

Laing on authenticity-2019

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How can we be authentic in a world with other people? How can we be true to ourselves if there is no essential self to be true to? How can we go beyond our false selves? Laing, following Jean-Paul Sartre, responds to such conundrums by unmasking, mapping and revealing patterns of self-deception, deceptions and false self systems in individual and social contexts.

Laing's approach was fundamentally existentialist in nature. and placed fundamental value on the uniqueness of the individual and their experience. He was no utilitarian. From Laing's perspective, authenticity is good in itself, intrinsically valuable and is not good because it has better consequences, even if it does. Maxims such as 'Know thyself' and 'An unexamined life is not worth living' reflect foundational ethical values that underline an existentialist approach to human realities. These values are built upon individual freedom, choice and responsibility rather than on the consequentialism of the hedonic balances of pleasure and pain. I am sure Laing would have agreed with John Stuart Mill's statement, 'It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied' [John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1863)].

So it's curious that in spite of the fact that the concept of authenticity pervades Laing's life and writings from *The Divided Self* onwards, Laing didn't often use the term 'authenticity'. For Laing authenticity is not so much a direct striving for personal truth as about revealing how we avoid the obvious, that which stands in front of us. We mystifyingly

construct false selves and false self systems so as not to see what is obviously. going on.

Laing was an anti-systematic thinker who focused less on finding the right answers than on asking the right questions. He didn't want to account for the content of a true self so much as understanding how we erect barriers to avoid our freedom. Throughout, Laing is interested in revealing and deciphering the false self systems that stand in the way of our being real.

Laing's view of authenticity owed much to the legacy of existentialism. Laing adopted the ideas of Heidegger and Sartre in particular about the foundation of the irreducible freedom that constitutes us. We construct our lives and meaning with no essential self but rather as active self as agent. The focus is not on the nature and content of a true self but instead upon how we construct false selves and illusion, and how we might be able to map and go beyond them.

Such a longstanding difficult and frustrating journey is reflected in this story from the Talmud:

A man once got lost in the thick of the forest. For days he tried hopelessly to find his way out, yet it was to no avail. This continued for many weeks and months. One day, he came across an old man, who was coming toward him. He ran to the stranger and pleaded, "Please tell me how to get out of this forest - I have been wandering for many weeks and months!"

"My son," the old man replied forlornly, "unfortunately, I too am lost. I have been wandering in this forest not for

weeks nor months, but for many years, yet I still have not found the way out. However, before you conclude that any advice I may offer is certainly useless, consider this: Although I may not know the way out of the forest, I can tell you better than anyone which paths lead to nowhere!"

I think that Laing was mapping the obstacles and the paths that don't work rather than directly showing the way out.

The term 'authenticity' had a bad press in the 1970s: people playing at or pretending to themselves and others to be authentic often came across, ironically, as fake. Wishing hoping, pretending instead of recognizing reality and moving on from there, sounds, in fact, more authentic.

Authenticity was often a buzz word, in a language reflecting self-centered self-absorption, a language aiming to express the subdued inner child of pop psychology.

But is there something beyond this?

The original meaning of being authentic ('to thine own self be true') is what something really, purely or genuinely is. As Sartre would have it, authenticity implies being true to one's own set of commitments. This builds upon Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 18th century paradox that we are born free but are everywhere in chains. For Rousseau, the introduction of private property corrupted the purity of children. Although Rousseau's view is based upon a simplistic view of an essentially good self of 'noble savages', it serves also to call into question established, taken-for-granted social hierarchical assumptions.

Laing immersed himself in reading the existentialists in his early years. For Laing, Sartre was a 'gate-opener' to the other existentialists (Charlesworth, Existentialists and JPS). He read Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) which built upon many of Heidegger's concepts before he read Heidegger.

Heidegger's classic, *Being and Time*, appeared 16 years earlier in 1927.

Although the concept of 'authenticity' used in existential philosophy originated with Kierkegaard's book, *Sickness unto Death*, it was expounded classically in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Heidegger actually coined the term *Eigentlichkeit*, translated early as 'authenticity', from the ordinary German word *Eisgentlich* meaning 'actually', 'truly' or 'really', which built upon the German word *Eigen* meaning own or proper. For Heidegger authenticity involves owning up to who we are or being one's own, the quality of ownedness--dis-owning it is inauthentic. For Heidegger, the noise of the world covers up and distracts us from the uncanniness of our being-in-the-world. Recognizing this uncanniness allows us to further experience our 'fallenness' and ourselves as 'thrown' in our essential estrangement. Thus, a sense of estrangement or alienation from others, for Heidegger is a good not a bad thing, because it represents a basis for becoming attuned to our authentic mode of being rather than being absorbed into the world of the 'they' or others. In Heidegger's account, to be uniquely human involves our agency whereby we shape our identity, realizing our individual human distinctiveness through owning and realizing our overarching projects for the sake of ourselves.

Heidegger, who built upon Nietzsche's ideas of the 'will to power' and the *Übermensch*, the overman, who could justify humanity's existence and overcome and realise him or herself, opposes any concept of realizing a pre-given essential self or inner child. For Heidegger, humans are beings whose being is in question, and we have no essence. According to Heidegger, authenticity is an ongoing process. It's the narrative we construct for ourselves from an ineffable base from which we actively attempt to realize our goals. Laing characterized Heidegger's enigmatic conception of truth as "that which is literally without secrecy" (p. 111 in 1969 ed.).

Along the same lines, Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that the world can be divided into existence or being for itself on the one hand and essence or being in itself on the other. According to Sartre, only humans have the character of existence and things have an essence.

Sartre mapped this central idea of a non-essential self as patterns of self-deception, based upon how we try to avoid the freedom to which we are all condemned. Authenticity means recognizing NOT having an essential pre-given false self, and this fact determines the patterns of inauthenticity. Sartre's clearest insights are about treating ourselves as choosing beings, not as things.

According to Sartre, we often try to escape into seeing ourselves or others as things instead of as choosing beings with their own axes of orientation. As I mentioned, Sartre posits two kinds of being—being in itself and being for itself, being and nothingness —being as that which is, and nothingness as a gap in being, an

indefinable free agent that can't get away from having to choose.

Sartre sees self deception (*mauvaise foi*) as a project that aims at escaping freedom. Sartre proposes different patterns of self deception in treating ourselves or others as objects or things. He instances a waiter who tries too hard in pretending to be a Waiter, overacting the role of Waiter almost as a caricature. Another example: the woman on a first date who pretends that her hand being grasped is not really her hand, something that is her, but instead a separate object out there in the world that things just happen to. She is trying to dissociate, to disown herself, to distance the action, to treat part of herself as a mechanistic object. Pretending not to be able to make choices is itself a choice and dis-owning ourselves is inauthentic. Heidegger and Sartre don't prescribe how to behave so much as describing ways not to. Sartre's fictional trilogy of the 1940s, *The Roads to Freedom*, describes the paradoxes and complexities of different paths we pursue in evading our freedom and how authentic freedom can come only upon recognising false ways of being, recognizing the paths not to go down. That is an ethic of owning oneself and one's behaviour and not dis-owning it.

As Heidegger says, we are the beings whose being is in question, and as Sartre puts it, we are not free not to be free. Authenticity need not be a self-serving overvaluation of oneself. It can be transcending, reaching out beyond where one is to the world of others in terms of fulfilment of one's overarching projects in relationship between self and others. For both Heidegger and Sartre authenticity lies in my owning up to my freedom and choices.

Laing sketches the ways we encumber ourselves or are framed by others into not seeing what is going on or not seeing the paths out from where we don't want to be.

Sartre thinks choosing is unfathomable in itself. But as choosing beings we are saddled with having to choose and making our choices—for Sartre, we are our choices, we are our actions. For Sartre, while we are alive we can change ourselves by changing our choices and actions. At the same time as we irredeemably choose, we are also encumbered with commensurate and inescapable responsibility for our actions together with their consequences. We are what we do and cannot avoid bearing the consequences. In fact, I think that authenticity involves being responsible not only for your choices and actions, but also not turning a blind eye to their probable consequences and taking them into account.

I have now outlined Laing's indebtedness to the major existential thinkers whose thought formed the foundation of his approach to authenticity. Let's now look more directly at Laing's ideas. Authenticity is always implicit as underlining Laing's approach, but because he does not often explicitly discuss it, it is not as easy to directly examine it in the same way as I have with the conference topics of previous years.

Nonetheless, there are some clear indicators.

The Divided Self is based on the assumption of authenticity. A science of persons for Laing explicitly recognised the difference between seeing somebody as a free human being and as a mechanism. The concepts of true and false self and false self systems explain ways that people deceive themselves and others that they are not making choices. For

Laing, mental illness is far more intelligible in terms of the meaning and choices patients make so that such choices can be deciphered, decoded, unmasked or unveiled. In *The Divided Self*, Laing draws on existentialist thinkers, particularly Sartre on self deception to explain the differences between explicit authentic choices and false and inauthentic choices, which can be revealed in terms of false self confusions. According to Laing, the schizophrenic's vulnerable true self does not feel it is participating in the activities of the false self systems which mask it (p. 74).

For the Laing of *The Divided Self*, the psychotic is understood in terms of attempts to solve existential problems through the use of the person's ineluctable freedom and subjectivity. In this Laing is a firm follower of Sartre. The hysteric's dissociations are for Laing best described as Sartre's concept of "self-deception". Laing sees much of schizophrenia as "simply nonsense, red-herring speech, prolonged filibustering to throw dangerous people off the scent, to create boredom and futility in others. The schizophrenic is often making a fool of himself and the doctor. He is playing at being mad to avoid at all costs the possibility of being held responsible for a single coherent idea, or intention" (p. 164).

This inauthentic behavior is seen to be more of a way out than usually thought. As Laing puts it, 'The false self is one way of not being oneself'. He goes on to list a number of important existentialist studies 'relevant to understanding the false self as one way of living inauthentically'.

To understand ourselves only from the vantage point of our consciousness of what is going on is normally to be mistaken. Authenticity is based on the nature of the unknown self,

alignment with it and expression of it. How can we listen or pay attention to ourselves honestly and speak candidly? Laing cites Euripedes. 'A slave is a man who dares not speak his thoughts'.

Laing conveyed a romantic vision of schizophrenia in *The Politics of Experience*. It even seemed at the time as though ordinary people were, as such, inauthentic and false. Not just 'Little Boxes' but neo-Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse suggested all of us in the first world were so alienated as to not recognise that we were alienated at all. In this situation, it seemed to Laing that somehow schizophrenics might be able to glimpse a way out into authenticity, albeit through a tiny pane of glass darkly. Although Laing contributed to the romanticisation of the mentally ill as finding their true selves and challenging false selves, he also mapped the nature of authenticity as agency and ways out of living alienated lives. On this basis it is easy to see why for Laing mad people would stand out. However, the inner self is neither good nor bad but ineffable, uncanny. This implies that the terms 'true' and 'false self' are confusing and misleading because neither one is exclusively true or false. For example, a false self may be a misnomer as it is really a social self we need for getting along with others in daily living.

The paradoxes of freedom question the simple romantic notion of some kind of essential self. In my view the Laing of *The Politics of Experience* traversed romantic Rousseauian territory by idealizing madness and seeing mad people as what his Kingsley Hall colleague Joe Berke labeled 'a sort of emotional proletariat' (Beveridge, p. 317). Laing gave credence to such romantic notions in *The Politics of Experience* where the split of Us and Them meant that We

were good and They were bad, and that schizophrenics were akin to renaissance explorers. Mary Barnes' famous journey through madness was charted as a search for authenticity. I don't think anybody who knew Mary Barnes thought she succeeded that well.

Laing was allergic to anything fake or counterfeit. He reacted, even seriously over-reacted, to a sense of lack of genuineness. But he really appreciated the genuine article and resonated with a genuine person, such as a schizophrenic patient with whom he was able to relate in a natural way. He liked plain speaking and wrote in words of one syllable.

Laing began and ended with individuality. He emphasized the values of authenticity, candidness, honesty, straightforwardness, being who you are without pretense. The idea of the asylum communities was that they were havens, crucibles of experience, where people could be themselves, often uncomfortably rubbing up against others, hopefully without harming them. It rested on the idea that people could be respected for being who they were. We need a community in order to be authentic, as will be discussed later on in our session, What is authentic community? with Fritjof, Mike, Nita and myself. We are hoping to make this an authentic community in our days at Esalen together.

On his tours of the US in 1972, Laing recalled that he was often asked by students, 'How do we get in touch with our feelings?' That degree of alienation from who we are, that we can be strangers to ourselves, was an alarm signal. This was a time when child birth could be seen as simply a medical procedure under the gaze of a 'scientific look' and not as a meaningful life event.

Laing valued the individual highly as a unique being whom we couldn't presume to know at bottom. We are all different and we can't mind read. Although we shouldn't presume to know what the other person is thinking, we can have an intuitive sense of it seems to be.

Laing is, if you like, a methodological individualist. Along with other existentialists, he begins from the standpoint and unique value of the individual and their experience, and then works outwards and upwards to more social and collective concepts. But, like Sartre, he never abandons the focus on the individual's experience and actions and the consequences of that stance within collective psychosocial systems. This is where authenticity is crucial to understanding the foundation of individual actions and interactions, labeling and the impacts of the social systems we inhabit. This was always a challenge. There is no pre-given fit, and Laing is far more Freud than Marx in his understanding of the inherent tensions in relationships and society that cannot be resolved. Laing begins with the intuitions of existentialists and respect for the individual's unique experience and agency. Sartre followed this path from individual through to social system, inquiring as to how it is possible to be authentic in systems in which we may not be aware of its rules, injunctions and structures. How can we situate choice within the types of groups in which we live, such as the family?

However, for Laing no individual is just an island and always exists within what Sartre would term a "situation". But their individuality is still there, even if constrained or alienated. The individual needs to be comprehended in context. Our consciousness is always consciousness of something. That

context is the internal context of different and mostly unconscious aspects of self. But that context needs to be comprehended within the relationship of self and other. Again, self and other are situated within a family or group context, and the family exists within the system of society and that within the Total Social World System. That world, again, exists within a spiritual or cosmological context. Much of Laing's work lies avowedly in the zone of communications theory and research exploring the possibility of mapping the patterns of relationships in the human world and investigating how we might be able to see the ground clearly enough to individually flourish. This approach involves understanding and revealing from the position of the individual not only the rules of the game but untangling the metarules, metametarules, and so on.

If we don't know who we are, at least we might know some of the things we aren't. We will always act with limited knowledge, given factors such as the unconscious and impacts that we are not aware of. We can do the best we can, honestly, straightforwardly, owning up to the responsibility for our actions.

I want now to outline what I think is Laing's only explicit and considered albeit brief discussion about his approach to authenticity.

In *Self and Others* Laing gets to the heart of what inauthentic or alienated action is. It is about putting oneself into a false or untenable position or being put into such positions. Laing equates inauthenticity with what he calls being in a false existential position. He cites colloquialisms and everyday speech that demonstrate our experience of place and position in our world. A person can put himself or herself 'into' their

acts or may not be 'in' them. Or we 'lose' or 'forget ourselves' or are 'full of ourselves' or 'beside ourselves', all attributions about the person's relation to their own actions. In all of them the issue is

the extent to which the act is seen or felt to *potentiate* the being or existence of the doer, or the extent to which the action... makes patent the latent self of the doer.

Laing suggests that we feel we are going forward when we put ourselves into our actions, 'when we disclose or make patent our true self'. Or we may be liable to feel that we are 'going back', 'going round in circles', or 'getting nowhere'. Thus, Laing submits, "In 'putting myself into' what I do, I lose myself, and in so doing I seem to become myself. The act I do is felt to be me, and I become 'me' in and through such action. Also, there is a sense in which a person 'keeps himself alive' by his acts; each act can be a new beginning, a new birth, a recreation of oneself".

In a rare comment on authenticity, Laing goes on to explain,

To be 'authentic' is to be true to oneself, to be what one is, to be 'genuine'. To be 'inauthentic' is to not be oneself, to be false to oneself: to be not as one appears to be, to be counterfeit. We tend to link the categories of truth and reality by saying that a genuine act is real, but that a person who habitually uses action as a masquerade is not real.

Laing sees the self-disclosure of authenticity as being what Nietzsche meant by the 'will to power'. Laing explains,

It is the 'weak' man who, in lieu of potentiating himself genuinely, counterfeits his impotence by dominating and controlling others, by idealizing physical strength or sexual potency.

For Laing, I may feel fulfilled by an 'act that is genuine, revealing, and potentiating' in 'an act that is me: in this action I am myself. I put myself "in" it. In so far as I put myself "into" what I do, I become myself through this doing'.

Conversely, I feel empty when it is not my doing.

Citing Heidegger, Laing contrasts two notions of truth. First, there is the natural scientific concept that consists of the correspondence of what goes on in the mind and what happens in the world. The second notion of truth derives from the pre-Socratics' concept of *Alethia*, which is that which is without secrecy, what discloses itself without a veil.

What if the inauthentic person, the person in a false position isn't aware of being 'in' such a position? The person can only experience his or her position as false to the extent that he or she is not totally estranged from their 'own' experience and actions.

Laing vividly describes the consequences of this false position of inauthenticity:

Perhaps without his realizing it his 'life' comes to a stop. With no real future of his own, he may be in that supreme despair which is, as Kierkegaard says, not to know he is in despair. He is in despair because he has lost 'his own' future, and so can have no genuine hope or trust in any future. The person in a false position has lost a starting-point of his own from which to throw or thrust

himself, that is, to project himself, forward. He has lost the place. He does not know where he is or where he is going. He cannot get anywhere however hard he tries. In despair, just as one place is the same as another, so one time is the same as another. The future is the resultant of the present, the present is the resultant of the past, and past is unalterable.

This is not a good way to be. Although authenticity can be an uncomfortable way to be, it can have its rewards in terms of being alive, real, genuine, a sense of being one's own unique self, and ownership of actions and better relationships. However, authenticity comes at a cost. It goes with being confronted and living with the human condition, the world which Freud outlined in *Civilization and its Discontents*: the inevitable pain and suffering of life, the realities of our vulnerability to our own bodies, other people, the perils of nature, and mortality.

And then there are the perils of authenticity. What is the cost of being authentic, of authenticity? It can make us uncomfortable and incapable of being honest when we have a real fear of other people, especially in a politically correct or more directly oppressive society. There is no pat answer here—it's a balance. How much authenticity can we get away with? Can it be authentic then to go along to get along? Such conundrums will make for some great discussions throughout the week.