Laing on Love

Douglas Kirsner, PhD

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Love lies at the heart of Laing's approach. In this chapter I want to sketch out the basic approach and parameters that Laing adopted, sourcing not only his works, films and interviews but also lectures he delivered in the 60s and 70s.

Love is central to the human study of human beings and cannot be excluded without gross distorting what the method and what is observed and understood.

Thus, Laing was very concerned about the factoring out of love in the acquisition, description and evaluation of knowledge that brings about a false objectivity that feeds on itself, appearing to exclude human intention and action as major factors. Knowledge about human beings should of necessity factor in human values, contributions and involvements. It needs to be personal. The final page of Laing's memoir to the age of 30, *Wisdom Madness and Folly* (1985), is about the exclusion of the personal from psychiatry. The personal, Laing avers, is as much ignored and feared by professionals as it is by patients.

'Psychiatry', Laing says, 'tries to be as scientific, impersonal and objective as possible towards what is most personal and subjective. The disordered suffering treated by psychiatrists has to do with what are our most personal and private thoughts and desires. No other branch of medicine has to contend with this domain so much. Nothing whatever in Western medical training exists to adapt students and young doctors to integrating the personal aspect into clinical theory and practice. The result is that when doctors are faced with this inner suffering, they are disoriented, insofar as they refer themselves back to their conventional training for orientation'.

At 30 already having written *The Divided Self,* Laing says, 'I knew what I wanted to address myself to for the foreseeable future in theory and in practice. I began to focus on the personal factor. You and me' *{Wisdom, Madness and Folly,* p. 146).

An abiding and dominant theme throughout Laing's future work is the personal and the exclusion of the personal--I don't think it's too much to say, love and the exclusion of love,

although, Laing says, no other term has been more prostituted, as he says as early as *The Divided Self.* (p. 34).

As Laing stated there, a science deals with what is appropriate to its field, and the study of human beings entails the human prisms to see what is going on. As he argued in *The Divided Self,* the appropriate science for human beings is the science of persons. Diagnosis for Laing was etymologically 'seeing through', which involved both SEEING through the prism of what goes on as much as seeing THROUGH to the reality of what is going on. By valuing what we SEE, we can ignore what we see THROUGH. The human context is ineradicable even if its elimination may appear more attractive to a scientific objectivist approach of modern times. The more intention and love are factored out of the equation, the more they appear irrelevant, yet that exclusion distorts the phenomenological context still further.

Love is and has always been a many-splendored thing, which needs to be seen in the context of the use of the term. Just as Eskimos have many terms for snow, the Greeks who studied love found, as Mike Thompson has found, at least eight terms for love. So we have Eros, erotic love; caritas, charitable love; agape or spiritual love; and philia or filial love. It's worth mentioning at this point that love was so central to Laing that he with some colleagues founded the Philadelphia Association in 1965 with its guiding principle filial love. It was set up as a charity by his father and colleagues in 1965 to utilize an open-minded alternative approach to mental illness and psychotherapy on the basis of philia or brotherly or sisterly love. The brochure from the early period declared on its frontispiece:

> *Philadelphia (Greek): brotherly or sisterly love. '... I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it'.*
> *(Revelation 3.8)*

The articles of association include:

> To relieve mental illness of all descriptions, in particular schizophrenia.
> To undertake, and further, research into the causes of mental illness, the means of its detection and prevention, and its treatment.
> To provide, and further, the profusion of residential accommodation for persons suffering or who have suffered from mental illness

You can see how the Philadelphia Association, based as it was upon love, was a central thread to Laing and his work.

We have Aristotle's mode of friendship, which significantly includes love, in terms of three approaches—love as about utility or business, achieving useful aims; love as providing pleasure or entertainment; and what we often think of as true love, the love that values the other in terms of his or her true nature or is-ness as valuable in itself for its own sake. Eros plays a central part in Freud's approach both in its general sense of life energy and in its decisive role in many kinds of relationships. And who can forget the pleasure principle? Although the term 'love' is used across a range of contexts with many meanings and aspects, love always involves something distinctively human. We exclude love as a crucial factor at the peril of losing any real understanding of our fundamental mode of being.

Since the eighteenth and certainly the nineteenth century, objectivity has become the lynchpin of the scientific conception of the nature of knowledge itself. Objective is valued in the natural sciences over subjective, and subjectivity is seen as best eliminated in science. I am not suggesting that we blame science itself. On the positive side, the scientific and technological world of modern human beings has brought about massive advances in our quantity and quality of life. The overarching natural scientific approach and look ought not be condemned in a blanket way. As Laing says, he wants the dentist to take a scientific and detached look at his teeth and how best to treat them. It's all about context. It's about the appropriate and nuanced use of science and technology as a very useful servant but not master for human ends. Of course, psychoanalysis which focuses on experience, was formed in that era too. But by and large, natural science involves trying not to tamper with the observations by taking the person out of the equation, especially when it comes to human issues.

Here I want to quote Laing from some very relevant lectures he presented in the 1970s surrounding these issues.

Laing says that contemporary science is characterizable by a phrase of CF von Weizsicker, a twentieth century German theoretical physicist and philosopher, who said, summarizing the nature of the nature of modern science.

As von Weizsicker's puts it somewhat poetically in his 1949 book, *The History of Nature*,

> The scientific and technical world of modern man is a result of his daring enterprise: knowledge without love. The serpent in paradise urges on man knowledge without love. Antichrist is the power in the history that leads loveless knowledge into the battle of destruction against love. But it is at the same time the power that destroys itself in its triumph. The battle is still raging. We are in the midst of it, at a post not of our choosing, where we must prove ourselves.

A major problem lies in the mindset of scientists and doctors who have often been trained to dissect frogs and cut dead animals, taking them apart to see how they move. What is the relationship between dissecting a frog and talking to a psychotic? This training distances the doctor and scientist from life, moving on and generalizing from dissecting animals to understanding the meaning and purposes of human beings.

If we aim to understand or know one another better, Laing says it makes a difference if such knowledge is based on whether is excluded from the intentions or objects of study. You can only recognize the existence of love by being open to its being there. ('What is the Philadelphia Association?' 11,12.75). Laing suggests that feeling for others means 'that one leaves the other alone, that one in fact doesn't interfere, influence, tamper with, or in any way transgress or intrude grossly or subtly on the being of the other person'. He recalls that St Thomas Aquinas even defines love as the knowledge of being in itself in its is-ness. Without the presence of love, many human facts remain undisclosed (see *Facts of Life,* p. 97)

Laing explains in a lecture:

> So you can't know what the being of oneself, or of the other in his or her or its is-ness is, if one tampers with it, as Tao Te Ching says in so many words very clearly.

Laing is referring to these important words from the Tao Te Ching:

> Those that would gain what is under heaven by tempering with it—
> I have seen that they do not succeed…
> Those that tamper with it harm it.
> Those that grab it lose it.

Laing comments:

> It's like trying to make ice by boiling water. And one can't leave the other alone, unless one has got a feeling for the other, otherwise one tramples over and doesn't even know one's doing it.

So Laing was concerned with love as not being tampered with so that the other is left to be what he as they are. This certainly resonates with Buddhist concepts of attachment and detachment. In any case, we can see that the observer is part of the observational field and affects what is observed. How we approach towards the other affects what we see, and whether the approach is with or without love in the equation makes all the difference.

But I want to go back to a chapter in *The Politics of Experience,* The Mystification of Experience', originally titled 'Violence and Love' published in 1965. The chapter contains insights in terms of understanding and updating Karl Marx's original concept of mystification, which, as I suggested two years ago here, is essential to understanding Laing's contributions to the nature of therapy. Whatever its persuasive attributes, this chapter demonstrates an unusual lack of nuance on Laing's part. Individual detail and nuance is, I think, an essential part of Laing's skeptical approach. But this chapter is more of a poetic and rhetorical desperate plea, akin to Alan Ginsberg's *Howl.*

To recapitulate, Laing adapts Marx's concept of 'mystification' to add the forms of reciprocal interaction of person with person to the psychological realm. Marx uses the idea of mystification to explain what happens when social relations are obscured or how far social relations form the world.

For Laing, individuals are not islands, and interactions and perceptions mould behaviour and judgment of experience. Laing suspected that there may be different interactions within families, especially those with schizophrenics as members. Laing understood the nature of our inevitable interactions as involving communication, ascription and commands that needed decrypting or deciphering. Laing states:

> To mystify, in the active sense, is to befuddle, cloud, obscure, mask whatever is going on, whether this be experience, action, or process, or whatever is "the issue." It

> induces confusion in the sense that there is failure to see what is "really" being experienced, or being done, or going on, and failure to distinguish or discriminate the actual issues. This entails the substitution of false for true constructions of what is being experienced, being done (praxis), or going on (process), and the substitution of false issues for the actual issues

Love is a prime vehicle for mystification in Laing's view. During the mid-sixties, Laing viewed love through the prism of overwhelming and ubiquitous violence, which often masqueraded as love. He proposed then that human beings are violated to the core in modern times, that we are influenced and manipulated at every level, beyond our knowing just like Herbert Marcuse's one dimensional man. Since violence seems to inhabit every aspect of the contemporary world even down to the devastation of experience, there is no room for love as such to even begin. In 1969 Laing's *The Politics of the Family* was a critique of the family demonstrating the destruction that goes on in the most intimate relationships, principally through mystification and confusion.

Freud was acutely aware of the disturbances to love that comes with culture or civilization. I referred to this at the first of these conferences in New York, During a 1980 interview with me, Laing refers to Freud's comment in *Civilization and its Discontents* where Freud stated:

> Among the works of the sensitive English writer, John Galsworthy... there is a short story of which I early formed a high opinion. It is called 'The Apple-Tree': and it brings home to us how the life of present- day civilized people leaves no room for the simple natural love of two human beings. (Freud, S. 1930, p. 105)

Writing around the same period as he wrote 'Violence and Love', Laing declared in his 1964 Preface to the Pelican Edition of *The Divided Self:*

> Freud insisted that our civilization is a repressive one. There is a conflict between the demands of conformity and the demands of our instinctive energies, explicitly sexual. Freud could see no easy resolution of this antagonism, and he came to believe that in our time the

> possibility of simple natural love between human beings had already been abolished (Laing, 1965, p. 10).

Perhaps *The Politics of Experience* is also in part Laing's update of *Civilization and its Discontents*. Love as inevitably tampered with by society so that there is no way it can emerge.

Laing suggests:

> Love and violence, properly speaking, are polar opposites. Love lets the other be, but with affection and concern. Violence attempts to constrain the other's freedom, to force him to act in the way we desire, but with ultimate lack of concern, with indifference to the other's own existence or destiny {*Politics of Experience*, p. 50).

This is all part of the fundamental error of treating persons as things or objects to be manipulated. According to Laing, persons experience whereas things behave. The natural scientific method that doesn't recognize this ends up with reified results don't recognize the fundamental 'ontological discontinuity between human beings and it-beings. Human beings relate to each other not simply externally, like two billiard balls, but by the relations of the two worlds of experience that come into play when two people meet. If human beings are not studied as human beings, then this once more is violence and mystification (p. 53).
For Laing in 1965, violence and intrusion are so ubiquitous, everything is so tampered with that there is no room for love which is on that account necessarily a fraud and a swindle. Laing certainly modified his position on love as he abandoned the all-encompassing overarching simplistic political view and also as he found love himself.

But all along, the principle of the idea of love itself was crucial to his philosophy and sensibility. As I suggested at the 2015 conference, Laing was a classical liberal or libertarian on the model of John Stuart Mill. He begins from the individual and their freedom of choice, not from the collective. His model of 'live and let live' is about leaving the individual alone within the law to pursue their own goals in their own way. Agreeing with both Sartre and Mill, for Laing the ability of the individual to make their own choices is a good in itself. Not being intruded upon, being left alone to be as free as possible to develop in one's own way, not being tampered with or violated even for one's own alleged good but respected, nurtured, cared for or nurtured so that one can blossom in one's own way, lies at the heart of Laing's

approach right across the board, including to human relations, psychiatry, therapy, politics, society, science and technology, birth, spirituality and love.

But then what is the nature of that love, and is it possible in practice?

From early in his life Laing was acutely aware of issues that stand in the way of love from an early age some of which are so obvious that they are hard to see. He recalls in *Did you used to be RD Laing:*

> I can remember vividly around the age of 7 or 8 a boy in my class at school. I went to his house, another house, another world, amazing. I think that type of childhood I had has obviously sensitized me to this area of life more than most of other people are sensitized to this area. So it occasions me maybe the greatest consolations I've had in life. And the greatest pain I've had in life have been in relationship to other people.

Laing continues with the song 'Nobody knows the trouble I've seen' in the background on the film).

> From my earliest days in Glasgow, Scotland where I was born in 1927, there was my father and mother, and they did they did not seem to be happy. And I addressed myself at that time to why did these people seem to be so miserable, what are they unhappy about? It had a great deal to do with how they were not getting on very well with each other. And they were entangled, and I was entangled. And they were entangled with all those terribly little things that I have spent the last 50 of my 60 years or so since I was about 10 years old trying to figure out. A lot of it seems to go around the issue of love.

It is worth noting here that Laing's own early bad personal experience of love continued in one way or another into the early and mid 60s when he was very negative about the real chances of love. But then he met Jutta, a resident of Kingsley Hall during 1966 and 1967 and love bloomed. They married in 1974 and they had two sons and a daughter. There was a bad breakup when Jutte left him, then divorcing him in 1988. Some of this in a fictionalized way is portrayed in *Mad to be Normal,* which we will see on Wednesday. So it is interesting to

trace the evolution of Laing's views on love in tandem with his own experiences from childhood to some miserable years, good years, and then some miserable ones again.

Much of Laing's project is to explain why this is so by deconstructing the knots, ties, tangles, impasses and deceptions that challenge or even may masquerade as love, that stand in the way of the fruition of love. He doesn't question love as such, but the obstacles to love; sometimes even the possibility of love. He maps how violent behavior may appear to be love, or even masquerade as love. Treating people without respect or labeling them might appear to everybody involved to be in their own best interests.

But the obstacles to love may not be deliberately created. The term 'masquerading' sounds intentionally deceptive but it may not be. Laing was captivated by investigations into communications and interpersonal perceptions, how we don't know what each other thinks and certainly not whether they know that we know what they do or that we know what they think we think we think they think. People may be deceived that they are not deceived. We are often mystified and confused in our perceptions and intentions, and Laing wanted to see how the knots in the politics of relationships could be untangled, how the codes could be deciphered. Laing remarked in a lecture to the White Institute in 1967 that Freud's classic work, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life,* is about 'how the truth will out'. And this may often be unbeknown to ourselves at the time, such as in slips of the tongue or jokes.

Laing asks, 'Do you love me? Nobody loves you…. Believe me…Don't believe me but don't believe me because I say so. That's my mother', Laing recalls of his mother whom he regarded as a witch, an understandable charge, given that she made a voodoo doll of him and used to stick pins into it at night. Laing was tortured by love all is life, obsesses with love and how destructive families can be. Laing felt many people got caught in this kind of trap that 'they ought to trust or believe the person they love because they love them'.

But Laing didn't see why that would follow, given that we are used to so much disinformation, even fake news, and deception everywhere. This is even more true in relation to sexual relationships. But Laing claims, 'Bedrooms are the most dangerous places on God's earth. They are more dangerous than the streets of Los Angeles. More crimes of violence are committed in bedrooms. More murders are committed in bedrooms than in any other location'. Laing was clearly seized by the need to be clear-sighted as to what is actually

taking place so as to act meaningfully. Unknotting the tangles that love has woven along with everything else is essential in this. According to Laing, ‘Any illusion, any idealization, any disparagement, any way we have of projecting, or denying the existence of the other person as he or she is in his or her own is-ness is not loving them. Really to be with another person in a completely open hearted unguarded way where one is not on one’s own part canceling or changing or altering or modifying who that other person is to suit one’s own book’. Laing contrasts this with co-presence, which is being actually present to each other without reservation, a precondition to communion, which he thought the perfect way we should ordinarily be together.

In *The Facts of life,* Laing describes how a patient came downstairs at home to see her husband with a naked woman. Thereupon her husband told her, ‘That isn’t a woman, that is a waterfall’. And she felt she was spinning around she might faint…. Some people in that moment of vertigo lose themselves by believing what they’re told at the expense of then you can’t believe your eyes or believe your ears’, Laing explains. This is not the same as jealousy, but in addition the pain of discovery of having been deceived and betrayed, one’s sense of reality is blown, and may lead to having to revise one’s entire history. I remember Laing telling the story of an elderly patient who had just discovered that her husband had a mistress—for forty years! She came to Laing not because of jealousy but primarily her whole history and sense of reality lay in tatters. According to Laing, ‘Deprivation of reality, one’s being deprived of access as to what’s going on. And very often that sets up a really mind-boggling conflict. Are you to believe the evidence of your intuition or your senses, or are you to believe what the other person says?’ Derealization, the sense of reality breaking down, betrayal and deep ontological insecurity can contribute to driving a person crazy.

Laing was very influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre’s dark views on human relations, from Sartre’s early to late works, which always focused on how almost invariably tangled up relationships are, even with the best of intentions. For Sartre, relationships are always conflict-ridden wrestles for control in a master-slave dialectic, and are locked in conflict as either sadistic or masochistic. ’Do you Love me? could be a remake of Sartre’s 1944 play No Exit where ‘Hell is other people’. Sartre’s later work, which Laing approved of, focuses on the oppressive structures of groups where outcomes so often resulted in counter-finality, that is, the opposite of what was intended in a game of Loser Wins. Laing was intent on revealing

the games people play often unbeknown to themselves or even others. ‘Games people play’ was a Grammy Award song debuted by Joe South in 1968 and covered by Jerry Lee Lewis, Tina Turner and Inner Circle among others.

In a too often neglected book on the dynamics of communication and miscommunication, *Interpersonal Perception,* which Laing published in 1967 along with fellow researchers Philipson and Lee, researched the differences between levels of communication—questioning what I think, what I think you think, what I think you think I think, and so on; along with what you think, what you think I think, what you think I think you think, etc. and how these all meld or mostly don’t meld together. I often attribute my own perceptions to others, and vice versa, so that systematic miscommunications occur. Then there are the repressions, invalidation beyond confusions, misattributions and projections, that result in mystifications and reifications. It’s a matter of levels of communication, sometimes confused and conflicting with each other So a communication on one level might clash with a communication on a meta level, without conscious awareness. This was the double bind or double message that could drive people crazy—well known as the work of Gregory Bateson and Harold Searles-–—come here and go away at the same time. Or a message of ‘I love you’ while communicating pushing the other away on a nonverbal level. So it is a political kind of challenge in communications to try to reveal and unshackle mystifications, confusions and conflicts within dyadic and group family structures. Laing moved beyond a one-person psychology to at least a two-person psychology or even a group systemic psychology. I quoted Laing at last year’s conference as seeing the big innovations of the sixties as the revolution in understanding the science of communications. Love is the perfect storm location for different levels of communications, given the physical, neurological, mental, spiritual, linguistic, non-verbal, irrational, unconscious, passionate and intense levels of communication involved. Moreover, Laing was focused on understanding game theory or set theory in terms of group theory and transformations involving mapping from one set onto another. Thus there is an overlay or imprint from one generation only to another in a transference over space and time. People today are influenced by the image of their parents and grandparents from the past with projections and introjections that remain active.

But I think the clash, conflict and interplay of levels is what is particularly confusing and mystifying from Laing’s perspective. He begins *Knots* with this simple form:

They are playing a game. They are playing at not playing a game. If I show them I think they are, I will break the rules and they will punish me.
I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game.

Here is one example from *Knots* of the kind of interpersonal misperceptions that are way beyond a one person psychology that can stand in the way of harmony in a relationship:

Jack can see that he sees
what Jill can't see
but Jack can't see
that Jill can't see
that Jill can't see it.

Jack tries to get Jill to see
that Jack can see
what Jill can't see
but Jack can't see
that Jill can't see that Jill can't see it.

Jack sees
there is something Jill can't see
and Jack sees
that Jill can't see she can't see it.

Although Jack can see Jill can't see she can't see it
he can't see that he can't see it himself.

Here is a similar dynamic from *Do you love me?* that questions and reveals some of the patterns of the obstacles in love's path:

Do you love me?

do you love me?
yes I love you

best of all?
yes best of all
more than the whole world?
yes more than the whole world
do you like me
yes I like you
do you like being near me?
yes I like being near you…

do you really love me?
yes I really love you
say “I love you”
I love you
do you want to hug me?

yes I want to hug you, and cuddle you
and bill and coo with you…
swear you’ll never leave me
I swear I’ll never ever leave you, cross my heart
and hope to die if I tell a lie
(*pause*)
do you *really* love me?

What does all this have to do with therapy? A great deal since it reveals how therapy can heal, by not tampering with people, being sympathic and there with them, valuing and respecting their subjectivity. Laing himself had an uncanny ability to bring love out in the most existential sense of letting the other be in their own space and way, not manipulate or change them but get to know them. A kind of love and nurture. The further means of doing so is to explore distortions, tangles, knots, impasses, mystifications and confusions so as to recognize what is going on and help bring about more trust and ontological security in oneself and close others if possible. Love is not intrinsically destructive or else therapy would be impossible.

So in this light I was musing about how best to summarise Laing's 'live and let live' approach to love, which involves respect, friendship and not tampering, at the same time as referring to the pitfalls of love and therapy, when a song Bob Dylan came to mind. It's from his 1964 album, *Another Side of Bob Dylan* and titled 'All I really want to do'. Laing and Dylan were on the same page, they appealed to the same people looking for the same kinds of things in similar circumstances. Laing's attitude and approach to love and therapy, of not tampering, leaving the other to be themselves and respecting them in who they are in themselves, living and letting live, are, I think, encapsulated in Dylan's pertinent lyrics:

I ain't lookin' to compete with you
Beat or cheat or mistreat you
Simplify you, classify you
Deny, defy or crucify you
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

No, and I ain't lookin' to fight with you
Frighten you or tighten you
Drag you down or drain you down
Chain you down or bring you down
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

I ain't lookin' to block you up
Shock or knock or lock you up
Analyze you, categorize you
Finalize you or advertise you
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

I don't want to straight-face you
Race or chase you, track or trace you
Or disgrace you or displace you
Or define you or confine you

All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

I don't want to meet your kin
Make you spin or do you in
Or select you or dissect you
Or inspect you or reject you
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

I don't want to fake you out
Take or shake or forsake you out
I ain't lookin' for you to feel like me
See like me or be like me
All I really want to do
Is, baby, be friends with you

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