

R. D. Laing as Negative Thinker

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. . . you can't really make a whole haystack out of needles, if I could I would, but I haven't had the inspiration to do that.

R. D. Laing

R. D. Laing was not a systematic thinker. One of the more controversial figures in psychology and psychiatry, both as a result of his efforts and in spite of them, he remains a difficult theorist to nail down. Laing preferred to cover a broad area of inquiry rather than work any specific idea out to its logical conclusions and fine-tune it to perfection. His best known and perhaps most promising work, an existential theory of the genesis of schizophrenia, was never fully developed; it was abandoned in favor of an exploration into interpersonal defenses (Burston, 1996, p. 58). Indeed, Laing's career and written works are marked by radical shifts in subject matter, position, writing style, intended audience, and interest-- producing a book of logical poems, an exploration into pre-birth experiences, a commune for the mentally ill, a psychedelic treatise (which led to investigations into his own mental stability), and an extended hiatus to India and Sri Lanka to practice Buddhist meditation.

Moreover, upon closer inspection, it soon becomes apparent that Laing's work is not only non-systematic, but that there are irresolvable tensions in his thought. Even if one takes his intellectual development over the duration of his career as psychiatrist and theorist into account, one will be hard-pressed to create any sort of final philosophical anthropology or theory of mental health, illness, or therapy. This of course has not stopped us from trying; numerous books that have been written about Laing both during and after his lifetime struggle to make sense of his frustratingly diverse and sometimes chaotic career. Some attempt to work out a unified Laingian theory (or at least say what is "important" in Laing's thought), while others take a more historical or biographical approach, comparing Laing's earlier projects to his later projects and teasing out influences and patterns. These endeavors have been more or less successful, depending on what one is looking for. For example, Andrew Collier's discussion of Laing's social phenomenology closes with the claim that "in the end, one has to choose what one wants from Laing," rejecting what does not coherently fit and emphasizing what works (1977, p. 196). On the other hand, Daniel Burston, at the end of his exploration into Laing's approach to psychotherapy, urges that Laing should ultimately be read in the more disseminated style of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche rather than in that of a systemetizer such as Kraepelin or Freud (2000, p. 146).

Although some complain about Laing's inconsistencies and lack of a coherent system, I believe that this is where his strength lies. What we have to learn from Laing's work is not so much a statement about how the world *is* as much as an attitude or method of approaching it. a way of looking. Laing's thought in this way is fundamentally open-ended. His preference for smaller phenomenological inquiries instead of the construction of grand narratives allowed him to remain open to the possibility of being surprised. Thus, in spite of having a reputation for a quirky personal arrogance, Laing had a humility before the phenomena he investigated; an awareness of the mystery that remained after his investigations, of what he could *not* see.

There will always be phenomena and experiences that stand outside of our theorizing, surprising or even resisting our attempts to make it all fit together. But the possibility of our being surprised is shrinking as we mold the world to our expectations. In our present situation, the hegemony of the "objective" viewpoint threatens to foreclose any deeper exploration into human experience as we search for a unified theory that will explain everything. Psychology is falling fast into the service of the grand narrative of pharmacology. To resist this, we would do well with more microanalyses, as Foucault called them, that stand outside these totalitarian theories and allow what would be invisible to appear. Laing did not allow himself to be led by a drive to describe the nature of the whole. If it is true that the importance of his work lies in his way of looking at phenomena. a way of looking that reveals what other ways of looking pass over. then the complaint that Laing does not attempt to complete a system that will reveal *everything* may lead us to wonder about the motivations of those who would have everything given over. Rather, his tensions and contradictions shed light, reflecting the tensions and contradictions of human experience.

With this in mind, I want to turn to a few examples of how Laing has been picked up, particularly in the service of revolutionary metaphysical systems. Laing's early affiliation with Marxism ended on a sour note. The Marxists he dialogued with generally painted him as having failed in what they took to be his theoretical project and criticized his abandonment of the political sphere. In this vein, Laing has been charged with being lukewarm and inconsistent in his commitments, ultimately allowing his social constructivism to be corrupted by an existential personalism he could never free himself from.

The fact that these critics are Marxist revolutionaries is not in itself a problem; Laing himself was a revolutionary of sorts, and used many Marxist ideas and terms on his own initiative. In fact, many of those who criticized Laing were inspired by him in the first place. The problem, rather, is that his critics are often working to construct a closed metaphysical system: they have goals based on grand narratives as to how the world looks-- or rather, *should* look-- from outside any concrete point of view within it. Laing, being a phenomenologist, would never allow such an "objective" point of

view to take precedence. He did not try to see the world from the outside. Thus, their complaints against him are not so much about his inconsistency as the fact that he doesn't stand where they would like him to. Their efforts to give an account of Laing's thought have failed. His excess has no place in their systems. They mistook Laing's less ambitious method for a metaphysics.

Laing's Self-Understanding

How did Laing understand his own project? Although he complained that what he was saying was constantly being misunderstood and misappropriated, Laing understood himself as something other than the founder of a coherent theory. In a short third-person summary he wrote of himself for *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (1987), Laing presents the critical stance he took against the theoretical foundations and practices of the existing medical establishment rather than any positive work he developed. In fact, he devotes as much space in the entry to actually *criticizing* the establishment as he does to outlining his critical stance. Ultimately, though, he positions himself as a "social phenomenologist" who "has been mainly concerned to see and to describe what goes on in people's experience, as mediated by their interactions" (p. 417). Although the method of the analysis of interpersonal relations has yet to be fully developed, he says, he nevertheless "has studied various facets of very disturbed and disturbing personal relations." At the end of his summary, Laing has more questions than answers, giving himself over to a necessary ignorance that realizes "there is so much that goes on between us which we can never know" (p. 418). And this unknown factor will not go away, he scolds, simply because the existing empirical sciences refuse to look at it. Thus Laing presents his project as attempting to bring into view what he can from this realm of uncertainty-- even though many resist this goal and would rather pretend that the unknown does not exist. His closing line indicates, after all the misunderstanding and confusion, that what he wants to be remembered for is not so much what he said about what he saw, but how he went about it: "It therefore may turn out that the main significance of Laing's work lies in what it discloses or reveals of a way of looking which enables what he describes to be seen" (p.418). That is, the legacy he leaves behind is his phenomenological method of looking at an individual's experiences in the context of his or her interpersonal relationships-- not a particular statement about the nature of reality as a whole.

But not only did Laing not see himself as a metaphysician; he saw himself expressly as *anti* metaphysical. Over the last two years of his life Laing gave a series of interviews with his would-be biographer, Bob Mullan. What was published from these conversations serves us as the closest available approximation to Laing's intellectual memoirs, giving his reflections upon his career and body of work. as well as his childhood and many other more personal subjects. Here, he takes his position of not

knowing even further. Where he earlier presented himself as non-systematic and critical of the establishment, his interviews emphasize his position as a negative thinker of sorts in the style of Foucault, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Laing thought these thinkers wrote closer to life and in a more accessible way than did systematizers such as Hegel and Heidegger.

Because there is no longer a single cultural worldview to support them, Laing explained, the days of building grand metaphysical schemas and all-encompassing explanations are over. Different views create an excess of meaning. Thus, when one discusses issues of ultimacy such as the meaning of existence or the nature of things, the words one uses have so much invested in them throughout the diversity of individual listeners that "the meaning of all the words disappears into other people," who hear in them only what they themselves mean when they use the terms (Mullan, 1995, p. 37). In other words, you can't control meaning. The intention of the speaker is lost, making it difficult, if not impossible, to articulate a single coherent answer to the big questions. One simply can't communicate the whole of it. Even the last great systematizers, Laing says, such as Heidegger and Adorno, had to invent so much jargon in an attempt to control how they were received that they were incoherent to all but professional academics. Perhaps, he suggests, a musician or poet would have better luck at communicating such an ambitious undertaking as the meaning of the whole. But since he was a writer, Laing thought it better to stick to smaller, clearer projects. the "needles" of precision that Foucault, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard preferred. Laing saw himself as a literary minimalist, getting to the point and getting out: "I want to use the simplest everyday language in a coherent way" (p. 38).

This being said, Laing was still adamant about one project in particular throughout his career-- that of the social contextualization of experience. In *The Divided Self*, he argues in the beginning that in trying to make the schizophrenic (or any other person's) experience comprehensible, "any theory that begins with man or a part of man abstracted from his relation with the other in his world" will necessarily fail to understand the workings of the human psyche (1960, p. 19). As time went on, Laing sharpened his focus on the social network, turning away from the description of individual experience and toward the ways that we use "interpersonal actions" to shape each other's experiences. This "social nexus" was the primary theme of *Self and Others* (1961), his follow up to his first work. He became more scathing in *The Politics of Experience* (1967), where he asserts that the behavior of the supposed schizophrenic is "a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation" (p. 115). This puts the blame, or at least the source of a person's suffering, on his or her conscious or unconscious treatment at the hands of others.

This locating the source of one's suffering in his or her social situation, along with his career-long criticism of the medical establishment in their treatment of those labeled

mentally ill, led Laing to be lumped in with radical Marxists and anti-psychiatrists. But in spite of his virulent attacks on the established understanding of mental illness (as a problem within the individual's psyche), Laing's inclusion into the anti-psychiatry movement came to pass only to his chagrin and in spite of his defensive assertions to the contrary. Laing was still an avowed existential phenomenologist, greatly influenced by existential writers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger, and shared their personalist point of view and understanding of subjectivity.

Obviously, this refusal to reject existentialism was not agreeable to those who labored to show how anonymous ideology constitutes what the individual mistakes for his or her personal experience, which is how much of Marxist thought has constituted the subject since Althusser. It is indicative of the difficulty Laing would face on this front that the principal text in which he emphasized the importance of social context was *not* a social critique, but a phenomenological description of the schizoid experience. And even in *Self and Others*, while he is turning towards a more socially constructed understanding of the self, Laing speaks of that which is radically private in a person's experience-- to the point where the loss of this "unqualified privacy" of first-person experience is a considerable factor in madness (1961, p. 36). Despite his emphasis on the role of the social, he never gave up his existential bent and his concern for personal experience. His critics took this as a weakness, seeing Laing as a developing social critic who was never able to purge himself of his personalist starting point. as if one should not speak about social experience and personal experience without ultimately reducing one to the other.

Laing's Systematic Appropriation

Laing's deliberate lack of ultimate coherence has not stopped his being picked up and pressed into the service of the metaphysical projects of others. The irony here is that Laing shared the same fate as the heroes he cited in his interviews with Mullan. Indeed, it seems that an unfortunate consequence of being a non-systematic thinker has been that others subsequently appropriate one's thought into a system. even if one's initial project was the destruction of systems. The will to system may indeed be irresistible. Foucault complained about this tendency even during his lifetime, and we are just beginning to realize the damage that has been done to Nietzsche's thought by condensing it into a neat and palatable package. Kierkegaard seems to have been luckier in this regard, perhaps because he has instead been boiled down to a few disconnected, trite slogans.

Even stranger (and more infuriating), this appropriation into a system in turn leads to charges of inconsistency when disparate facets of the thinker's ideas fall outside of that purported system. which, in the end, turns out to be nothing more than the editor's agenda. Peter Sedgwick, for example, in his *Psycho Politics*, accuses Laing of having

deceived and disappointed his followers by "returning" to psychiatry in the seventies and abandoning what he, Sedgwick, saw as the important revolutionary (that is, Marxist) element of Laing's work (1982, p. 102).

Indeed, Laing's ambivalence toward the "revolution" is apparent. Burston reports that Laing's strong association with the Left and his emphasis on social activism in the sixties had all but disappeared by the mid-seventies, during which he "lost no opportunity to emphasize his indebtedness to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud, distancing himself from Marxist politics" (1996, p. 109). With this came Laing's turn towards Buddhist mysticism and his trip to the East. In spite of this, Laing never lost his socially critical tone; still, he rejected any affiliation with revolutionary social movements. Although Laing sympathized with Sedgwick and respected his commitment to his cause, he resented Sedgwick's demand that he stay within his categories of what a revolutionary should be. Discussing this issue with Mullan, he reacted to Sedgwick's charge with the countercharge of trying to pigeonhole him: "I thought of writing him and saying you. re putting some sort of ideological map in front of you, in terms of what you see in me, but it doesn't correspond" (Mullan, p. 357). Laing's resentment of such charges ran deep, as they conflicted with his own identity as an independent thinker. Sedgwick assumed that Laing was on their side from the beginning, and took any departure from that as a betrayal. But Laing wasn't so impressed with "their side" in the first place. or even so sure that such a side actually existed. So not only was his turn to the East not a "betrayal of the cause" (p. 356); he called Sedgwick impertinent in assuming that he, Laing, should follow any sort of preset "correct Marxist line" (p. 91).

Laing's own personal experience taught him that the world is too complicated to fit into "proper" theory; in his University days in Glasgow, he had been involved in various groups who read Marx and tried to apply it to their own local situation. Laing told Mullan of the difficulties he had found trying to apply such abstract ideas to social change: "Scotland wasn't capitalist . . . and we couldn't rely on what Marx had written over 100 years ago simply applied to different circumstances" (p. 89-90). Since the world didn't fit into Marx, it would be better to fit Marx into the world. Such an approach allows (and requires) a decentering of one's politics; simply belonging to the correct party is not enough. Bluntly put: "What the fucking hell is a correct Marxist line?" (p. 91).

Laing's refusal to commit in his political affiliations was reflected on the theoretical level as well. Laing's lifelong theoretical project certainly had a critical voice in it; contextualizing his patients-- symptoms within their social situations and familial systems in order to make sense of them led him to describe how these contexts often contribute or even constitute the patients. identity and experience as mentally ill. This naturally led to his criticism of those systems and, as said before, to his being taken up

by radical social theorists. But Laing was suspicious of the high level of abstraction Marxism attained to gain its theoretical justification in the first place. What interested him in Marx was not the materialist dialectic, but the desire to change people's concrete situations for the better.

The ambivalence with which Laing used Marxist theory is borne out in the tension he saw between the young Marx, which he read as a sort of humanism, and the later revolutionary works he characterized with the well known phrase "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs" (Mullan, p. 89). Although he was impressed with the seriousness of the latter approach, he was very aware of the danger of working with such a totalizing logic and the harm it can bring to people in the world. He was highly critical (and he is not alone in this) of the way he saw Marxist theory taken up on the abstract level of ontological forces in their historical culmination. bourgeois subjective idealism. rather than being motivated by a concern for the suffering of real individuals in their concrete circumstances. Classes, as abstract categories, don't suffer. People do. And when the logic takes priority over the reality, it becomes "a simple-minded formula" where one thinks he or she can simply "turn the handle" and it will apply to everything (p. 90). The individual is thus lost in the machine. As an existentialist, Laing's concern was for the individual experience, not the completion of history through the correction of social conscience. The abstraction that Marxist theory reached in order to justify itself was ultimately too convoluted for Laing. He grounded his activism at the level of the concrete, citing the example of the French worker priests who interpreted the gospel as telling Christians to dive into the trenches because, as he liked to say, "Jesus Christ has no other hands but ours" (p. 88). The work is to be done in front of the curtain, not behind it.

Still, Andrew Collier, in his *R. D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy* (1977), spends the entire book trying to fit Laing into a materialist dialectic. Collier's text is a good example (indeed, almost a caricature) of how the will to systematize can lead one to overlook the complexity of another's thought. to say nothing about the complexity of the world of human experience. Collier asserts that "Laing's own theory and practice cannot be understood except as a version of psychoanalysis, however unorthodox" (p. 39) and then proceeds to select what he can use from Laing to serve his Freudo-Marxist project. Further, Collier charges that "the 'existentialism' which Laing finds in the pain of his patients. self-experience . . . infect[s] his own method about theorizing about psychological matters," and that these contaminations have no place in an objective explanation of reality. Thus, while there are plainly both personal and social strains in Laing's thought, Collier strives to rescue Laing from the former "existential" camp. His Marxist and scientific lenses lead him to see only those aspects of Laing's thought that lend themselves to his materialist

dialectic. Not surprisingly, he comes up in the end with a reading of Laing that simply confirms his worldview. There is no danger of Laing's excesses and contradictions shaking up his predetermined view of the way the world is: The phenomena that are brought to light are the ones he expects to see.

Collier wants to show how much Laing has to offer this "scientific" project of moving history forward, awarding Laing's social phenomenology an instrumental role in his plan. For Collier, phenomenology in and of itself is insufficient to analyze the world of our experience. Collier, in fact, is not interested in the world of experience at all, since the task of science is rather "to find out what the world is like independently of us" in order that we may change it to suit us better. hardly a phenomenological task (p. 196). Thus, though Laing's method is descriptively helpful in that it makes the schizophrenic's behavior intelligible where it was previously impenetrable, mere description is not enough. It is actually dangerous, Collier says, because it may stop us from seeking the "real" explanation of the phenomena. Collier thinks it an essential task to go further in order to "distinguish real from spurious intelligibility" so that we can finally grasp the objective truth of the matter (p. 55). And in order to reach this final point of a full explanation, Collier states apodictically, we must uncover "a process governed by causal laws connecting the behaviour of the part . . . with the structure of the whole" (p. 52). That is, unless one shows that what we are looking at is another example of universal processes governed by universal laws, one has failed to throw light upon it. For Collier, this top-down explanation of psychic phenomena takes the form of a causal link to anonymous unconscious processes: the economy of psychosexual energy (p. 66). He is partial to a rather extreme Freudian reduction of human behavior to processes analogous to biological ones. A "subjective" explanation in terms of the individual's experience, then, is nothing more than a rationalization (p. 53). Laing's subjective protocols thus don't have much to offer him. Obviously, if the goal of science is to view the world as if we humans weren't in it, the discourse of personal experience will not lead us to any "real" explanation. A true explanation must be said in terms of impersonal processes governed by universal laws; it must be shown how the phenomenon fits into the structural whole, which logically precedes it. Only then does one have sufficient understanding of the process to be in a position to change it. (In which direction we should change it, it seems, is not open to discussion since, presumably, that is a part of the structure as well.)

Nonetheless, Collier sees a place for Laing in this process. Although Collier sees social phenomenology as restricted in that it does not account for the "real" unconscious processes that cause behavior, it does have the benefit of being able to contextualize the individual in his or her social situation. And because psychoanalysis as it stands can only explain *intra* personal causes of experience, Laing's method, when reinterpreted as a causal explanation, is a useful supplement to psychoanalysis

because it can illuminate the other *interpersonal* causes of experience: "Thus psychoanalysis can allow for the fact that although all mental phenomena have their psychological causes, some are adequately explained by the external reality with which the person in question is confronted and therefore do not have to be interpreted as symptoms" (p. 73). The subjective protocols become the raw data that the therapist or caregiver (who, oddly, seems to enjoy a subjective agency the patient does not) uses to discern the pathological processes from the interpersonal. The former is to be dealt with in analysis. The latter is dealt with by the revolutionary process of changing the oppressive social structure surrounding the individual: either by educating the family into better behavior (reducing double binds and disconfirmations) or, if possible, by removing the patient from his or her destructive environment (p. 81).

Thus Collier can now explain all psychological conflict as a combination of internal Freudian drives and their interrelations with other sets of internal Freudian drives. He begins and ends on the level of abstract universal processes, never treating the person as if his or her experiences were real. This reductive goal runs so counter to Laing's original phenomenological project that one wonders if Collier was even interested in it in the first place. But, since Collier says in the end that one must choose what one wants from Laing, we cannot charge him with a non-charitable reading; he merely takes what he wants (p. 196).

Although Collier sees an ally in Laing's revolutionary leanings, he charges him with being on the wrong side of the fence as far as his metaphysics is concerned. Laing begins and remains in existential phenomenology, which Collier sees as a threat to the scientific project of seeing things as they "really are." Phenomenology, Collier says, though helpful to his psychoanalytic explanation, "must remain however a supplementary discipline . . . it is not an autonomous new science, still less a rival alternative to psychoanalysis" (p. 82). Laing's personalism reeks of subjectivity, which for Collier counts as tainted evidence for any scientific exploration of the world, human or otherwise.

Dialectic, Methods, and Metaphysics

But Laing wasn't trying to develop metaphysics. He was developing a method through which to approach phenomena. Collier wants Laing's social phenomenology to function in the service of metaphysical social theory, showing how the social environment affects (or rather effects) the individual. But Laing never worked out a final theory as to how the two relate, as Collier did, except to say that one cannot view a person in abstraction from his or her context and that that context, at least in part, constitutes the individual. This is a point of view on experience, not a dogmatic statement about reality. And as we have seen, even though Laing had Marxist sympathies, he does not feel the need to toe the proper party line. Nonetheless, Collier

holds that in order to fully understand Laing's "system," one must use a Marxist analysis "based on a Marxist account of how capitalist society works" (pp. ix-x). This, ultimately, means accepting Collier's interpretation of the dialectical movement of history and historical change.

Collier sees two ways to understand the historical process of conflict. In the first, the unifying principle is ultimately preferred in that all conflict is considered to be an illusion. The contradictions that appear do so within a totality, which is in the end, as it was originally, essentially one. Thus, contradictions are only apparent and can be overcome in pure thought (p. 29). Collier attributes this understanding of dialectic (that prefers the whole) to Hegel and Sartre, the former with his emphasis on the historical self-completion of Geist and the latter with the unity of consciousness. In his view it leads to abandoning the world in quietism. As, he thought, Laing did. In the second sort of dialectic, with which he credits both Marx and Freud for decentering the self, it is rather the *unity* that is illusory. Quietism will not help here: Thought cannot grasp any underlying unity in the parts because the contradictions are not just pieces in the care of a preexisting whole. Rather, Collier says, "it is the task of science to pierce through this appearance of unity" and to grasp its underlying contradictions. This then gives us the leverage to bring about historical change. For Collier, it is not pure thought at the unity pole, but historical practice at the level of difference that unifies and changes the world.

Still, it may be fruitful to hesitate before we commit to one side or the other, especially since there are more than two sides to consider. There is an oversight in both of Collier's understandings of dialectic in that *both* of his conceptualizations posit plurality, whether illusory or real, as being eventually subsumed into the one. Unity is achievable through contemplative or philosophical thought in the first, or through historical praxis in the second. But Collier fails to give consideration to the possibility that there might not be any final resolution at all, through thought *or* practice. While the origin of activity might change hands in Collier's estimation, the direction of the activity leads to the same assumed goal.

This blind spot is due to top-down thinking, a methodological rather than a metaphysical issue. In spite of his apparent preference for plurality over unity, Collier is working from the vantage point of a preset metaphysics: he presumes to know the ultimate end of the dialectic of history (unity), no matter how it is achieved. That is, while his system begins with plurality, his *systemizing* begins with the one. And his desire to present a unified theory, no matter what the cost, leads him to reject all that doesn't fit as inconsistent. This of course is reminiscent of his assertion that explanation needs to be done in terms of universal processes in order to yield reality. He speaks from the point of view of the whole. One can only imagine what is passed over in the process.

Laing, on the other hand, is saved from this presumption by the "personalism" (his refusal to give up the primacy of the individual's experience) with which Collier finds him so infected. When Laing speaks of Marxism, he does not speak about history moving forth. He speaks about liberating, or at least easing the plight of, the oppressed. And when he speaks of the oppressed, he is talking about people-- *concrete* people in terms of their lived experience, not in terms of their "objective" existence. Collier's metaphysic, on the other hand, considers the individual only after reducing him or her to hydraulic processes and subsuming these processes into the movement of the whole. A person's experience is another example of a universal movement.

As a phenomenologist, Laing cannot claim to speak from an objective point of view of the whole. He speaks from the messiness of human experience. Such is the existentialism that Collier rejects as unscientific. But it seems more realistic to theorize with an awareness that we don't actually *know* where history is going. This may be less scientific if one considers the point of science to eliminate the human perspective (a contradiction, to say the least), but it is certainly more human in that it remembers that the scientist speaks from within the world. In presuming to speak from an outside perspective, not only does Collier assume that the whole can be spoken for; he assumes that it is a closed process tending toward unification. When method is ruled by parsimony and a desire to have a closed system, real excess (such as the person who is systematizing) is lost in the methodological attempt to clean up the loose ends.

Such teleological optimism is certainly not the product of scientific objectivity; it is a human event. Laing's hesitation over the possibility of a final unification is due to a concrete realism that refuses to give up the experiences of the scientist who theorizes. Laing doesn't know the direction of the whole; it remains a question for him. Because of this, Laing's science is much more sensitive to subtlety and difference. and thus rife with loose ends. In keeping closer to experience, it is possible to consider the possibility of a more playful (or tragic, depending on your disposition) dialectic without seeking the final unity that Collier hoped for. One can hold the tension of difference itself as the stuff of life. The "whole," then, at least from our point of view, is a non-teleological historical process that prefers difference *per se* to any overarching ideal process, logical or material. Thus our historical efforts to bring about a final unity may in the end ultimately fail. The direction of our movement is far more open to question than any utopian theorist might hope. This is not to say that there can't be a final goal. just that we don't know it. This way of looking is a possibility, with far-reaching consequences, that is by definition overlooked by the will to systematize.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972/83), champion Laing in this vein, taking a stance that is opposed in the extreme to any unified goal of history. For them, history is not moving towards anything, but rather is an infinite process of change and regeneration, of the destruction and construction of new identities. But while they hold with Laing the tension of an open-ended universe, they share with Collier the same scorn for Laing's existential personalism. Laing represents to them a pioneer of social constructionism who does not go far enough.

Deleuze and Guattari are grateful to Laing for showing them that "it is certain that neither men nor women are clearly defined personalities, but rather vibrations, flows, schizzes, and -- knots.. " For them, the self is not a real entity; rather the term "refers to personological co-ordinates from which it results" (p. 362). Thus for them it is not enough to say that the self is constructed through its relations with others. For Deleuze and Guattari, the "self" is the residue that results from the intertwining of multiple drives that, while seeming to speak with a more or less unified voice, are actually anonymous. Contra Laing they do not consider the distinction between the self and the other to be any more interesting, important, or real than the plurality of competing drives that compose this so-called self. Thus there is no distinction between the inter- and intrapsychic in their theory: the self is at best temporary, and at worst to be disposed of into the infinite flux.

Therapy in turn becomes the same as revolutionary activism, breaking up what we assume is unified and liberating the chaotic multiplicity that underlies it. And this is precisely what they are calling for: "Schizoanalysis" is a full frontal assault on identity in the name of difference. Deleuze and Guattari call for the dissolution of the self into the plurality, vapor, and field of play that it is. And since *this* field of play is not distinguishable from *other* fields of play, their project expands into social action until they would reach the chaotic celebration of what one of their translators calls "the schizophrenic process of desire" (1983, p. xvii). The aim, then, is a sort of endless revolution with no reintegration, a dialectic of change with no final unity.

Obviously, then, Deleuze and Guattari have no patience for Laing's more Sartrean leanings. They criticize Laing's well known characterization of psychosis as metanoia, a breakdown of the individual leading to a breakthrough (an idea he borrowed from Jung and Winnicott), as hesitating before the possibility of true liberation:

At the very moment he breaks with psychiatric practice, undertakes assigning a veritable social genesis to psychosis, and calls for a continuation of the "voyage" as a process and for a dissolution of the "normal ego," he falls back into the worst familialist, personological, and egoic postulates, so that the remedies invoked are no more than a "sincere corroboration among parents," a

"recognition of the real persons," a discovery of the true ego or self as in Martin Buber. (p. 360)

Here we see a complaint similar to Collier's: Laing's personalism leads him to speak of psychic liberation in terms of *self* liberation, while they would rather address the anonymous processes underneath. Laing's existentialism not only slows the process of true liberation; his colluding with the fantasy that the self should be preserved works to perpetuate the oppressive regime of identity and sameness Deleuze and Guattari are fighting against. Deleuze and Guattari blame Laing's return to the self not only for his eventual "retreat to the Orient," but for the failure of the antipsychiatry movement as a whole as well.

Laing, in turn, was not fond of their extremism. Laing thought Guattari (the psychiatrist of the pair; Deleuze was a philosopher) a phony who worked at a hospital giving electric shocks like the rest of the establishment (Mullan, p. 182 & 365). Furthermore, Laing's therapeutic and political goals were far more complex and varied than those of Deleuze and Guattari (and Collier's, for that matter). Laing avoided such a totalizing project as the dissolution of all identity (Burston, 2000, p. 124). In the same way that his theorizing was not determined by an idea of the whole, his therapy was more open ended as well. In fact, he was reluctant to give any sort of model for therapy because he was afraid of its subsequent codification into a set method. When Mullan asked Laing to characterize his style of therapy, Laing replied that though he could tell us what he *has* said to clients, he could not say what one *should* say (Mullan, p. 319). Nor was he consigned to the idea that what he had to offer was necessarily therapeutic, or even helpful. Laing was quite aware that when one claims to know the purpose of the whole, anything one does can be justified in the name of its service.

Putting aside the curious irony of Deleuze and Guattari's accusing Laing of being inconsistent when their own project is the destruction of identity itself, we can see here another example of Laing's hesitation before the complexity of the phenomena being passed over by those who claim to be able to see the world as a system from outside any point of view in it. Although Deleuze and Guattari are radically against any final telos, they still present the revolutionary process itself as the unifying principle that justifies their project. And in building this system, they take what they need, rejecting what they cannot use. Unfortunately in doing so they leave some fundamental questions about the world of experience unaddressed. Who is it writing the book, if not some sort of self? Is this entire level of explanation to be rejected? Their critical questioning of the establishment turns into a metaphysical treatise. There is no sense of wonder here; indeed, *Anti-Oedipus* reads like a manifesto. Perhaps the wonder of this text is that it tries to build a system out of excess. But excess, it seems, resists even this.

Phenomenology and the Will to System

Thus we see Laing's treatment at the hands of grand metaphysical narratives. What fits is lauded for its insight, and what remains is dismissed as backwards thinking; his excess is rejected as inconsistency. But Laing's social phenomenology was a much more humble project than those who used him would like to admit. Rather than trying to describe everything, he offered a method to look at individual experience in a way that reveals the interpersonal aspect. And though Laing shares with the Marxists an awareness that the self is constituted from its social context, he was not ready to reduce the former to the latter or discount the legitimacy of the self and its experiences simply for the sake of systematic cohesion. For Laing, Marxism isn't a metaphysical model of what is; rather, it sheds light on how we are currently and contingently organized (Mullan, p. 309). Laing resolved to keep his experience of the world a human one, from the point of view of one who lives in it. Contra Collier, he must be read as a phenomenologist. In spite of his unending criticism of the current nature of social world, he remains at the level of the particular phenomena with his microanalyses rather than jumping to the structure of the whole. Questioning at this level reveals far more subtle differences than can be seen from the outside, letting the phenomena "be" in the double sense of allowing things to be seen and not presuming to know where they should be-- even if one has the sense that things still aren't as they should be at the present moment.

How is this to speak to those of us already in the practice of phenomenology, who agree that science must be done from a human point of view and that the particular is more important and interesting than the whole? Phenomenology is, after all, not a system. It is a method of inquiry. If we keep this in mind and let the phenomena lead, aren't we free from the will to systematize and unify, the desire to build up a theory of everything?

Interestingly, not even fellow phenomenologists escape the wrath of Laing in this regard. When Mullan asked him if anyone had been following up on the phenomenological exploration he left behind with *The Divided Self*, Laing took the opportunity to lambaste some of the work being done in America in the name of social phenomenology:

There is an American journal of-- I don't know what they called it perhaps, *Existential Psychology*-- that has got completely unreadable gobbledegook in it which they think is following it up. Simply Heideggerian jargonese, drowning the visibility of the other person through their haze of existialese they regard as following it up. (Mullan, p. 335)

Exactly which journal he means to slur here remains ambiguous. But this should burn the ears of those of us who are predisposed to writing in broad strokes about a person's "being-in-the-world" or "being-with-others," and any hyphenated extensions in this vein.

Laing is not simply complaining about the technical jargon of phenomenology. Although phenomenological vocabulary can reveal what was previously unseen, it also functions to obscure. Subtle yet important differences are steamrolled when it becomes a quest to show how an individual yields another case of a given universal structure. The method of phenomenology is turned into a metaphysic, and the theory leads the phenomena and determines even more strictly what can be seen. hardly the "needles" of clarity and precision that make small, less centered projects fruitful.

This of course is not to say that Laing himself had no metaphysical assumptions; rather that he was not trying to build an all encompassing view of the world. In fact, he was attempting the opposite: loosening the security of prevailing metaphysical dogma. The essence of negative thinking, it seems, is that one continually question and shake up one's foundations without falling into the trap of building a new set to replace them. Although this can be an annoyingly destructive project for some, it has the benefit of emphasizing what remains outside of our theorizing, no matter how radical it may be. Thus, though Laing revealed interesting interpersonal dynamics, we have much more to take from him by way of his approach in itself and his attention to the excess: pluralism, a more humble wondering attitude, a critical voice, a more sensitive ear for the other, and perhaps even a greater appreciation for the tragic aspects of our experience. Laing had more questions-- and complaints-- than answers.

Likewise, our own projects as phenomenologists should not be to build a "phenomenological worldview" that will describe everything *in toto* with the same voice. If phenomenology is a method, we would do better to stick with more pluralistic, local microanalyses, looking for that which *doesn't* fit into our present way of seeing. This would amount to an active attempt to upset our own theorizing, continually overturning the ever-sedimenting interpretations of our experience. Just as we cannot and should not fit the world into Marx, we should not fit the world into Heidegger. Heidegger, rather, fits into the world. Because human experience is often contradictory, we should leave the possibility open that the whole (if we can speak of such a thing) is contradictory as well.

This refusal to commit metaphysically should not be read as defeatism or a lack of commitment to the world. Laing was extremely committed to his projects, often overextending himself to the breaking point for such humanist concerns as shedding light on the meaning of madness. Instead, this hesitation is a refusal to speak for the whole, to say that there is a last word on an issue, or think that the book can be closed

on something so varied and mysterious as our experience. There is a playful yet challenging freedom in striving to remain open-ended, where one makes it a negative project to ask questions and challenge what we take for granted. As Laing told Mullan when asked what fundamental ideas he wanted to take to the grave with him, "I don't feel obliged to believe *anything* -- which doesn't mean I don't . . ."

Endnotes

1 Mullan, 1995, p. 38.

2 Not least among these particular situations, he adds, is the unequal power structure between psychiatrist and patient in which the latter's experience is disconfirmed by the former. s labeling him or her a schizophrenic, further alienating him or her from the possibility of psychic healing.

3 Laing had hinted at this in the *Oxford Companion* summary when he chose only the name of Foucault to represent the diverse thinkers that make up the body of phenomenologists. even though Foucault rejected existential phenomenology-- rather than that of Sartre or Heidegger. This implied that Laing saw him to be, if not a strange bedfellow, then at least in the same bedroom.

4 Phenomenologists who dialogue with poststructuralism can take a lesson from this. One does not have to collapse into a sort of postmodern depression simply because positive systematic thought is out; while we may not be contributing to a solid body of correct knowledge, there is still fruitful and revealing dialogue to be done.

5 For a description of Laing's complex relationship with social constructivism, as well as anti-psychiatry, see Burston's *The Wing of Madness: The Life and Work of R. D. Laing* (1996, pp. 168-173 and 235-238).

6 Of course this tension between the social and the individual is not a burden for Laing to shoulder alone; one can see this tension structuring existential (or western, even) thought on the whole. Heidegger himself is criticized for speaking out of both sides of his mouth when he addresses the *they*: He uses the term pejoratively even while saying it is the precondition of authenticity. Sartre, of course, is less undecided on this issue.

7 Collier is equally dogmatic in his claims that "philosophers must accept the role of underlabourers to science, . removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way of knowledge, ." and that "the appearance of the sciences of historical and mental processes, associated with the names of Marx and Freud, defines the task of philosophy in our time" (p. viii). With this as his starting point, he doesn't appear to leave much room for disagreement along the way to his goal.

8 Collier dismisses Laing's rejection of causality as "another legacy of existentialist thought" he should be cleansed of (p. 52), insisting that any sort of understanding or intelligibility, in order to be "useful," must be a causal concept (p. 74). One wonders what Collier means by "useful" here.

9 In fact, he seems to equate a phenomenological description with naively taking the patient. s side of the story at "face value" (p. 39 & cf. pp. 54 & 155). Here Collier completely misses Laing's critique of the dangerously unequal power relationship between patient and doctor, awarding the analyst the role of being able to see objective reality (i.e. unconscious processes) where the patient cannot. See the first chapter of *Self and Others* in this regard.

10 Here he takes his lead from the structural Marxist Louis Althusser in claiming that, like the process of history, the process of human relationships is ultimately an anonymous one. In this way he criticizes Laing's tendency to stop at what he sees as mere experiential descriptions, indicting that "one could have hoped that a psychologist of inter-personal relations should have learnt from Freud that family life and human

interaction generally is also a process without a subject" (p. 56). Of course, in order to take this stance, one must speak from a point of view outside of the structure. And while such a stance might be an ideal perch from which to do high theory, it is hardly the place from which to muddle through the trenches of life. Collier is so anti-existential in this regard that he even claims that, from the point of view of reality, there is no such thing as the phenomena of laziness or lust. (pp. 61 & 84).

11 Still, Deleuze and Guattari are far more subtle thinkers (albeit heavier hitting) than Collier, and deserve more treatment than given here. According to Best and Kellner, their follow up to *Anti-Oedipus, A Thousand Plateaus*, is a far less systematic work, more of a series of micro-projects that aim "to prevent their position from stabilizing into an ideology, method, or single metaphor" (1991, p. 98).

12 Mullan, p. 309.

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