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THE POLITICS OF EXPERIENCE  
AND  
THE BIRD OF PARADISE

R. D. Laing, one of the best-known psychiatrists of modern times, was born in Glasgow in 1927 and graduated from Glasgow University as a doctor of medicine. In the 1960s he developed the argument that there may be a benefit in allowing acute mental and emotional turmoil in depth to go on and have its way, and that the outcome of such turmoil could have a positive value. He was the first to put such a stand to the test by establishing, with others, residences where persons could live and be free to let happen what will when the acute psychosis is given free rein, or where, at the very least, they receive no treatment they do not want. This work with the Philadelphia Association since 1964, together with his focus on disturbed and disturbing types of interaction in institutions, groups and families, has been both influential and continually controversial.

R. D. Laing's writings range from books on social theory to verse, as well as numerous articles and reviews in scientific journals and the popular press. His publications are: *The Divided Self*, *Self and Others*, *Interpersonal Perception* (with H. Phillipson and A. Robin Lee), *Reason and Violence* (introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre), *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (with A. Esterson), *The Politics of Experience* and *The Bird of Paradise*, *Knots*, *The Politics of the Family*, *The Facts of Life*, *Do You Love Me?*, *Conversations with Children*, *Sonnets*, *The Voice of Experience and Wisdom*, *Madness and Folly*.

R. D. Laing died in 1989. Anthony Clare, writing in the *Guardian*, said of him: 'His major achievement was that he dragged the isolated and neglected inner world of the severely psychotic individual out of the back ward of the large gloomy mental hospital and on to the front pages of influential newspapers, journals and literary magazines... Everyone in contemporary psychiatry owes something to R. D. Laing.'

R. D. LAING

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**The Politics of Experience  
and  
The Bird of Paradise**



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### *Chapter 7*

This is a revised version of an article entitled 'A Ten-Day Voyage' which appeared in *Views*, Number 8 (1965).

# Introduction

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FEW books today are forgivable. Black on the canvas, silence on the screen, an empty white sheet of paper, are perhaps feasible. 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.

What is to be done? We who are still half alive, living in the often fibrillating heartland of a senescent capitalism – can we do more than reflect the decay around and within us? Can we do more than sing our sad and bitter songs of disillusion and defeat?\*

The requirement of the present, the failure of the past, is the same: to provide a thoroughly self-conscious and self-critical human account of man.

No one can begin to think, feel or act now except from the starting-point of his or her own alienation. We shall examine some of its forms in the following pages.

We are all murderers and prostitutes – no matter to what culture, society, class, nation one belongs, no matter how normal, moral or mature one takes oneself to be.

Humanity is estranged from its authentic possibilities. This basic vision prevents us from taking any unequivocal view of the sanity of common sense, or of the madness of the so-called madman.\* However, what is required is more than a passionate outcry of outraged humanity.

Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any aspect of present inter-human life. Viewed from different perspectives, construed in different ways and expressed in different idioms, this realization unites men as diverse as Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Tillich and Sartre.

We are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another, and to the spiritual and material world – mad, even, from an ideal standpoint we can glimpse but not adopt.

We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially men, but are in an alienated state, and this state is not simply a natural system. Alienation as our present destiny is achieved only by outrageous violence perpetrated by human beings on human beings.





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## Chapter 1

# Persons and Experience

... that great and true Amphibian whose nature is disposed to live, not only like other creatures in divers elements, but in divided and distinguished worlds.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE, *Religio Medici*

### I. Experience as evidence

EVEN facts become fictions without adequate ways of seeing 'the facts'. We do not need theories so much as the experience that is the source of the theory. We are not satisfied with faith, in the sense of an implausible hypothesis irrationally held: we demand to experience the 'evidence'.

We can see other people's behaviour, but not their experience. This has led some people to insist that psychology has nothing to do with the other person's experience, but only with his behaviour.

The other person's behaviour is an experience of mine. My behaviour is an experience of the other. The task of social phenomenology is to relate my experience of the other's behaviour to the other's experience of my behaviour. Its study is the relation between experience and experience: its true field is *inter-experience*.

I see you, and you see me. I experience you, and you experience me. I see your behaviour. You see my behaviour. But I do not and never have and never will see your *experience* of me. Just as you cannot 'see' my experience of you. My experience of you is not 'inside' me. It is simply you, as I experience you. And I do not experience you as inside me. Similarly, I take that you do not experience me as inside you.

'My experience of you' is just another form of words for 'you-as-I-experience-you', and 'your experience of me' equals 'me-as-you-experience-me'. Your experience of me is not inside you and my experience of you is not inside me, but *your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you*.

I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience. We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience used to be called The Soul. Experience as invisibility of man to man is at the same time more evident than anything. *One's* experience is evident. Experience is the *only* evidence. Psychology is the logos of experience. Psychology is the structure of the *evidence*, and hence psychology is the science of sciences.

If, however, experience is evidence, how can one ever study the experience *of the other*? For the experience *of the other* is not evident to me, as it is not and never can be an experience of mine.

I cannot avoid trying to understand your experience, because although I do not experience your experience, which is invisible to me (and non-tasteable, non-touchable, non-smellable, and inaudible), yet I experience you *as experiencing*.

I do not experience your experience. But I experience you as experiencing. I experience myself as experienced by you. And I experience you as experiencing yourself as experienced by me. And so on.

The study of the experience of others, is based on inferences I make, from my experience of you experiencing me, about how you are experiencing me experiencing you experiencing me....

Social phenomenology is the science of my own and of others' *experience*. It is concerned with the relation between my experience of you and your experience of me. That is, with *inter-experience*. It is concerned with your behaviour and my behaviour *as I experience it*, and your and my behaviour *as you experience it*.

Since your and their experience is invisible to me as mine is to you and them, I seek to make evident to the others, through their experience of my behaviour, what I infer of your experience, through my experience of your behaviour.

This is the crux of social phenomenology.

Natural science is concerned only with the observer's experience of things. Never with the way things *experience us*. That is not to say that things do not react to us, and to each other.

Natural science knows nothing of the relation between behaviour and experience. The nature of this relation is mysterious – in Marcel's sense. That is to say, it is not an objective problem. There is no traditional logic to express it. There is no developed method of understanding its nature. But this relation is the copula of our science – if science means *a form of knowledge adequate to its subject*. The relation between experience and behaviour is the stone that the builders will reject at their peril. Without it the whole structure of our theory and practice must collapse.

Experience is invisible to the other. But experience is not 'subjective' rather than 'objective', not 'inner' rather than 'outer', not process rather than praxis, not input rather than output, not psychic rather than somatic, not some doubtful data dredged up from introspection rather than extrospection. Least of all is experience 'intra-psychic process'. Such transactions, object-relations, interpersonal relations, transference, counter-transference, as we suppose to go on between people are not the interplay merely of two objects in space, each equipped with ongoing intra-psychic processes.

This distinction between outer and inner usually refers to the distinction between behaviour and experience; but sometimes it refers to some experiences that are supposed to be 'inner' in contrast to others that are 'outer'. More accurately this is a distinction between different modalities of experience, namely, perception (as outer) in contrast to imagination etc. (as inner). But perception, imagination, phantasy, reverie, dreams, memory, are simply different *modalities of experience*, none more 'inner' or 'outer' than any others.

Yet this way of talking does reflect a split in our experience. We seem to live in two worlds, and many people are aware only of the 'outer' rump. As long as we remember that the 'inner' world is not some space 'inside' the body or the mind, this way of talking can serve our purpose. (It was good enough for William Blake.) The 'inner', then, is our personal idiom of experiencing our bodies, other people, the animate and inanimate world: imagination, dreams, phantasy, and beyond that to ever further reaches of experience.

Bertrand Russell once remarked that the stars are in one's brain.

The stars as I perceive them are no more or less in my brain than the stars as I imagine them. I do not imagine them to be in my head, any more than I see them in my head.

The relation of experience to behaviour is not that of inner to outer. My experience is not inside my head. My experience of this room is out there in the room.

To say that my experience is intra-psychic is to presuppose that there is a psyche that my experience is in. My psyche is my experience, my experience is my psyche.

Many people used to believe that angels moved the stars. It now appears that they do not. As a result of this and like revelations, many people do not now believe in angels.

Many people used to believe that the 'seat' of the soul was somewhere in the brain. Since brains began to be opened up frequently, no one has seen 'the soul'. As a result of this and like revelations, many people do not now believe in the soul.

Who could suppose that angels move the stars, or be so superstitious as to suppose that because one cannot see one's soul at the end of a microscope it does not exist?

## *II. Interpersonal experience and behaviour*

Our task is both to experience and to conceive the concrete, that is to say, reality in its fullness and wholeness.

But this is quite impossible, immediately. Experientially and conceptually, we have fragments.

We can begin from concepts of the single person<sup>\*</sup>, from the relations between two or more persons, from groups or from society at large; or from the material world, and conceive of individuals as secondary. We can derive the main determinants of our individual and social behaviour from external exigencies. All these views are partial vistas and partial concepts. Theoretically one needs a spiral of expanding and contracting schemata that enable us to move freely and without discontinuity from varying degrees of abstraction to greater or lesser degrees of concreteness. Theory is the articulated vision of experience. This book begins and ends with the person.

Can human beings be persons today? Can a man be his actual self with another man or woman? Before we can ask such an optimistic question as 'What is a personal relationship?', we have to ask if a personal relationship is possible, or, *are persons possible* in our present situation? We are concerned with the possibility of man. This question can be asked only through its facets. Is love possible? Is freedom possible?

Whether or not all, or some, or no human beings are persons, I wish to define a person in twofold way: 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: only through action can our experience be transformed. It is tempting and facile to regard 'persons' as only separate objects in space, who can be studied as any other natural objects can be studied. But just as Kierkegaard remarked that one will never find consciousness by looking down a microscope at brain cells or anything else, so one will never find persons by studying persons as though they were only objects. A person

the me or you, he or she, whereby an object is experienced. Are these centres of experience, and origins of actions, living in entirely unrelated worlds of their own composition? Everyone must refer here to their own experience. My own experience as a centre of experience and origin of action tells me that this is not so. My experience and my action occur in a social field of reciprocal influence and interaction. I experience myself, identifiable as Ronald Lain by myself and others, as experienced by and acted upon by others, who refer to that person call 'me' as 'you' or 'him', or grouped together as 'one of us' or 'one of them' or 'one of you'.

This feature of personal relations does not arise in the correlation of the behaviour of non-personal objects. Many social scientists deal with their embarrassment by denying its occasion. Nevertheless, the natural scientific world is complicated by the presence of certain identifiable entities, re-identifiable reliably over periods of years, whose behaviour is either the manifestation or a concealment of a view of the world equivalent in ontological status to that of the scientist.

People may be observed to sleep, eat, walk, talk, etc. in relatively predictable ways. We must not be content with observation of this kind alone. Observation of behaviour must be extended by inference to attributions about experience. Only when we can begin to do this can we really construct the experiential-behavioural system that is the human species.

It is quite possible to study the visible, audible, smellable effulgences of human bodies, and much study of human behaviour has been in those terms. One can lump together very large numbers of units of behaviour and regard them as a statistical population, in no way different from the multiplicity constituting a system of non-human objects. But one will not be studying persons. In a science of persons, I shall state as axiomatic that: behaviour is a function of experience; and both experience and behaviour are always in relation to someone or something other than self.

When two (or more) persons are in relation, the behaviour of each towards the other is mediated by the experience by each of the other, and the experience of each is mediated by the behaviour of each. There is no contiguity between the behaviour of one person and that of the other. Much human behaviour can be seen as unilateral or bilateral *attempts* to eliminate experience. A person may treat another *as though* he was not a person, and he may act himself *as though* he was not a person. There is no contiguity between one person's experience and another. My experience of you is always mediated through your *behaviour*. Behaviour that is the direct consequence of impact, as of one billiard-ball hitting another, or experience directly transmitted to experience, as in the possible cases of extra-sensory perception, is not personal.

### *III. Normal alienation from experience*

The relevance of Freud to our time is largely his insight and, to a very considerable extent, his *demonstration* that the *ordinary* person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be.

As adults, we have forgotten most of our childhood, not only its contents but its flavour; and men of the world, we hardly know of the existence of the inner world: we barely remember our dreams, and make little sense of them when we do; as for our bodies, we retain just

sufficient proprioceptive sensations to coordinate our movements and to ensure the minimal requirements for biosocial survival – to register fatigue, signals for food, sex, defaecation, sleep; beyond that, little or nothing. Our capacity to think, except in the service of what we are dangerously deluded in supposing is our self-interest, and in conformity with common sense, is pitifully limited: our capacity even to see, hear, touch, taste and smell is so shrouded in veils of mystification that an intensive discipline of un-learning is necessary for *anyone* before one can begin to experience the world afresh, with innocence, truth and love.

And immediate experience of, in contrast to belief or faith in, a spiritual realm of demons, spirits, Powers, Dominions, Principalities, Seraphim and Cherubim, the Light, is even more remote. As domains of experience become more alien to us, we need greater and greater open-mindedness even to conceive of their existence.

Many of us do not know, or even believe, that every night we enter zones of reality in which we forget our waking life as regularly as we forget our dreams when we awake. Not all psychologists know of phantasy as a modality of experience<sup>\*</sup>, and the, as it were, contrapuntal interweaving of the different experiential modes. Many who are aware of phantasy believe that phantasy is the farthest that experience goes under ‘normal’ circumstances. Beyond that are simply ‘pathological’ zones of hallucinations, phantasmagoric mirages, delusions.

This state of affairs represents an almost unbelievable devastation of our experience. There is empty chatter about maturity, love, joy, peace.

This is itself a consequence of and further occasion for the divorce of our experience, such as is left of it, from our behaviour.

What we call ‘normal’ is a product of repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection and other forms of destructive action on experience (see below). It is radically estranged from the structure of being.

The more one sees this, the more senseless it is to continue with generalized descriptions of supposedly specifically schizoid, schizophrenic, hysterical ‘mechanisms’.

There are forms of alienation that are relatively strange to statistically ‘normal’ forms of alienation. The ‘normally’ alienated person, by reason of the fact that he acts more or less like everyone else, is taken to be sane. Other forms of alienation that are out of step with the prevailing state of alienation are those that are labelled by the ‘normal’ majority as bad or mad.

The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one’s mind, is the condition of the normal man.

Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal.

Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years.

Our behaviour is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things.

*If our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive.*

If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.

How much human *behaviour*, whether the interactions between persons themselves or

between groups and groups, is intelligible in terms of human *experience*? Either our inter-human behaviour is unintelligible, in that we are simply the passive vehicles of inhuman processes, whose ends are as obscure as they are at present outside our control, or our own behaviour towards each other is a function of our own experience and our own intentions, however alienated we are from them. In the latter case, we must take final responsibility for what we make of what we are made of.

We will find no intelligibility in behaviour if we see it as an inessential phase in an essentially inhuman process. We have had accounts of men as animals, men as machines, men as biochemical complexes with certain ways of their own, but there remains the greatest difficulty in achieving a human understanding of man in human terms.

Men at all times have been subject, as they believed or experienced, to forces from the stars, from the gods, or from forces that now blow through society itself, appearing as the stars once did to determine human fate.

Men have, however, always been weighed down not only by their sense of subordination to fate and chance, to ordained external necessities or contingencies, but by a sense that their very own thoughts and feelings, in their most intimate interstices, are the outcome, the resultant, of processes which they undergo.

A man can estrange himself from himself by mystifying himself and others. He can also have what he does stolen from him by the agency of others.

If we are stripped of experience, we are stripped of our deeds; and if our deeds are, so to say, taken out of our hands like toys from the hands of children, we are bereft of our humanity. We cannot be deceived. Men can and do destroy the humanity of other men, and the condition of this possibility is that we are interdependent. We are not self-contained monads producing no effects on each other except our reflections. We are both acted upon, changed for good or ill, by other men; and we are agents who act upon others to affect them in different ways. Each of us is the other to the others. Man is a patient-agent, agent-patient, interexperiencing and interacting with his fellows.

It is quite certain that unless we can regulate our behaviour much more satisfactorily than at present, then we are going to exterminate ourselves. But as we experience the world, so we act, and this principle holds even when action conceals rather than discloses our experience.

We are not able even to *think* adequately about the behaviour that is at the annihilating edge. But what we think is less than what we know: what we know is less than what we love: what we love is so much less than what there is. And to that precise extent we are so much less than what we are.

Yet if nothing else, each time a new baby is born there is a possibility of reprieve. Each child is a new being, a potential prophet, a new spiritual prince, a new spark of light, precipitated into the outer darkness. Who are we to decide that it is hopeless?

#### *IV. Phantasy as a mode of experience*

The 'surface' experience of self and other emerges from a less differentiated experiential matrix. Ontogenetically the very early experiential schemata are unstable, and are

surmounted: but never entirely. To a greater or lesser extent, the first ways in which the world has made sense to us continues to underpin our whole subsequent experience and actions. Our first way of experiencing the world is largely what psychoanalysts have called phantasy. This modality has its own validity, its own rationality. Infantile phantasy may become a closed enclave, a dissociated undeveloped 'unconscious', but this need not be so. This eventuality is another form of alienation. Phantasy as encountered in many people today is split off from what the person regards as his mature, sane, rational, adult experience. We do not then see phantasy in its true function but experienced merely as an intrusive, sabotaging infantile nuisance.

For most of our social life, we largely gloss over this underlying phantasy level of our relationship.

Phantasy is a particular way of relating to the world. It is part of, sometimes the essential part of, the meaning or sense (*le sens*: Merleau-Ponty) implicit in action. As relationship we may be dissociated from it: as meaning we may not grasp it: as experience it may escape our notice in different ways. That is, it is possible to speak of phantasy being 'unconscious', if the general statement is always given specific connotations.

However, although phantasy can be unconscious – that is, although we may be unaware of experience in this mode, or refuse to admit that our behaviour implies an experiential relationship or a relational experience that gives it a meaning, often apparent to others if not to ourselves – phantasy need not be thus split from us, whether in terms of its content or modality.

Phantasy, in short, as I am using the term, is always experiential, and meaningful: and, if the person is not dissociated from it, relational in a valid way.

Two people sit talking. The one (Peter) is making a point to the other (Paul). He puts his point of view in different ways to Paul for some time, but Paul does not understand.

Let us *imagine* what may be going on, in the sense that I mean by phantasy. Peter is trying to get through to Paul. He feels that Paul is being needlessly closed up against him. It becomes increasingly important to him to soften, or get into Paul. But Paul seems hard, impervious and cold. Peter feels he is beating his head against a brick wall. He feels tired, hopeless, progressively more empty as he sees he is failing. Finally he gives up.

Paul feels, on the other hand, that Peter is pressing too hard. He feels he has to fight him off. He doesn't understand what Peter is saying, but feels that he has to defend himself from an assault.

The dissociation of each from his phantasy, and the phantasy of the other, betokens the lack of relationship of each to himself and each to the other. They are both more and less related to each other 'in phantasy' than each pretends to be to himself and the other.

Here, two roughly complementary phantasy experiences wildly belie the calm manner in which two men talk to each other, comfortably ensconced in their armchairs.

It is mistaken to regard the above description as merely metaphorical.

### V. *The negation of experience*

There seems to be no agent more effective than another person in bringing a world for oneself alive, or, by a glance, a



The physical environment unremittingly offers us possibilities of experience, or curtails them. The fundamental human significance of architecture stems from this. The glory of Athens, as Pericles so lucidly stated, and the horror of so many features of the modern megalopolis is that the former enhanced and the latter constricts man's consciousness.

Here however I am concentrating upon what we do to ourselves and to each other.

Let us take the simplest possible interpersonal scheme. Consider Jack and Jill in relation. Then Jack's behaviour towards Jill is experienced by Jill in particular ways. How she experiences him affects considerably how she behaves towards him. How she behaves towards him influences (without by any means totally determining) how he experiences her. And his experience of her contributes to his way of behaving towards her which in turn... etc.

Each person may take two fundamentally distinguishable forms of action in this interpersonal system. Each may act on his own experience or upon the other person's experience, *and there is no other form of personal action possible within this system*. That is to say, as long as we are considering personal action of self to self or self to other, the only way one can ever act is on one's own experience or on the other's experience.

Personal action can either open out possibilities of enriched experience or it can shut off possibilities. Personal action is either predominantly validating, confirming, encouraging, supportive, enhancing, or it is invalidating, disconfirming, discouraging, undermining and constricting. It can be creative or destructive.

In a world where the normal condition is one of alienation, most personal action must be destructive both of one's own experience and of that of the other. I shall outline here some of the ways this can be done. I leave the reader to consider from his own experience how pervasive these kinds of action are.

Under the heading of 'defence mechanisms', psychoanalysis describes a number of ways in which a person becomes alienated from himself. For example, repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection. These 'mechanisms' are often described in psychoanalytic terms as themselves 'unconscious', that is, the person himself appears to be unaware that he is doing this to himself. Even when a person develops sufficient insight to see that 'splitting', for example, is going on, he usually experiences this splitting as indeed a mechanism, so to say, an impersonal process which has taken over, which he can observe but cannot control or stop.

There is thus some phenomenological validity in referring to such 'defences' by the term 'mechanism'. But we must not stop there. They have this mechanical quality, because the person as he experiences himself is dissociated from them. He appears to himself and to others to suffer from them. They seem to be processes he undergoes, and as such he experiences himself as a patient, with a particular psychopathology.

But this is so only from the perspective of his own alienated experience. As he becomes de-alienated he is able first of all to become aware of them, if he has not already done so, and then to take the second, even more crucial, step of progressively realizing that these are things he does or has done to himself. Process becomes converted back to praxis, the patient becomes an agent.

Ultimately it is possible to regain the ground that has been lost. These defence mechanisms are actions taken by the person on his own experience. On top of this he has dissociated himself from his own action. The end-product of this twofold violence is a person who no longer experiences himself fully as a person, but as a part of a person, invaded by destructive psychopathological 'mechanisms' in the face of which he is a relatively helpless victim.

These 'defences' are action on oneself. But 'defences' are not only intrapersonal, they are *transpersonal*. I act not only on myself, I can act upon you. And you act not only on yourself, you act upon me. In each case, on *experience*.\*

If Jack succeeds in forgetting something, this is of little use if Jill continues to remind him of it. He must induce her not to do so. The safest way would be not just to make her keep quiet about it, but to induce her to forget it also.

Jack may act upon Jill in many ways. He may make her feel guilty for keeping on 'bringing it up'. He may *invalidate* her experience. This can be done more or less radically. He can indicate merely that it is unimportant or trivial, whereas it is important and significant to her. Going further, he can shift the *modality* of her experience from memory to imagination: 'It's all in your imagination.' Further still, he can invalidate the *content*. 'It never happened that way.' Finally, he can invalidate not only the significance, modality and content, but her very capacity to remember at all, and make her feel guilty for doing so into the bargain.

This is not unusual. People are doing such things to each other all the time. In order for such transpersonal invalidation to work, however, it is advisable to overlay it with a thick patina of mystification.† For instance, by denying that this is what one is doing, and further invalidating any perception that it is being done, by ascriptions such as 'How can you think such a thing?' 'You must be paranoid.' And so on.

## VI. *The experience of negation*

There are many varieties of experience of lack, or absence, and many subtle distinctions between the experience of negation and the negation of experience.

All experience is both active and passive, the unity of the given and the construed; and the construction one places on what is given can be positive or negative: it is what one desires or fears or is prepared to accept, or it is not. The element of negation is in every relationship and every experience of relationship. The distinction between the absence of relationships, and the experience of every relationship as an absence, is the division between loneliness and a perpetual solitude, between provisional hope or hopelessness and a permanent despair. The part I feel I play in generating this state of affairs determines what I feel I can or should do about it.

The first intimations of nonbeing may have been the breast or mother as absent. This seems to have been Freud's suggestion. Winnicott writes of 'the hole', the creation of nothing by devouring the breast. Bion relates the origin of thought to the experience of no-breast. The human being, in Sartre's idiom, does not create being, but rather injects nonbeing into the world, into an original plenitude of being.

Nothing, as experience, arises as absence of someone or something. No friends, no relationships, no pleasure, no meaning in life, no ideas, no mirth, no money. As applied to

parts of the body – no breast, no penis, no good or bad contents – emptiness. The list is, in principle, endless. Take anything, and imagine its absence.

Being and nonbeing is the central theme of all philosophy, East and West. These words are not harmless and innocent verbal arabesques, except in the professional philosophism of decadence.

We are afraid to approach the fathomless and bottomless groundlessness of everything. 'There's nothing to be afraid of.' The ultimate reassurance, and the ultimate terror.

We experience the objects of our experience as *there* in the outside world. The source of our experience seems to be outside ourselves. In the creative experience, we experience the source of the created images, patterns, sounds, to be within ourselves but still beyond ourselves. Colours emanate from a source of pre-light itself unlit, sounds from silence, patterns from formlessness. This pre-formed pre-light, this pre-sound, this pre-form is nothing, and yet it is the source of all created things.

We are separated from and related to one another physically. Persons as embodied beings relate to each other through the medium of space. And we are separated and joined by our different perspectives, educations, backgrounds, organizations, group-loyalties, affiliations, ideologies, socio-economic class interests, temperaments. These social 'things' that unite us are by the same token so many *things*, so many social figments that come between us. But if we could strip away all the exigencies and contingencies, and reveal to each other our naked presence? If you take away everything, all the clothes, the disguises, the crutches, the grease paint, also the common projects, the games that provide the pretexts for the occasions that masquerade as meetings – if we could meet, if there were such a happening, a happy coincidence of human beings, what would now separate us?

Two people with first and finally nothing between us. Between us nothing. No thing. That which is really 'between' cannot be named by any things that come between. The between is itself no-thing.

If I draw a pattern on a piece of paper, here is an action I am taking on the ground of my experience of my situation. What do I experience myself as doing and what intention have I? Am I trying to convey something to someone (communication)? Am I rearranging the elements of some internal kaleidoscopic jigsaw (invention)? Am I trying to discover the properties of the new *Gestalten* that emerge (discovery)? Am I amazed that something is appearing that did not exist before? That these lines did not exist on this paper until I put them there? Here we are approaching the *experience* of creation and of nothing.

What is called a poem is compounded perhaps of communication, invention, fecundation, discovery, production, creation. Through all the contention of intentions and motives a miracle has occurred. There is something new under the sun; being has emerged from nonbeing; a spring has bubbled out of a rock.

Without the miracle nothing has happened. Machines are already becoming better at communicating with each other than human beings are with human beings. The situation is ironical. More and more concern about communication, less and less to communicate.

We are not so much concerned with experiences of 'filling a gap' in theory or knowledge, of filling up a hole, of occupying an empty space. It is not a question of putting something

*into* nothing, but of the creation of something *out* of nothing. *Ex nihilo*. The no thing out of which the creation emerges, at its purest, is not an empty space, or an empty stretch of time

At the point of nonbeing we are at the outer reaches of what language can state, but we can indicate by language why language cannot say what it cannot say. I cannot say what cannot be said, but sounds can make us listen to the silence. Within the confines of language it is possible to indicate when the dots must begin.... But in using a word, a letter, a sound, OM, one cannot put a sound to soundlessness, or name the unnameable.

The silence of the preformation expressed in and through language, cannot be expressed by language. But language can be used to convey what it cannot say – by its interstices, by its emptiness and lapses, by the latticework of words, syntax, sound and meanings. The modulations of pitch and volume delineate the form precisely by not filling in the spaces between the lines. But it is a grave mistake to mistake the lines for the pattern, or the pattern for that which it is patterning.

‘The sky is blue’ suggests that there is a substantive ‘sky’ that is ‘blue’. This sequence of subject verb object, in which ‘is’ acts as the copula uniting sky and blue, is a nexus of sounds and syntax, signs and symbols, in which we are fairly completely entangled and which separates us from at the same time as it refers us to that ineffable sky-blue-sky. The sky is blue and blue is *not* sky, sky is not blue. But in saying ‘the sky is blue’ we say ‘the sky’ ‘is’. The sky exists and it is blue. ‘Is’ serves to unite everything and at the same time ‘is’ is not any of the things that it unites.

None of the things that are united by ‘is’ can themselves qualify ‘is’. ‘Is’ is not this, that, or the next, or anything. Yet ‘is’ is the condition of the possibility of all things. ‘Is’ is that nothing whereby all things are.

‘Is’ as no-thing, is that whereby all things are. And the condition of the possibility of anything being at all, is that it is in relation to that which it is not.

That is to say, the ground of the being of all beings is the relation between them. This relationship is the ‘is’, the being of all things, and the being of all things is itself no-thing. Man creates in transcending himself in revealing himself. But what creates, wherefrom and whereto, the clay, the pot and the potter, are all not-me. I am the witness, the medium, the occasion of a happening that the created thing makes evident.

Man, most fundamentally, is not engaged in the discovery of what is there, nor in production, nor even in communication, nor in invention. He is enabling being to emerge from nonbeing.

The experience of being the actual medium for a continual process of creation takes one past all depression or persecution or vain glory, past, even, chaos or emptiness, into the very mystery of that continual flip of nonbeing into being, and can be the occasion of that great liberation when one makes the transition from being afraid of nothing, to the realization that there is nothing to fear. Nevertheless, it is very easy to lose one’s way at any stage, and especially when one is nearest.

Here can be great joy, but it is as easy to be mangled by the process as to swing with it. It will require an act of imagination from those who do not know from their own experience what hell this borderland between being and nonbeing can become. But that is what imagination is for.

One's posture or stance in relation to the act or process can become decisive from the point of view of madness or sanity.

There are men who feel called upon to generate even themselves out of nothing, since the underlying feeling is that they have not been adequately created or have been created only for destruction.

If there are no meanings, no values, no source of sustenance or help, then man, as creator must invent, conjure up meanings and values, sustenance and succour out of nothing. He is a magician.

A man may indeed produce something new – a poem, a pattern, a sculpture, a system of ideas – think thoughts never before thought, produce sights never before seen. Little benefit is he likely to derive from his own creativity. The phantasy is not modified by such 'acting out', even the sublimest. The fate that awaits the creator, after being ignored, neglected, despised, is, luckily or unluckily according to point of view, to be discovered by the noncreative.

There are sudden, apparently inexplicable suicides that must be understood as the dawn of a hope so horrible and harrowing that it is unendurable.

In our 'normal' alienation from being, the person who has a perilous awareness of the nonbeing of what we take to be being (the pseudo-wants, pseudo-values, pseudo-realities of the endemic delusions of what are taken to be life and death and so on) gives us in our present epoch the acts of creation that we despise and crave.

Words in a poem, sounds in movement, rhythm in space, attempt to recapture personal meaning in personal time and space from out of the sights and sounds of a depersonalized, dehumanized world. They are bridgeheads into alien territory. They are acts of insurrection. Their source is from the Silence at the centre of each of us. Wherever and whenever such a whorl of patterned sound or space is established in the external world, the power that it contains generates new lines of forces whose effects are felt for centuries.

The creative breath 'comes from a zone of man where man cannot descend, even if Virgil were to lead him, for Virgil would not go down there'.\*

This zone, the zone of no-thing, of the silence of silences, is the source. We forget that we are all there all the time.

An activity has to be understood in terms of the experience from which it emerges. These arabesques that mysteriously embody mathematical truths only glimpsed by a very few – how beautiful, how exquisite – no matter that they were the threshing and thrashing of a drowning man.

We are here beyond all questions except those of being and nonbeing, incarnation, birth, life and death.

Creation *ex nihilo* has been pronounced impossible even for God. But we are concerned with miracles. We must hear the music of those Braque guitars (Lorca).

From the point of view of a man alienated from his source creation arises from despair and ends in failure. But such a man has not trodden the path to the end of time, the end of space, the end of darkness, and the end of light. He does not know that where it all ends, there it begins.

### The Psychotherapeutic Experience\*

IN the last twenty years, psychotherapy has developed both in theory and in practice in complex ways. And yet, through all this tangled complexity and sometimes confusion, it is impossible, in the words of Pasternak, 'not to fall ultimately, as into a heresy, into unheard of simplicity'.

In the practice of psychotherapy, the very diversities of method have made the essential simplicity more clear.

The irreducible elements of psychotherapy are a therapist, a patient, and a regular and reliable time and place. But given these, it is not so easy for two people to meet. We all live on the hope that authentic meeting between human beings can still occur. Psychotherapy consists in the paring away of all that stands between us, the props, masks, roles, lies, defences, anxieties, projections and introjections, in short, all the carry-overs from the past, transference and counter-transference, that we use by habit and collusion, wittingly or unwittingly, as our currency for relationships. It is this currency, these very media, that re-create and intensify the conditions of alienation that originally occasioned them.

The distinctive contribution of psychoanalysis has been to bring to light these importation carry-overs, compulsive repetitions. The tendency now, among psychoanalysts and psychotherapists is to focus not only on transference, not only on what has happened before but on what has never happened before, on what is new. Thus, in practice, the use of interpretations to reveal the past, or even to reveal the past-in-the-present, may be used as only one tactic and, in theory, there are efforts to understand better and to find words for the *non-transference* elements in psychotherapy.

The therapist may allow himself to act spontaneously and unpredictably. He may set out actively to disrupt old patterns of experience and behaviour. He may actively reinforce new ones. One hears now of therapists giving orders, laughing, shouting, crying, even getting up from that sacred chair. Zen, with its emphasis on illumination achieved through the sudden and unexpected, is a growing influence. Of course such techniques in the hands of a man who has not unremitting concern and respect for the patient could be disastrous. Although some general principles of these developments can be laid down, their practice is still, and indeed must always be, for the man who has both quite exceptional authority and the capacity to improvise.

I shall not enumerate all the many practical varieties of psychotherapy, long and short, brief, intensive, experiential, directive and non-directive, those that utilize the conscious-expanding drugs or other adjuvants, and those that use, as it were, nothing but persons. I wish rather to consider in more detail the critical function of theory.

These lines of growth that seem to expand centrifugally in all directions have intensified the need for a strong, firm primary theory that can draw each practice and theory into relation to the central concerns of all forms of psychotherapy. In the last chapter I outlined some of the fundamental requirements of such a theory. Namely, that we need concepts which both indicate the interaction and interexperience of two persons, and help us to

understand the relation between each person's own experience and his own behaviour, within the context of the relationship between them. And we must in turn be able to conceive of the relationship within the relevant contextual social *systems*. Most fundamentally a critical theory must be able to place all theories and practices within the scope of a total vision of the ontological structure of being human.

What help are the prevailing theories of psychotherapy to us? Here it would be misleading to delineate too sharply one school of thought from another. Within the mainstream of orthodox psychoanalysis and even between the different theories of object-relationships in the U.K. – Fairbairn, Winnicott, Melanie Klein, Bion – there are differences of more than emphasis: similarly within the Existential school or tradition – Binswanger, Boss, Caruso, Frankl. Every theoretical idiom could be found to play some part in the thinking of at least some members of any school. At worst there are the most extraordinary theoretical mixes of learning theory, ethology, system theory, communications analysis, information theory, transactional analysis, interpersonal relations, object relations, games theory, and so on.

Freud's development of metapsychology changed the theoretical context we now work in. To understand with sympathy the positive value of metapsychology, we have to consider the intellectual climate in which it was first developed. Others have pointed out that it drew its impetus from the attempt to see man as an object of natural scientific investigation, and thus to win acceptance for psychoanalysis as a serious and respectable enterprise. I do not think such a shield is now necessary; or even, that it ever was. And the price paid when one thinks in metapsychological terms is high.

The metapsychology of Freud, Federn, Rapaport, Hartman, Kris, has no constructs for any social system generated by more than one person at a time. Within its own framework it has no concepts of social collectivities of experience shared or unshared between persons. This theory has no category of 'you', as there is in the work of Feuerbach, Buber, Parsons. It has no way of expressing the meeting of an 'I' with 'an other', and of the impact of one person on another. It has no concept of 'me' except as objectified as 'the ego'. The ego is one part of a mental apparatus. Internal objects are other parts of this system. Another ego is part of a different system or structure. How two mental apparatuses or psychic structures or systems, each with its own constellation of internal objects, can relate to each other remains unexamined. Within the constructs the theory offers, it is possibly inconceivable. Projection and introjection do not in themselves bridge the gap *between* persons.

Few now find central the issues of conscious and unconscious as conceived by the early psychoanalysts – as two reified systems, both split from the totality of the person, both composed of some sort of psychic stuff, and both exclusively *intrapersonal*.

It is the relation *between persons* that is central in theory, and in practice. Persons are related to one another through their experience and through their behaviour. Theories can be seen in terms of the emphasis they put on *experience* or on *behaviour*, and in terms of their ability to articulate the relationship between experience and behaviour.

The different schools of psychoanalysis and depth psychology have at least recognized the crucial relevance of each person's experience to his or her behaviour, but they have left unclarified what *is* experience, and this is particularly evident in respect of 'the unconscious'

Some theories are more concerned with the interactions or transactions between people,

without too much reference to the experience of the agents. Just as any theory that focuses on experience and neglects behaviour can become very misleading, so theories that focus on behaviour to the neglect of experience become unbalanced.

In the idiom of games theory, people have a repertoire of games, based on particular sets of learned interactions. Others may play games that mesh sufficiently to allow a variety of more or less stereotyped dramas to be enacted. The games have rules, some public, some secret. Some people play games that break the rules of games that others play. Some play undeclared games, so rendering their moves ambiguous or downright unintelligible, except to the expert in such secret and unusual games. Such people, prospective neurotics or psychotic may have to undergo the ceremonial of a psychiatric consultation, leading to diagnosis, prognosis, prescription. Treatment would consist in pointing out to them the unsatisfactory nature of the games they play and perhaps teaching new games. A person reacts by despair more to loss of the *game* than to sheer 'object-loss', that is, to the loss of his partner or partners as real persons. The maintenance of the game rather than the identity of players is all important.

One advantage of this idiom is that it relates persons together. The failure to see the behaviour of one person in relation to the behaviour of the other has led to much confusion. In a sequence of an interaction between p and o,  $p_1 \rightarrow o_1 \rightarrow p_2 \rightarrow o_2 \rightarrow p_3 \rightarrow o_3$ , etc., p's contribution p1, p2, to p3 is taken out of context and direct links are made between  $p_1 \rightarrow p_2 \rightarrow p_3$ . This artificially derived sequence is then studied as an isolated entity or process and attempts may be made to 'explain' it (find the 'aetiology') in terms of genetic-constitutional factors or intra-psychic pathology.

Object-relations theory attempts to achieve, as Gun-trip has argued, a synthesis between the intra and inter personal. Its concepts of internal and external objects, of closed and open systems, go some way. Yet it is still objects not persons that are in question. Objects are the what not the whereby of experience. The brain is itself an object of experience. We still require a phenomenology of experience including so-called unconscious experience, of experience related to behaviour, of person related to person, without splitting, denial, depersonalization, and reification, all fruitless attempts to explain the whole by the part.

Transaction, systems, games, can occur and can be played in and between electronic systems. What is specifically personal or human? A personal relationship is not only transactional, it is transexperiential and herein is its specific human quality. Transaction alone without experience lacks specific personal connotations. Endocrine and reticuloendothelial systems transact. They are not persons. The great danger of thinking about man by means of analogy is that the analogy comes to be put forward as a homology.

Why do almost all theories about depersonalization, reification, splitting, denial, tend themselves to exhibit the symptoms they attempt to describe? We are left with, transactions but where is the individual? the individual, but where is the other? patterns of behaviour, but where is the experience? information and communication, but where is the pathos and sympathy, the passion and compassion?

Behaviour therapy is the most extreme example of such schizoid theory and practice that proposes to think and act purely in terms of the other, without reference to the self of the



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