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Conversations with Laing in Saragossa

A passionate plea for a science of experience

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I met R. D. Laing in May 1977, and I last saw him in the Summer of 1988, a year before he died. During these eleven years, we met many times, either just the two of us or with our families and friends; and we saw each other at conferences, gave joint seminars, and together participated in panel discussions.

In these reminiscences, I want to concentrate on my longest and most intensive encounter with Laing in September 1980 at a conference on "The Psychotherapy of the Future" in Spain, sponsored by the European Association for Humanistic Psychology.

The central subject of our discussions at that conference was the nature of experience and the challenge of formulating a future science of experience. I want to tell you how I experienced Laing 's radical and often dramatic methods of inquiry, which many of you have also experienced; and I also want to share some of his prescient ideas, which began to be realized by cognitive scientists a decade later.

The conference in Spain took place near Saragossa at the Monasterio de Piedra, a beautiful twelfth-century monastery which had been converted into a hotel. The array of participants was very impressive. In addition to Laing, there were Stanislav Grof, Jean Houston, and Rollo May, and the group would have also included Gregory Bateson had he not died two months earlier.

During that entire week, I experienced a wonderful feeling of community and adventure generated by the extraordinary group of participants and the magnificent setting of the conference. Lectures were held in the old refectory of the monastery, often by candlelight; there were seminars in the cloister and in the garden, and informal discussions on a large balcony until late at night.

Laing was the animating spirit of the entire conference. Most of the discussions and happenings revolved around his ideas and the many facets of his personality. He had come to the conference with a large entourage of family, friends, former patients, and disciples, including even a small film crew. He was active day and night and never seemed to tire. He gave lectures and seminars, and arranged filmed dialogues with other participants. He spent many evenings in intensive discussions with small groups of people, which usually ended in long monologues when everybody else had become too tired to continue the conversation; and he would often end up at the piano, long after midnight, and reward those who had held out that long with superb renditions of Cole Porter and Gershwin.

During that conference I really got to know Laing. Up to then our relationship had been cordial and our discussions very inspiring for me, but it was not until the Saragossa conference that I really got close to him on a personal level. That's also when I

began to call him "Ronnie," following the example of his friends. On the day I arrived at the Monasterio, Laing invited me after dinner to join him and a group of friends for a glass of cognac and discussions. We all sat down on the balcony, surrounded by the balmy breezes of a beautiful Mediterranean summer evening, Laing and I side by side, leaning against the white stucco wall with a fairly large circle of people in front of us.

Laing asked me what I had been up to in the past two years. I told him that I was working on a new book, *The Turning Point*, and that, lately, I had become interested in the nature of mind and consciousness. The next thing I knew Laing was attacking me extremely vigorously. "How dare you, as a scientist, even ask about the nature of consciousness," he scowled indignantly. "You have absolutely no right to ask that question, to even use words like 'consciousness,' or 'mystical experience.' It is preposterous of you to dare mention science and Buddhism in the same breath!" This was not a joking, teasing confrontation. It was the beginning of a serious, vigorous, and sustained attack on my position as a scientist, voiced passionately in an angry and accusing tone.

I was shocked. I was not prepared at all for such an outburst. Laing was supposed to be on my side! Indeed, he had been; and I was especially taken aback by his attacking me like this on the day I had arrived, and in front of a large group. At the same time, I felt his intellectual challenge, and my shock and confusion soon gave way to intense mental activity, as I tried to understand Laing's position, evaluate it, and prepare myself for responding.

In fact, as he continued his passionate diatribe against science, which he saw me as representing, I found myself becoming very excited. I have always enjoyed intellectual challenge, and this was the most dramatic challenge I had ever encountered. Laing had placed our dialogue in a spectacular setting. Not only was I leaning against the wall of the balcony facing Laing's tribe of friends and disciples; I also felt pushed against the wall metaphorically by his relentless attack. But I did not mind. In my state of excitement all traces of embarrassment and discomfort had disappeared.

The main point of Laing's attack was that science had no way of dealing with consciousness, or with experience, values, ethics, or anything referring to quality. "This situation derives from something that happened in European consciousness at the time of Galileo and Giordano Bruno," Laing began his argument. "These two men epitomize two paradigms—Bruno, who was tortured and burned for saying that there were infinite worlds; and Galileo, who said that the scientific method was to study this world as if there were no consciousness and no living creatures in it. Galileo made the statement that only quantifiable phenomena were admitted to the domain of science.

Galileo said: 'Whatever cannot be measured and quantified is not scientific'; and in post-Galilean science this came to mean: What cannot be quantified is not real."

"This has been the most profound corruption," Laing continued, "from the Greek view of nature as *physis*, which is alive, always in transformation, and not divorced from us. Galileo's program offers us a dead world: Out go sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell, and along with them have since gone esthetic and ethical sensibility, values, quality, soul, consciousness, spirit. Experience as such is cast out of the realm of scientific discourse. Hardly anything has changed our world more during the past four hundred years than Galileo's audacious program. We had to destroy the world in theory before we could destroy it in practice."

Laing's critique was devastating, but as he paused and reached for his cognac, and before I could say anything in reply, he leaned over to me and whispered under his breath so that nobody else could hear it: "You don't mind me setting you up like that, do you?" With that aside he instantly created a conspiratorial mood and shifted the whole context of his attack. I just had time to whisper back "Not at all!" and then I had to concentrate fully on my response.

I defended myself as well as I could, being put on the spot with hardly any time for reflection. I said that I agreed with Laing's analysis of Galileo's role in the history of science. I also agreed with him that there was no room for experience, values, and ethics in the science of today. However, I then went on to say that my own endeavor was precisely to help change today's science in such a way that these considerations could be incorporated into the scientific framework of the future.

To do so, I emphasized, the first step had to be the shift from the mechanistic and fragmented approach of classical science to a holistic paradigm, in which the main emphasis was no longer on separate entities but on relationships. This would make it possible to introduce context and meaning. Only when one had that holistic framework, I concluded, could one begin to take further steps in response to Laing's concerns.

Laing was not immediately satisfied with my response. He wanted a more radical approach, going beyond the intellect altogether. "The universe was a vast machine yesterday," he said sarcastically; "it is a hologram today. Who knows what intellectual rattle we'll be shaking tomorrow." And so the argument went back and forth for quite a while, and in the midst of it Laing leaned over to me once more and said softly, in a confidential tone: "You realize, the questions I am asking you are all questions I am asking myself. I am not just attacking you, or other scientists out there. I am tarred with the same brush. I could not get so curled up over this if it were not a personal struggle."

The discussion went on until very late that night, and when I finally went to bed I still could not sleep for a long time. Laing had presented me with a tremendous challenge. I spent most of the next day pondering the problem, and in the evening I was ready to see him again. "I have thought a lot about what you said last night, Ronnie," I told him at dinner, "and I would like to respond to your critique in a more complete and systematic way tonight, if you feel like sitting down with me for another glass of cognac." Laing agreed, and so we settled down on the balcony again after dinner in the same setting as the night before.

"I would like to present to you tonight," I began, "as completely and systematically as I can, the view of mind and consciousness that I see emerging from the conceptual framework that I am now developing. This is not a framework in which your critique can be fully satisfied, but I believe, as I said last night, that it is a necessary first step toward that goal. From the vantage point of my new framework, you can actually begin to see how experience, values, and consciousness might be incorporated into science in the future."

Laing simply nodded his head and kept listening attentively with intense concentration. I then proceeded to give him a concise summary of my ideas. I began with the view of living organisms as self-organizing systems, explained Prigogine's notion of dissipative structures, and emphasized especially the view of biological forms as being shaped by underlying processes. I then wove in Bateson's concept of mind as the dynamics of self-organization. [At that time I was not yet familiar with Maturana's more detailed concept of cognition as the process of life].

I then specified that what I meant by "consciousness" was the property of mind characterized by self-awareness. "Awareness," I argued, "is a property of mind at all levels of complexity. Self-awareness, as far as we know, manifests itself only in higher animals and fully unfolds in the human mind; and it is this property of mind that I mean by consciousness."

"Now, if we look at theories of consciousness," I continued, "we can see that most of them are variations of two seemingly opposite views. One of these views I will call the Western scientific view. It considers matter as primary and consciousness as a property of complex material patterns, which emerges at a certain level of biological evolution. Most neuroscientists today subscribe to this view."

I paused for a moment, and seeing that Laing had no intention of interjecting anything, I proceeded: "The other view of consciousness may be called the mystical view, since it is generally held in mystical traditions. It regards consciousness as the primary reality, as the essence of the universe, the ground of all being, and everything

else—all forms of matter and all living beings—as manifestations of that pure consciousness. This mystical view of consciousness is based on the experience of reality in non-ordinary modes of awareness, and such mystical experience, they say, is indescribable. It is..."

"Any experience!" Laing shouted, interrupting me forcefully, and when he saw my puzzled look, he repeated: "Any experience! Any experience of reality is indescribable! Just look around you for a moment and see, hear, smell, and feel where you are."

I did as he told me, becoming fully aware of the mild summer night, the white walls of the balcony against the outline of trees in the park, the sound of crickets, the half moon hanging in the sky, the faint strains of a Spanish guitar in the distance, and the closeness and attention of the crowd surrounding us—experiencing a symphony of shades, sounds, smells, and feelings, while Laing continued: "Your consciousness can partake all that in one single moment, but you will never be able to describe the experience. It's not just mystical experience; it's *any* experience." I knew that Laing was right, and I also knew immediately that his point needed much further thought and discussion, even though it did not directly affect my argument, which I was about to conclude.

"Okay, Ronnie, *any* experience," I agreed. "Now, since the mystical view of consciousness is based on direct experience, we should not expect science, at its present stage, to confirm or contradict it. Nevertheless, I feel that the systems view of mind seems to be perfectly consistent with both views and could therefore provide an ideal framework for unifying the two."

Again I paused briefly to collect my thoughts, and as Laing remained silent I went on to clinch my argument: "The systems view agrees with the conventional scientific view that consciousness is a property of complex material patterns. To be precise, it is a property of living systems of a certain complexity. On the other hand, the biological structures of these systems are manifestations of underlying processes. What processes? Well, the processes of self-organization, which we have identified as mental processes. In this sense, biological structures are manifestations of mind. Now, if we extend this way of thinking to the universe as a whole, it is not too far-fetched to assume that *all* its structures—from subatomic particles to galaxies and from bacteria to human beings—are manifestations of the universal dynamics of self-organization; in other words, of the cosmic mind. And this, more or less, is the mystical view."

"I realize," I concluded, "that there are several gaps in this argument. Still, I feel that the systems view of life provides a meaningful framework for unifying the two opposing views of the age-old questions of the nature of life, mind, and consciousness."

Now I fell silent. My long monologue had been a tremendous effort for me. For the first time I had laid out, as clearly and concisely as I could, my entire framework for approaching the questions of life, mind, and consciousness. I had presented it to the most knowledgeable and forceful critic I knew and had been as inspired, spontaneous, and alert as I would ever be. So this was my answer to Laing's challenge of the previous evening, and after a while I asked him: "How does that sound to you, Ronnie? What do you think of it?"

Laing lit a cigarette, took a sip of cognac, and finally made the most encouraging comment I could have hoped for. "I will have to think about it," he said simply. "This is not something I can address myself to right away. You have introduced quite a few new ideas and I will have to think about them."

With this comment the tension that had persisted for the last hour was broken and we spent the rest of the evening in a very relaxed and warm conversation in which Ronnie and I were joined by many of our group.

During the next two days, I spent most of my time with Laing and his friends in a relaxed and playful mood without ever mentioning our discussion. After a couple of days of relaxation and some more thinking, I found a way in which quality and experience might possibly be incorporated into a future science, and the next day after lunch I invited Laing to join me for coffee.

"A true science of consciousness," I proposed, "would have to be a new type of science dealing with qualities rather than quantities and being based on shared experience rather than verifiable measurements. The data of such a science would be patterns of experience that cannot be quantified or analyzed. On the other hand, the conceptual models interconnecting the data would have to be logically consistent, like all scientific models, and might even include quantitative elements. Such a new science would quantify its statements whenever this method is appropriate, but would also be able to deal with qualities and values based on human experience."

"I would add to this," Laing replied, "that the new science, the new epistemology, has got to be predicated upon a change of heart, upon a complete turning around; from the intent to dominate and control nature to the idea of, for example, Francis of Assisi, that the whole creation is our companion, if not our mother. That is part of your turning point. Only then can we address ourselves to alternative perceptions that will come into view."

As I reflected on Laing's comment, several of our friends entered the café, and Laing asked me whether I minded if they joined us. Of course I did not mind, and Ronnie invited them to sit down. "Let me just tell these people what you and I have been talking about," he continued. "If you don't mind, let me just reiterate what you have been saying." He then proceeded to give a brilliant summary of what I had said three nights before and during the last hour. He summarized the entire conceptual framework in his own words, in his highly idiosyncratic style, with all the intensity and passion that were characteristic of him. After this brilliant discourse, which amounted to an exhortation, there was no more doubt in my mind that Laing had accepted my ideas.

The question of how experience might be approached within a new scientific framework, which had been the main subject of my discussions with Ronnie Laing in Saragossa, came into full focus in cognitive science a decade later.

During the 1970s and 80s, the study of consciousness as lived experience was still taboo among most scientists, but during the 1990s, the situation changed dramatically. While cognitive science established itself as a broad interdisciplinary field of study, new non-invasive techniques for analyzing brain functions were developed, which made it possible to observe complex neural processes associated with mental imagery and other human experiences. And suddenly, the scientific study of consciousness became a respectable and lively field of research.

The central challenge of this research was, and still is, to explain the experience associated with cognitive events. Different states of conscious experience are sometimes called *qualia* by cognitive scientists, because each state is characterized by a special "qualitative feel," as Laing emphasized in our discussions. The challenge of explaining these *qualia* is often called "the hard problem of consciousness study," an expression coined by the philosopher David Chalmers.

In the mid-nineties, biologist and neuroscientist Francisco Varela proposed a new approach to this "hard problem" that embraces both brain physiology and the analysis of first-person experience. Varela called this new school of thought "neurophenomenology." Phenomenology, as you know, is an important branch of modern philosophy, founded by Edmund Husserl at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed further by many European philosophers, including Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The central concern of phenomenology is the disciplined examination of experience, and the hope of Husserl and his followers was, and is, that a true science of experience would eventually be established in partnership with the natural sciences.

Neurophenomenology is an approach to the study of consciousness that combines the disciplined examination of conscious experience with the analysis of corresponding neural patterns and processes. With this dual approach, neurophenomenologists explore various domains of experience and try to understand how they emerge from complex neural activities. In doing so, these cognitive scientists are indeed taking the first steps toward formulating a true science of experience.

Prominent neurophenomenologists today include Walter Freeman and Antonio Damasio. I don't know to what extent these scientists were influenced by Laing's views on the centrality of experience in human consciousness, which he published in 1982 in his book *The Voice of Experience*. All I know is that my own attempts over the past thirty years to map out a science of qualities, integrating the biological, cognitive, social, and ecological dimensions of life, were triggered by my dramatic discussions with Ronnie Laing under the starry sky of Saragossa.

NOTE:

Giordano Bruno proposed that the Sun was essentially a star, and that the universe contained an infinite number of inhabited worlds populated by other intelligent beings. This shattered the Ptolemaic image of the stars being fixed to a crystalline sphere, all equidistant from the Earth.

