

"Human, all too human": The Life and Work of R. D. Laing

Interviewⁱ

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Introduction

During 1975 and 1976 I had the good fortune of spending some months living in 74 Portland Road in London, the Philadelphia Association (PA) household that Hugh Crawford ran (to the extent that anyone could run it.ⁱⁱ I vividly recall visiting the Cassell Hospital in Australia—famous for psychotherapy with very disturbed patients—and telling the staff what daily life in that house was like. Even they were shocked!) In the basement of that house was the headquarters of the PA which R. D. Laing still actively chaired. (Only “chaired” since it was next to impossible to lead such an eccentric bunch of individualistic skeptics; in any case Laing seemed constitutionally unable to keep many followers for long). Down there it was like the Freudian unconscious—anarchic, timeless, creative, unconventional and unpredictable though to some extent interpretable. It was really an anti-organization where rules were left at the top of the stairs. As home to the PA’s many seminars and workshops there was always some activity, at least from late afternoon on. When there weren’t animated seminars (dwelling, existentialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, asylums, Lewis Carroll, etc.), yoga and meditation workshops were taking place.

I was beguiled. I had been interested in Laing for years and even written a book, *The Schizoid World of Jean-Paul Sartre and R.D. Laing* (Kirsner, 1976). I argued there that both Sartre and his disciple Laing started out from a schizoid problematic, one which nonetheless addressed very real and significant psychosocial problems in the modern world. So in the Portland Road basement by day I found myself rummaging through some of the old PA archives, reading Laing’s careful notes of Sartre’s works. At night I

attended lectures and seminars, including Laing's ruminative lectures which were at that time certainly quite wonderfully absorbing and creative.

Of course, I spent time with Laing and other members of the PA. I once asked Laing why his general influence was not that great. He replied that there was no Laingian technique, there was no Laingian School. I am sure he was right but there was more. Although he was charismatic, Laing's personality was such that he could not really sustain a movement with disciples. He was often narcissistic and could appear as a trickster, somebody indefinable and unpredictable. A skeptic at heart, he was no dogmatist. He was a chameleon who was not really graspable in his essence. People had very different takes on who their "Ronnie" was and what he believed in. Nobody owned him, not the left, the anti-psychiatrists, the Buddhists, not even the Philadelphia Association that he founded. Although he obviously loved being famous, Laing could not relish it properly since he was always frightened of losing his identity by being categorized. Laing was too star-struck by his own image, overawed by his own reputation and role. This was strange for such a serious student of Sartre on self-deception—he seemed to have the delusion that he was "R. D. Laing".

But fortunately Laing was never reducible to his reputation. When Sartre was asked why he was studying Paul Valery who his critics dismissed as merely a "bourgeois intellectual", Sartre responded that while it was certainly true that Valery was a bourgeois intellectual, not every bourgeois intellectual was Paul Valery. I felt the same about Laing. While Laing no doubt had major problems (alcohol, drugs, narcissism, etc.), there can be no doubt that, despite these problems, he made exceptional contributions.

What were these exceptional contributions? Throughout his varied career Laing focused on many things: schizophrenia, birth and pre-birth experience, the family, the impact of the modern world of science and technology, yoga, politics, the impact of psychiatry, patients' rights, the vagaries of love, and many more. But there was a vital link permeating all of them 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; language about things or processes is never appropriate for ultimately understanding human beings.

While Laing was influenced by many philosophers and psychoanalysts, the extent to which Laing was a thoroughgoing follower of Sartre's philosophy has been greatly underrated. In fact, I do not believe that Laing can be fully appreciated without recognizing the central role of Sartre's philosophy in it, for their starting points which divided being into free and determined beings were identical. Without recognizing Laing's allegiance to Sartre's standpoint many of Laing's interests and perspectives appear unconnected and arbitrary. Laing's fascination with Sartre went back to his youth. David Cooper told me how Laing pored over Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* through many nights, black coffee at his side. Laing and Cooper published their summaries of some of Sartre's later work including his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* to which Sartre wrote an appreciative foreword in 1963. It is worth quoting from it:

Like you I think that we cannot understand psychic troubles *from outside*. . . I believe also that one cannot study nor cure a neurosis without an original respect for the person of the patient. . . I maintain like you I believe, mental illness to be the issue that the free organism, in its total unity, invents to live in an unlivable situation. For that reason, I attach the greatest value to your research, in particular to the study that you have made of the family milieu taken as group and as series and I am convinced that your efforts contribute to our approaching the time when psychiatry will be, finally, *human* (Original emphasis. My translation. ‘Foreword’ in Laing and Cooper, 1964, p. 7).

Clearly, Sartre assumed that mainstream psychiatry treated people as things.

Sartre took it as axiomatic that the human world was based on our praxis, agency and freedom and was irreducible to definitions of essences. Our being was always in question. Laing's landscape was essentially Sartre's—our essential freedom, self-deception, experience and its violation, the terror of the group, fear and intrusion of others, mystification, being for others as hostility and objectification. First and foremost, we must understand human beings as agents, as producers, as praxis. For Sartre our behavior was always intelligible and it was self-deception to ignore that. Since we started as agents who were condemned to be free, we could not escape our freedom. On the other hand, the nonhuman world was that of things, of identities, of essences and processes.

Laing took the implications of Sartre's schema very seriously. A "science of persons" and not of things was central to *The Divided Self* (Laing, 1965). Laing's abiding concern was with the implications of the intrusion of natural science into the human arena such as the scientific look or birth as an exclusively medical rather than a human event. For the schizophrenics of *The Divided Self* the fact that they were persons meant that they were free and (if they wanted) could produce potentially intelligible communications through their actions. Word salads were red herrings produced to mystify others (they may also have helped to mystify their selves). Laing claimed that the schizophrenics deemed by conventional psychiatry to be beyond all reason as victims of illness processes could be regarded instead as agents whose experience was potentially understandable and rational when seen as intentional acts within a context. They were using Sartrean self-deception as a way of trying to live in what they saw to be an unlivable situation. But why would one not want to be free? For Sartre the answer was clear: with freedom comes responsibility which cannot be avoided. 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 favor of the schizophrenic as human and acting meaningfully rather than as merely the victim of an organic process.

For Sartre whose collected essays appeared as a series entitled *Situations*, all free human actions took place within a setting, within certain parameters, as though they were on a stage where although the scene was set the actors could script the actions. For Sartre

all actions occurred within a structured context which impacted in a specific way with a particular person. Like Sartre, Laing always focused on *context* as a way of understanding those social events which seemed irrational. If we situate the context, we may better empathize with the specific intentions of the free subject. Laing utilized a systems theory approach with the concept of meta-context—the context of a context—to understand the hidden rationality in a situation, especially because meta-contexts by definition were not observable.

Laing completed *The Divided Self* in 1956 before Sartre published *Question of Methods* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). After *The Divided Self* Laing moved from an interest in the meaning in the intrapsychic life of the individual through the context of interpersonal space of two persons (*Self and Others*) which following the later Sartre is locatable within the group or family context. In *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (with Esterson) and *The Politics of the Family* Laing was interested in how the family constellation provided the context in which individual schizophrenic experience could be understood as a rational strategy. For Sartre and 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 even allowed for the possibility of mystical experience to explain seemingly irrational experience and behavior in terms of the biggest meta-context of all. Mysticism was about as far as contextualizing could go and Laing went to Ceylon to meditate in 1971. Of course, Sartre was too much a rationalist to make Laing's further move of situating the social world within the mystical. But the methodology of investigating particular "situations" illuminates 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. Context for Sartre and Laing was the human equivalent to cause in the nonhuman world. To the extent that context provided the parameters of choice we are all in Sartre's term, "universal singulars" where we can cross-reference an individual with his or her time. Laing was sensitive to and respected the unique experience of

individuals whom he did not suppose that he understood because he was an “expert” in mental illness. When he wanted, Laing had an uncanny ability to hear and empathize.

Laing was to psychotics what Freud was to neurotics—he listened to their stories to help to understand their meaning in terms of wishes and intentions, not of organic processes. Challenging conventional mores and approaches, Laing was, as Michael Guy Thompson (1998) has pointed out, in the Greek tradition of skepticism where little or nothing was taken for granted. Dichotomies, such as “inside-outside”, “mind-body”, “self-other”, “society-individual”, “mad-normal”, were, as he would have 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 live material to further explore the humanity or lack of it in the human world. Laing was particularly offended by the stand of Karl Jaspers and modern psychiatry that there was a category of human beings—psychotics—who were “un-understandable”. There was, according to Jaspers, an unbridgeable “abyss of difference” between psychotics and the rest of us. Not that there weren’t some obvious differences but they were, for Laing, a challenge rather than a bridge that could never be crossed. For Laing, whatever else it was schizophrenia was always a social event taking place within a social context needing to be understood in order to situate the experience and behavior of the psychotic. Whatever might be happening inside the person, clearly there were dramatic and significant events occurring outside, in interpersonal space and outside that in the broader social contexts. Laing was the major figure who helped loosen up the mind-set of “us” the normal diagnosers about “them”, the mad. He was bent on searching for the interpersonal and social context of the diagnosis of psychosis and its impact (See Kirsner, 1990).

Moreover, there was the issue of perspective—radically different consequences accrue from the initial stance of seeing someone as a person or as an object. Since the observer was always part of the observational field, how one treated someone impacted how they reacted and how they were seen. Along with phenomenological thinkers in general, for Sartre consciousness was never independent but always consciousness of

something—one’s stance determined what one saw. This phenomenology of ways of seeing is clear in Laing from the beginning. In *The Divided Self* Laing wrote:

Man’s being. . . can be seen from different points of view and one or other aspect can be made the focus of study. In particular, man can be seen as a person or thing. Now, even the same thing, seen from different points of view, gives rise to two entirely different descriptions, and the descriptions give rise to two entirely different theories, and the theories result in two entirely different sets of action. The initial way we see a thing gives rise to all our subsequent dealings with it (1965, p. 20).

Laing took the implications of one’s point of view much further in his later work—he made the concept of “the normal” itself a focus of investigation and critique. This is epitomized in one of Laing’s very best pieces, ‘The Obvious’, Laing’s contribution to the Dialectics of Liberation conference in 1967 (Laing, 1968). (David Cooper, who edited that collection of lectures into a book, told me that he considered them as encapsulating the one or two essential things that each contributor had to say in their lives.)

Etymologically, the “obvious” is that which stands in front of us. The story Laing told about the woman holding her three year old out of a sixth story window to show how much she loved him by not dropping him was for Laing an example of the crazed terrorism of hyper-normality. The normal stance for Laing was so warped as to be anti-human, as not treating people with the respect and dignity appropriate to human beings. Our reflex to obey, encapsulated in the Milgram experiments, was the result of treating people as though they were behaviorist machines. The double meaning of “dia-gnosis” as “*seeing through*” or seeing *through* social reality demonstrated the central issue that the perspective one adopted determined what one saw. Treating humans as persons had vastly different consequences from treating them as machines or things.

In Laing’s later work the basically subjective and human was made to stand in stark contrast to a technocratic and objective scientific approach. Thus his interest in the birth process, pre-birth experience, the way the mind has been seen in mechanistic terms, and the technological world-view of knowledge without love can be seen in the context

of Laing's interest in human agency as a primary explanatory factor in the human world. After *Knots* (1970), he wrote a play, *Do You Love Me?* (1972), a self-indulgent book of Laing's conversations with his children, and another self-indulgent book, this time of sonnets. But there was also *The Facts of Life* (1976) where he investigated the possibility of pre-birth experience as providing a template for later seemingly unintelligible behavior and experience. He raised the question as to what would happen to our world-view if we allowed ourselves to think whether there was some degree of intentionality in life before birth. It also focused on pre-birth experience and the technological fix of psychiatry. *The Voice of Experience* (1982) discussed experience, technology, psychiatry and once again the possibility of pre-birth experience, and *Wisdom, Madness and Folly* (1985) was an autobiography of his early years and his years of becoming a psychiatrist.

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 played 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 the discovery of Freudian slips as his major achievement—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 “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 is having 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. His interest in Francis Mott's strange ideas about pre-birth experience, the importance of the voice of experience and its relation to the scientific “look”, the asylum post-Kingsley Hall communities in London which were all aspects of a living phenomenology, what we did to ourselves and others in order to not see what we experience. Scientific objective rationality systematically contributed to the destruction and invalidation of the primacy of experience as providing specifically human data. In his social phenomenology Laing

illuminated a specific type of *sensibility* to experience, a natural way of being alive to oneself and others which he felt had been lost.

Of course, there was his last yet unpublished book about love, an issue which pervades his work. How is love between two human beings possible? If we love somebody, we love them as they are in their own being or “is-ness”. To love somebody for Laing is to leave them alone as they are in their unique difference from us. For Laing the modern world seemed beholden to a soulless scientific “knowledge without love” as the astronomer, C. F. von Weizsäcker put it. How could a knowledge without love yield a knowledge of love? From Laing’s perspective, the only way to humanize science was for it to assume human premises (Laing, 1976, p. 142).

How was love possible in the modern world in which people seemed increasingly to be treated as objects? The name of the organization he founded with others in 1964 to deal with human distress, The Philadelphia Association, was derived from the idea of “brotherly love”. The PA’s main concern was with people ‘whose relations with themselves and others have become an occasion of wretchedness’ and to ‘come to a better understanding of how we occasion our suffering and joy, of the ways we may lose ourselves and each other, and find ourselves and each other again’. Laing was always concerned with the disjunctions between people which prevented simple, natural love from occurring. For Sartre and Laing, no matter how alienated we humans are from ourselves or others, we are always free agents to some extent. The assumptions of science where it involved humans demanded fundamental questioning for Laing since the starting-points of the human and nonhuman approaches were radically different and thus led to different conclusions. Treating persons as things implied that one inevitably reached conclusions about things and not people. That was Laing’s basic existential critique of psychiatry which was a paradigmatic instance of a “heartless” approach that no matter how ‘humane’ was fundamentally flawed by confusing people with things, talking about humans in nonhuman terms. That is why “experience” is such a basic datum for Laing and the violation and mystification of experience was always so important and why “sensibility” to the nuances of others’ experience was so essential for Laing. Therefore,

the underlying reason that Laing focused so much on ‘the scientific look’, on the heartlessness of psychiatry, on invalidation and the circles of deceit which lead to mystification, on the difficulties of love (of oneself and others) was the degree to which (even inadvertently) we treat others or ourselves as things instead of as free agents. Laing argued from *The Divided Self* onward that there was the world of difference between treating somebody as a victim of processes or as a being whose actions were the result of intentions.

Laing’s approach was existential, phenomenological and experiential—concepts such as “ontological insecurity”, the violation, invalidation and mystification of experience, alienation from who we and others are, the impact of deception were definitively human terms for understanding the human situation. In one lecture I recall Laing telling of the impact on an elderly woman when she found out that her husband had been having an affair for twenty years. Her whole sense of reality was destroyed. The problem was not so much the affair as the effect on her sense of who she was having lived with such a fundamental deception for so long. What perception or what person could now be worthy of trust?

In his 1964 Preface to the Pelican Edition of *The Divided Self*, Laing wrote:

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. 11).

During the 1980 interview about the human condition that follows, Laing reminded me again of Freud’s comment. This is the passage from *Civilization and Its Discontents*:

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, 1930, p. 105n).

I think that this passage indicates something central to Laing's own abiding view of the world so vividly expressed in *The Politics of Experience*, Laing's version of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. It is scarcely accidental that Laing's last and unfinished work was devoted to the history of love. But while the regrets for what has been lost may be similar for Freud and Laing, Laing's view strongly contrasts to Freud's. Laing was an irremediable romantic, reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau who argued for the natural goodness of men and women before their corruption by civilization: "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains". We cannot predict, Laing once said, the behavior of animals in their natural state from the behavior of animals in captivity. Freud adopted a tragic view of human existence which assumed malaise to be inherent in culture—Freud had an anti-romantic Hobbesian view of the human condition. And this is Sartre's view as well. While, as I have been arguing, Laing followed Sartre in so much, he diverged greatly on this issue. For Sartre the problems of human relationships were not attributable to human history but were inscribed in the nature of being-for-others itself. But for Laing, our problems lay ultimately in treating people as objects and not as human. I think Laing's view of human nature, certainly as expressed in *The Politics of Experience*, was a romantic one: we are inherently and naturally good if only the world would leave us alone. Love was possible if not for the inroads of civilization. Schizophrenics might be in a better state if only psychiatrists would not interfere with them. And people would be more human if technocrats did not treat them as things. We get the sense of a simple, natural human state of affairs from which we have become estranged. On this view, we are, as the Scottish Christians of his youth would have put it, "corrupted".

Laing romanticized what it is to be human partly in reaction to the prevalent ways of looking at humans in nonhuman terms. But his strength lay in his stance as a skeptic who challenged the presumption of knowledge by those who looked at humans from a standpoint appropriate for looking at things. Some of his popularity was in his questioning of established claims to knowledge, especially around mental illness issues. His strength lay in his questioning of the impact of looking at the human world in

nonhuman terms and in providing glimpses of the possibilities of a more human world where relationships were a good deal more humane.

Laing made such significant contributions to our approach to mental illness and psychiatry that many of his ideas have come to be widely accepted. Nowadays for example, psychotics are accorded far more respect than formerly; the way that interpersonal relations can be subject to mystification and invalidation is assumed; the role and function of the family in relation to mental illness is taken seriously; the potentially intrusive role of psychiatry is taken for granted. We are fortunate that there is a good deal more material in addition to his published books and articles in the form of lectures, notes and other documents. The lectures were especially valuable because Laing was often at his best in more informal situations when he could ruminiate well beyond his writings. The number of books about Laing is testament to the interest, value and esteem in which he is held. I can only hope that Laing's executor will be able to see his way clear to releasing the material for the scholarly, and ultimately public consumption that it deserves.

Laing was no ideologue and never gave easy answers to difficult questions. This is reflected in the following interview which I conducted with him in his London office on February 22, 1980 which is among his most far-reaching and interesting. The interview about his views on the human condition provides insights into the way Laing saw important issues such as the ones that I have been highlighting as central to his stance. They remain very relevant today. This interview was originally broadcast on Melbourne radio station, 3RRR, as part of a series I co-directed in 1980, "The Psychoanalytic Revolution".

In 1985 Laing told me of David Cooper's death at 58 from a heart attack. Since from first-hand experience I knew Cooper to be a chronic alcoholic, I asked Laing if this could be related to Cooper's drinking. Laing totally dismissed this possibility saying that alcohol had no role in heart attacks. From Laing's denial of what is the well-established relation of alcohol to heart disease I should have known better than to express surprise when Laing then lit up a cigarette. He told me that those experts on breathing and

meditation, Buddhist gurus such as Chogyam Trungpa, all smoked. Obviously, Laing also denied the established relation between smoking and heart disease. Sadly, we all know what happened: Laing, who smoked and, like David Cooper, regularly drank to excess, died early from a heart attack. Nobody could deny that Laing, in the words of one of his favorite philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche, would always “live dangerously”.

For me the vagaries, complexities, strengths and weaknesses of Laing’s life and work can be summed up in another of Nietzsche’s memorable phrases—Ronnie Laing was “human, all too human”.

[Kirsner’s interview with Laing follows:]

Do you see yourself as a cultural pessimist or a cultural optimist? Or aren't these categories very useful in relation to the human condition?

I suppose I'm an optimist on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and a pessimist on Wednesdays and Sundays. I haven't got a philosophical position that justifies either optimism or pessimism. As I live them, anyway, these terms are more moods. They are of interest phenomenologically, but I don't think the mood proves anything, and I don't think anything proves the mood. We can feed a pessimistic mood with any amount of social observation, fact and pseudo-fact. And an optimistic mood can be fed also. I don't actually think in those terms, and I can't construct a stable linear view of history. History is so vast that my mind is completely boggled by the thought of all the different aspects of living that have gone into the human story so far. In what sense this is better than that, and how you can assess these against innumerable and continually changing factors, is beyond my mind to compute.

A writer like Kafka seems to see the world as a prison without bars, as in many ways you saw the world of the schizophrenic in The Divided Self, or Beckett, who doesn't seem to see any way out, or the early Sartre—we're condemned to be free at the same

time as being abandoned. We have all these parameters in our existence, within which we can act. I wonder whether you feel that there are various parameters of our existence which could be described as the human situation?

Whether our souls or minds have any sort of autonomy apart from our physical existence, we live our life in a physically mortal frame. One thing that is certain is death. What death is, however, seems to me an essential, baffling mystery. Apart from observing it (which only tells you what you see—it doesn't tell you what it is that one is looking at), the only way we could possibly know about it is to remember having died. And some people say they do. But what people say is always open to a scale of plausibility and implausibility, possibility and impossibility, probability and improbability. And so, what one makes of what anyone says will fit into a scale of credibility.

My mind works the same way as in the existential frame that it is apparently in the nature of man to question his being. Man is the being whose being is in question to himself. It doesn't look as though there are any other creatures that we've come across, except the human race so far, that have this peculiarity.

What is your stance on the world—your take on it—what is it like today for you?

My perspective is of the kind that I don't have a model to which I can refer it. I can't say it is like a prison, a womb, a tomb. I think it was Max Beerbohm from whom I first heard, "Life is a prison without bars". If a metaphor did fit, then I wish it would come to mind! I would even justify my inability to say what the world looks like by arguing that it is in the nature of the world not to be "putable" into an object or an image that one can stand out of. There is no image that one can make, which is the totality of all images in the ground of the possibility of everything. You can't put the infinite set of all into a model or an image that has a boundary on which one is on the outside looking. I don't share the internal world, or the world that used to be for Giordano Bruno, and up to maybe the time of Galileo, of the world as a vast animal, all alive. I don't feel it in terms of a schema of any particular spatial centeredness in the world that is related to any particular theological

or existential significance.

I grew up with the idea of these vast infinite spaces of Pascal. I don't feel alienated. I don't feel I strayed into this universe by some mistake or absent-mindedly or for some reason I've forgotten. I feel quite at home, basically in harmony. But I've got a real sense of shuddering and terror at the way human life can turn on anyone. Things that can happen to people don't look at all pleasant and I'm very thankful that in my life so far I've been spared a lot of terrible things that one actually encounters. As Sophocles said, "Terrible is life" . . ." It's not unmitigated. I don't have a sense of a continued abyss of utter end or nihilistic dissolution of all significance and meaning of things that I value and cherish. I don't know how to account for any of this universe. In reflecting upon what my position seems to be, I don't see why we would expect to be able to account for any of it.

In Freud's theory of civilization he claims that basically we are pretty narcissistic and what we want is satisfaction of the pleasure principle. But then, a la Hobbes, we unite for a better long term goal. Civilization is just a compromise. Freud does see human beings as not particularly lovely individuals. In many ways we are basically pretty destructive, as well as, of course, being creative.

Oh yes. I don't recognize in the way I look at my fellow creatures and myself that I've hardened into a misanthropic stance. I've never gone through a period of catastrophic disillusionment, a soured or a jaundiced view of people. Freud claimed for himself that he had a "friendly attitude" to human beings. At the same time, he didn't see why in any sense of the term that he could make any sense of, that you should be expected to love people at large, as he found many people quite unlovable. He disagreed with that injunction or command.

Also, in Civilization and Its Discontents, he brings up the short story by John Galsworthy, "The Apple Tree". A student on holiday in Wales has a brief romance with a farmer's daughter, just before World War I. He is upper class, she a peasant. He goes back to finish his holidays in Brighton. Soon the girls with their tennis racquets and

the rest of it capture his attention. He forgets about her completely. Many years later he happens to be on holiday in Wales. He remembers he had this affair there as a student and discovers that the girl committed suicide when he didn't come back for her, as he had vowed he would. Freud said this story showed how simple natural human love is no longer possible in our civilization.

I don't agree that you can culture out love. There is a lot to be said for one of the pleasant developments of our *civilization*. I am basing myself here, for instance on other people, social historians, like Louis Stone (in *Sex, Marriage and Family History from 1500-1800* with aperçus about the nineteenth century). He makes a very strong case that the development of our industrial *civilization*, money circulation and the dissolution of the romantically cherished structures that went 200-300 years ago opened out space for women and men to develop something like a friendly relationship to each other, to be able to look at each other, to choose each other out of personal taste to a considerable extent, to develop on their own avowal and take their destiny in their hands between themselves, to take the decision to live together if they wanted, to part if they wanted, to have children if they wanted. I like all that sort of thing. I am a sufficiently "corrupt" (I say that ironically) product of my times that I actually prefer the thought of living now than any other time I can think of. Just for the little time since the end of World War II in Europe, however long that is going to last, has been a remarkable period of comparative peace. Comparative, I mean, just in this particular location on the planet or anywhere where people haven't got the knives out, or the helicopters, or the machine guns-where people have a chance to sit down and get on with living a peaceful life and making something of it, I mean, that's the sort of place I would like to be.

But a lot of people would see you as a herald of a sort of non-alienated life to come in a totally different society. They've read The Politics of Experience and taken it that we are all half-crazed, half people in a really crazy world. Is there a question of being misunderstood?

I suppose it depends on the tone of voice in which one says that, and the look in the eyes—whether it is said in a frenetic, frantic way or whether it is said in some other tone of voice. If we take the world's well-known spiritual teachers from the Buddha to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to the Greek tradition and the Islamic tradition, it's said all over the place that most people by any rigorous standards are pretty daft. We don't give any credit to even the state of mind of people—our own great-great-great-grandparents—we think we have to make allowances for it, they didn't know any better. Have a look at how many women were burned a year in Europe for years—only about 20 generations back—apparently about 100,000 a year is a low conservative estimate out of a population of about 6,000,000. An incredibly large number of women were picked up in the middle of the night from their beds, trundled along in carts at 3 am—it could happen here or anywhere—these guys were going around picking up women and putting them into dungeons and torturing them and burning them. Any student in the first year of a philosophical course is expected to begin to realize that the unreflective ordinary state of mind, as soon as one looks upon it, is practically bound to discover innumerable, epistemological errors—deep programmed epistemological errors—so I don't think I'm saying anything unusual there.

You have been taken as that, though, haven't you?

I was taken by quite a lot of people who raved. The education people divided into two camps over *The Politics of Experience*. Some of them who were on the inner side of education knew the echoes, resonances and reverberations of what I was saying. But they deeply resented that thousands of people read that in that form for the first time—that was their introduction to all that. They read me before they had read Sartre or Hegel or before they had even heard of Kierkegaard, or before they had ever thought of reading Plato or Aristotle. Psychoanalysts did not like the idea that thousands of intelligent students were reading for the first time (at fourteen or earlier) these thoughts about Freud or psychiatry before they had read anything else, getting misled and misinformed and led astray. And the other side of those people who were positioned to make that critical judgment loved it, of course. They liked that because they felt my point of view was

sympathetic with theirs.

You actually did chime in with the mood of the 1960s, characterized by the Dialectics of Liberation Conference.

Yes. Most of *The Politics of Experience* was written in the late 50s and early 60s, and given in lectures, in professional and academic circles. Then, without me knowing that it was happening, a whole year of American college students picked it up and it became a campus best-seller. Well, it never had that fate anywhere else. And of course since the Americans with their *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Tim Leary and then *The Politics of Experience*—it was all over the world. The American students, what could they have read like that? Herbert Marcuse is not the same as that. He's not an existentialist, he is a Marxist-Freudian.

Sartre had never got to that generation in America and Camus was now too old for them. So here was quite a young guy in his thirties just writing. But all this passed me by. I didn't realize it had been happening until I came back from India. I realized that for 3-4 years there must have been a lot of stirring up of all sorts of issues that people were debating and that my contribution had become part of that conversation and that debate. But I found it extremely disheartening that any bit of meaning in what I'd intended to say had got overgrown with so many weeds of misunderstanding, deliberate distortion. Or if not misunderstanding, in some cases then construing the words of what I said in quite a legitimate way, but not in the way I intended.

Many people would regard you as a radical. For example, in writing The Politics of Experience you were one of the first people who took experience seriously as a central motif. Yet you don't cut it off from our interactions with our fellow human beings.

Related to that of course is your work in psychiatry and anti-psychiatry. I know that's not something you particularly want to be associated with.

I don't see how anyone could see me as a radical in a political activist sense. And I certainly would not say that I don't like to be thought of as radical. It's a nice word to bask under the warmth of, like "profound" and so forth.

In talking about the place that one gives experience to, it is really a matter of taking our human life cycle from conception to death. There are certain critical moments in that life cycle physiologically and as adults we experience. . . It is very difficult to say what one means by "experience"! There is an attitude of mind that simply seems to say that what we as human beings experience doesn't matter at all. It's got no metaphysical significance to speak of. It's mainly a nuisance as far as scientific truth is concerned. Practically no experience can be believed naively.

When it is believed it's almost as though what one said is that experience is a psychosis of matter—that experience is itself another countable aberration in the universe that knows nothing of it, and gets on its own way apparently without it. And yet it is only through it that we know anything at all. So there's a complex problem of different orders of this scientific methodology. The way one looks and what one sees and what comes into view. And what is revealed or concealed according to how one looks at anything at all.

I don't know the base word for a "looking at" that has been described by Foucault as this look of observation, inspection, monitoring and surveillance—we "look *at*". This is the look with which we look at people under certain circumstances. My dentist gives me nitrous oxide and a local anaesthetic and as far as he is concerned he is not out of touch with me as a human being, but he is giving all his attention to an objective problem which I am paying him to, I hope, ablate, subtract, eliminate, strip of his look any subjectivity that he has that is not going to contribute to his skill at drilling into my root. I am not asking for personal feelings or for him to be aware of the phenomenology of dentistry. I am not asking for that at all. And that's fine.

But then it applies to the way I die, it's applied to the way my children are taught to speak and move. It's applied all over the place. And I dislike that impinging, transgressive spread and that encroachment on the on-goings that are being looked at and examined and dissected and controlled and started and stopped in that way. There's no

way you can look at anyone that way, it's an instrumental look, and I don't want be at the receiving end of that unless I am able to keep that look as a slave that doesn't become my master, that I'm in control of that look. I can use that look, I can pay someone to look at me in that way and stop looking at me in that way when I want them to stop. He can't take over my whole life with that look. He can't take over something as profoundly important in every sort of way symbolically, socially and physically and the way I want to live my body or the way a woman wants to have a baby, I find that that's an insufferable transgression. So that's one side of things that unites in my mind as a common factor in the domain of psychiatry, the domain of medicine in general in the domain of midwifery and obstetrics and all this field of thanatology, I suppose thanatology is here to stay now-no wonder.

But that sensibility has been with you since the beginning—that the critique of standard institutional psychiatry has been exactly of that nature. It's been an attack on a knowledge which is not guided by love, which is really interested only in control and manipulation.

I do not in the slightest claim to be a rare human being, in so far as I'm capable of feeling. I'm not saying that scientists and psychiatrists who exclude this mode of being with and feeling with from their scientific work are incapable of it in their personal lives. But this sort of psychiatrist has developed a stance to his professional work whereby he feels that he's almost professionally culpable if he doesn't look at people that way. The way doctors learn how to do that is to start off with dead dogfish and move on to a dead human being, a corpse. Then we kill a frog and put it through all sorts of numbers from smashing its head to cutting its head off and pithing its spine and seeing all the different parts twitch. Then you eventually cut it all up, into bits that are still twitching. And then you have a bit of muscle or a bit of nerve from this frog. And then you learn how nerves and muscles work and then you move to patients in hospital and you start studying diseases and you can get a ten pound frog muscle that twitches, you start testing reflexes in neurological conditions. And in the movement from muscle nerve twitch to the tendon reflex no person has entered the horizon—there's no human being. There's a neurological condition,

you're simply looking at this bit of something with a tendon doing things to a piece of stuff. In some mysterious way there is a person attached, in some way connected, if only legally.

But at any rate there's a patient there. It's neurology, you're studying the nervous system and you're not really concerned with the personality of someone who's got pneumonia, except to give them a tranquilliser if they won't lie quiet. There's all sorts of objectives, studies that you can do. You can classify behavior even as an objective thing that people now suffer from Type A or Type B behaviour, people with different sorts of heart conditions. You now suffer from your own conduct, your conduct has become reified, objectified. The agent has been abolished, and by reversal has become pacified, and people now suffer from pathological syndromes of behaviour. So, instead of Manfred Bleuler or Ted Lidz in their descriptions of having a girl in their clinic or office who's scared stiff of them, they are doing an interview with acute excitement and a mute catatonic schizophrenic whose nervous system needs to be toned down because there is too much sensual arousal.

From the moment of entering into the whole system they've never even seen a person there. When I started psychiatry, I thought it was a branch of neurology! I was interested in the brain, my first job was in a neurosurgical unit. I was into this: how do these disorders of the body affect the mind? I wanted to know how the brain affected the mind. So I looked at people in this way. I never thought there was any other way to do it though I hadn't lost my fellow feeling like the rest of my fellow students. But when I came to a patient I de-listed the complaint. I did an examination trying to find out what was the matter. And what was the matter was some sort of delineable if possible, pathological condition or syndrome, or set of conditions. So I went through all this stuff with people in psychiatry and as you quickly discover, you've got to discover it yourself. You examine them all over backside forward, upside down and so forth and there is nothing the matter with them physically and no pathological stuff.

When it came to people who are schizophrenic, I looked at people like that and there was nothing the matter with them. I couldn't make this out. Apart from what the text books say textbooks go into primary, secondary or first rank symptoms of schizophrenia what psychiatrists in actual clinical practice go through in diagnosing someone who is

schizophrenic is that it is someone who is different. They never diagnose anyone who they felt was essentially the same as them as schizophrenic. It is a way of expressing, as I said, in *The Divided Self*, that disjunction. I think that for every sociologist, as well as psychiatrists, and anthropologists, that's abundantly clear that it is a disjunction that generates the diagnosis. But the disjunction is of a peculiar order. I can't understand this person who is inaccessible to me. As Jaspers says, it is on the other side of an abyss—his psychic life is different from mine. I repeatedly found that I felt I could understand this person perfectly well with no particular difficulty. I didn't see how or why other people would draw that line where they did. I still don't know why, actually.

It doesn't mean to say there isn't an abyss. If someone is on the other side of an abyss he doesn't cease to be a human being because I can only wave at him across a vast abyss, because he speaks another language, has made up a language of his own, is in a different inner space, is on a trip, or freaked out, or lost or confused. Now, the psychiatrists says the reason why that communication has broken down to me and you is that there is something the matter with you which makes you unable to communicate with me, or with anyone for that matter. Or yourself properly. And so that is why I can't understand you. It's because you're not capable of making yourself understood and you're not understandable. *Verstehen* therefore is out of the question. It's a complete error of reading of the situation to apply *Verstehen* modalities to a situation that is only explainable, it is not understandable.

Again, I am amazed that non-psychiatrists still have to be intimidated by psychiatry. All the hermeneutics of this problematic, how psychiatrists are allowed to get away with being vested with such power over such a crude issue! I mean, that would be all right if it was said in conversation as an insult to someone. "You are just making no real sense at all, and it's not even good for you to be allowed to speak. Your mind is so confused. And the reason why it is so confused is that I can't understand a word of what you're saying and that's that". In decent human dialogue if I feel that about someone, I don't feel impelled then to work them over with therapeutic vigor, rigor and zeal. Well, that's all right with me, I don't expect to understand everyone. Possibly there are quite understandable reasons (if I knew what they were) why he doesn't want to be understood. I don't have to stretch my imagination too far to imagine someone in that position. What I

cannot however, do is move into a sympathetic or empathetic mode while remaining in a "looking at" mode it is a contradiction of terms. The interesting thing is, *that* lack of understanding, applied with *that* look, in fact, extends essentially to everyone, not really just schizophrenics. If you think that schizophrenia is a name that a psychiatrist gives to someone who can't understand, then Bleuler was quite prepared to say that he couldn't understand 90% of people who are tinged with schizoid or schizophrenic symptoms. It is quite often said that if psychiatrists could diagnose people at will, 1 in 10 of any group of people would be definitely down the hatch. I mean how can this be taken seriously?

Szasz. says that you really champion the schizophrenic, that you think that it's wonderful to go through voyages of discovery, of inner space, and they are really better people in a sense than the usual.

Since *The Politics of Experience* I haven't given a long exposition in a book of my own position, but I have done many interviews in which I have said again, I think that some people, who for a variety of reasons get in dislocated and social space, getting out of position, being insufferable, not breaking the law in any gross way but act in such a way that no one can stand them any longer. This is a point that Hugh Crawford has particularly made and he is absolutely right. No one was ever sent away to hospital for schizophrenia if the company that they were keeping wanted them just in any ordinary way to be around. Either frightening, or worrying or alarming or putting people off. . . So there is no question that there are people who get into positions of being diagnosed as schizophrenic or go into unusual states of mind or so forth. People get diagnosed as schizophrenic or whatever state of mind, in terms of their likeability in general, or in terms of the vices and virtues, in terms of the Robert Burns sort of thing, "A man's a man for all that", whether you're daft or not, I don't think they're any better or worse than you or me. I said this is degrading, as it is. Sociologically, it stigmatizes, it places someone down and it strips a person of their total legal rights to their own body, to their own time, to their own money, to their own words, to their own utterances, to their own thoughts, etc. etc. So I agreed with Goffman and other people, yes this is a degradation, this is degrading. It invalidates the person quite explicitly and turns them into (in an obvious,

justifiable pun), at the same time an invalid and an invalidated person.

So I said I'm doing that. So the screams went up from some quarters that I was idealizing schizophrenics, as Nathan Ackerman, the American family therapist, said, "You're a schizophrenia lover, Ronnie, That's why they can't stand you!" So I'm just going to say that I'm going to treat this person on equal terms with me. If he behaves in a way that is insufferable to me, I'll deal with that accordingly. I might even deal with it by the use, or the power to use the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Though I've never had occasion to move in that type of setting, I am glad to say, for years now.

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ⁱ Professor Kirsner will be presenting a paper at the forthcoming conference, "R. D. LAING IN THE 21ST CENTURY", honoring the 25th anniversary of Laing's death, October 25-27, 2013, at Wagner College, Staten Island, NY.
www.rdlraig2013symposium.com

ⁱⁱ The Philadelphia Association was a charitable instituteion in London established by RD Laing and others in 1964. It challenged conventional ways of dealing with mental and emotional distress. Beginning with Kingsley Hall, a number of communal therapeutic households were set up under its auspices, In addition to maintaining therapeutic households, The Philadelphia Association continues to conduct psychotherapy, psychotherapy training and courses.