Experience was excessive, romantic, rhetorical, oracular, and was very much a sixties book. However, its sensibility and preoccupations with the value and validation of experience in its social context put *The Politics of Experience* right at the heart of Laing's project, making it a fascinating continuation of *The Divided Self,* as well as a work that can help to make *The Divided Self* more intelligible in broader terms. Clearly, the tone of these works is quite different. The first was the product of the mid-fifties, the second of a radically different time a decade later. *The Politics of Experience* has many faults but some serious and important ideas, which develop earlier themes, can be found among the rhetoric. Although *The Politics of Experience* was his most well-known work, that book was not typical of his approach either before or after the mid to late 1960s.

I believe that throughout his career Laing covered the range of philosophical problems described by Kant. He applied them in particular to his chosen field of investigation, the exploration of the interconnections between human nature, experience, relationships, mental illness and society. The interrogatory nature of his endeavours which asked us to question fundamental assumptions in our attitudes is a significant contribution to our ways of seeing and knowing.

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