

The Primacy of Experience in R. D. Laing's Approach to Psychoanalysis¹

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In recent years a sea-change in both theoretical and technical aspects of psychoanalysis has emerged at the interface between conventional psychoanalytic concepts and other disciplines that were traditionally held at arm's length by the analytic community. These trends have primarily occurred in the United States under the rubric of so-called relational theory, an amalgam of disparate and even contradictory perspectives including hermeneutics, constructivism, deconstructionism, intersubjectivity, and postmodernism. Largely a creature of the American psychoanalytic community, virtually all of these theories filtered into American culture from Europeans, including the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who identified the linguistic element of psychoanalysis with structuralism, and French philosophers such as Jacques Derrida (deconstructionism), Jean-Francois Lyotard (postmodernism), and Michel Foucault (poststructuralism). American analysts who are identified with the relational perspective have tended to eschew the more theoretical preoccupations of the French school and focus instead on a relaxation of classical psychoanalytic technique (e.g., neutrality and abstinence) emphasizing the so-called real and personal aspects of the analyst-patient relationship.

Ironically, many of these efforts to relax the technical rules of psychoanalysis were anticipated in the 1950 and 1960s by European psychoanalysts and psychiatrists who

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were identified with existentialism and phenomenology, including Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, and R. D. Laing. Yet analysts who are identified with the relational perspective and sympathetic with postmodernism rarely cite the existential analysts as either forerunners to or influences on their work. It is nevertheless striking how similar the so-called innovations in technique are to the work of Laing and other existential psychoanalysts. Perhaps Laing's estrangement from the British psychoanalytic community plays a role in this anomaly as well as Laing's inherently philosophical perspective, a feature of his work that also accounts for the limited influence Lacan has exerted on the American psychoanalytic community.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine Laing's complicated and enigmatic relationship with psychoanalysis with a view to emphasizing those features of his perspective that complies with the interpersonal and derivative relational schools of analysis. In so doing I shall emphasize not only Laing's debt to existentialism and phenomenology but especially to scepticism, the basis of the postmodern critique of contemporary culture (Thompson, 2002).

Any endeavor to situate Laing's work in the context of psychoanalysis immediately places the author in a quandry, not the least because Laing enjoyed relatively little impact on the psychoanalytic community in Britain or the United States, the two countries where he enjoyed most of his popularity. Indeed, despite his enormous contribution to contemporary thought, there is neither a Laingian theory or technique that pertains to his way of conducting psychoanalytic treatment or, for that matter, any form of psychotherapy. In fact, Laing's refusal to couch his clinical perspective in either theoretical or technical terms was an important feature of his debt to the sceptical philosophical tradition, which impacted not only Nietzsche and Heidegger (both of whom influenced Laing's thinking) but many of the exponents of the contemporary postmodern perspective. Yet Laing was trained as a psychoanalyst at the British Psychoanalytic Society and though he drifted

away from the psychoanalytic community following the completion of his training, Laing continued to call himself a psychoanalyst for the rest of his life.

If Laing thought of himself as a psychoanalyst then what kind of an analyst was he? How did Laing apply what he conceived psychoanalysis to be in his work as a psychoanalytic practitioner? Moreover, what manner of psychoanalysis did he practice and who were the principal influences on his clinical philosophy? Although Laing trained at the British institute he has traditionally been associated with the so-called existential school of psychoanalysts instead of the object relations school, the classical perspective, or the hermeneutic. Already this presents us with a paradox, because existential psychoanalysis is not now nor ever was officially affiliated with the International Psychoanalytical Association, the principal psychoanalytic accrediting body. Thus it would be useful to examine what existential psychoanalysis is presumed to entail, in what manner it can be deemed psychoanalytic, and in what measure can Laing be said to represent this school of analysis.

Laing's Relationship with Existentialism

Existential psychoanalysis is typically depicted as a clinical perspective that derives from a wide range of loosely associated theorists who have only marginally influenced the mainstream of psychoanalytic theory and practice. For example, Roy Schafer's rejection of Freud's motivational mechanisms that are said to be driven by instinct, in favor of a view that emphasizes the individual's agency implies the influence of existentialism in Schafer's work, though he would probably deny this. Moreover, Hans Loewald (1980) explicitly acknowledged his debt to Heidegger in the development of his views about psychoanalytic

theory and practice, and Stanley Leavy (1980, 1988) has acknowledged his debt to phenomenology in virtually all of his psychoanalytic publications. Touchstones with the existential and phenomenological perspective include the interpersonalists, intersubjectivists, and hermeneuticians, though none of these camps can be said to adhere to strictly existential preoccupations.

Existential analysis was conceived by Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, each of whom drew on the philosophical tradition of Martin Heidegger. Although Binswanger and Boss found a great deal of value in Freud's clinical philosophy, their work can be best understood as a reaction to and, in large measure a rejection of, Freudian psychoanalysis. Whereas Freud saw human beings as harboring a dark continent of disavowed motives, intentions, and lust that he believed occupies a part of the mind that is unconscious, Binswanger and Boss viewed existence from a Heideggerian perspective, situating existence "in-the-world," so that mind and world are so merged that the intelligibility of each is discernible only in terms of the other.

It wasn't until 1960 with the publication of Laing's first book, *The Divided Self* that, in the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism finally found its Freud. Laing's conception of psychoanalysis was derived from a synthesis of numerous philosophers, including Heidegger, Sartre, Søren Kierkegaard, Frederick Nietzsche, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Max Scheler, Paul Tillich, Eugene Minkowski, Martin Buber, G. W. F. Hegel, and even Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century sceptic. Laing was also indebted to the Classical philosophers, Christian theology and mysticism, and the considerable influence of Eastern philosophy. Laing's debt to the work of the American psychiatrist, Harry Stack Sullivan, and the American family therapy movement that flourished during the 1960s has been noted by numerous commentators (Friedenberg 1973; Burston 1996; Kotowicz 1997).

When one takes the breadth of Laing's intellectual resume into account it becomes immediately apparent that it is misleading to characterize him as simply an existential

analyst, in spite of his having become one of the most prominent proponents of existential analysis in Europe in its heyday that culminated in the 1970s. On some occasions Laing also characterized himself as a phenomenologist and at other times a sceptic, either of which more closely approximates his intellectual position. It is perhaps for this reason that, in spite of his debt to and identification with the existential tradition, the only label to which I am comfortable assigning Laing's analytic bias is that of simply psychoanalyst, the precise nature of which, because of his sceptical bent, resists categorization.

Ironically, despite their devotion to Heidegger, Laing felt that Binswanger and Boss failed to grasp the essence of Heidegger's philosophy, embodied in Heidegger's enigmatic conception of truth which Laing characterized as, "that which is literally without secrecy" (Laing 1969: 111). Laing also derived from Heidegger his preoccupation with the notion of authenticity and its correlate, or inauthenticity, or self-deception. For Laing, the basic thrust of any effort to situate psychoanalysis in existential and phenomenological principles must necessarily be rooted in the relationship between truth and falsehood and how our inescapable conflict between them accounts for the split in the self that engenders forms of human suffering that are customarily labeled as editions of psychopathology, though Laing was uncomfortable with this label and affected an ambivalent relationship with it throughout his clinical career.

A sceptic at heart, Laing believed that knowledge is intrinsically personal and that everything we believe is rooted in our experience, which is unique to each person alone. In turn, experience engenders suffering, so it is our nature to mitigate our suffering by deceiving ourselves about what our experience tells us. Due to our efforts to deny our experience we inevitably adopt false truths that are more acceptable (and less painful) than the ones we actually experience and split ourselves accordingly. It was on this basis that Laing emphasized the "political" (or social) nature of psychical suffering and why psychoanalysis is an inherently subversive endeavor. When effective, psychoanalysis

undermines established truths, whether such truths assume the form of edicts that are popularized by culture or are the manifestations of neurotic fantasies that become substitutes for a more painful reality. Hence, Laing's conception of psychoanalysis is characterized by two fundamental principles: 1) all human knowledge is rooted in personal experience; and 2) the weight of experience is so painful that we seek to relieve it through self-deception.

Laing's Relationship with Psychoanalysis

What makes Laing's clinical philosophy specifically psychoanalytic is the affinity between Laing's philosophical assumptions and his subversive deconstruction of Freud's technical recommendations. Like Laing, Freud believed that virtually all forms of psychopathology are the consequence of secrets that human beings conceal from themselves. Freud concluded that we harbor such secrets due to the overwhelming weight of experience, at the point which its commensurate suffering becomes insupportable. In fact, Freud's treatment method was the model on which Laing fashioned his clinical philosophy, though less doctrinaire than Freud's. In fact, Laing's and Freud's respective styles diverged considerably. Whereas Freud insisted that his patients use a couch so they couldn't stare at him for eight hours a day, Laing made a couch available for those who wanted to use it but did not require it. Laing achieved the same purpose (of not being stared at) by employing comfortable chairs that were situated at opposite ends of his darkened consulting room, so that it was difficult given the distance between them for his patients to make eye-contact or even to determine whether or not he was looking their way. Whereas Freud depicted these considerations as matters of technique, Laing was more prone to characterizing them as matters of style, an aspect of Laing's personality emphasized by Heaton (2000: 511-515). A psychoanalyst's style, however, is not to be confused with

being stylish, a matter of aesthetics and fashion. One can follow a fashion but one's style is unique because it derives from one's being and is a determinant of how we experience ourselves and other people. The closest approximation to style in Freud would be his emphasis on the analyst's *character*, which emanates from one's moral code and is conscious. On the other hand, style is a matter of ethics and is unconscious. Foucault regarded ethics as the practice of freedom, so it isn't something we think about because it is manifested spontaneously, from the person one is. Thus one's style imbues one with the freedom to be oneself when working with patients, but without imposing oneself on them. Laing put a great deal of emphasis on cultivating one's style when in training instead of learning technical interventions by rote. Though Freud apparently had style in his work with patients and felt free to be himself, his technical principles have been adopted in the strictest terms by succeeding generations of analysts who have treated them as a code of conduct, constricting their freedom to develop their own style, an anomaly that Laing was acutely aware of.

If these distinctions indicate some of the differences in style between Laing and Freud, the similarities they shared were more substantial. Like Freud, Laing believed that the only way to undo the consequences of self-deception is to take part in a therapeutic relationship wherein the two participants endeavor to be as honest with each other as they can. Whereas Freud believed that psychopathology is caused by the difficulty every human being has with an intrinsically harsh reality, Laing concluded that some realities are harsher than others and that the difference between your reality and mine has vast implications for how we experience each other, and ourselves. In fact, Laing was so uncomfortable with the very concept of psychopathology and its nomenclature that he found it impossible to draw a sharp line between the normal and the pathological. This aspect of Laing's style was particularly evident in his treatment of patients who had been diagnosed as schizophrenic at one time or other, a diagnostic category Laing never

entirely embraced. But to the degree that one finds oneself treating people whom others have diagnosed and treated in this fashion, Laing suspected their problems were probably the consequence of having been deceived by the people on whom they were dependent in their childhoods. This thesis implicates society at large, but it obviously includes the family in which one was reared, a thesis that has become increasingly “unfashionable” in an era in which special interest groups (such as families of schizophrenics) increasingly determine treatment mores.

Laing’s emphasis on the interpersonal basis of reality and the capacity every human being possesses to subvert the other’s experience through the use of lies and deception characterizes the specifically existential aspect of Laing’s conception of psychoanalysis, derived to a significant degree from his debt to Nietzsche. This assessment of psychological suffering led Laing to endorse in even stronger terms than Freud’s the latter’s observation that the therapeutic relationship must be rooted in a strict adherence to truthfulness. Laing not only embraced Freud’s insistence on fidelity to the fundamental rule - that patient’s should endeavor to be as honest as they are able - he endorsed its correlate, the rule of neutrality, to an even higher level. In Laing’s assessment this technical principle, in spite of the current tide of opinion against it in analytic circles, means nothing more onerous than to be unequivocally open minded and sensitive toward the person one is treating, no matter how trying or difficult a patient may be (Thompson, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1997).

The Primacy of Experience

Having examined the manner in which Laing situated himself in the psychoanalytic tradition, I now turn to his views on the therapeutic process itself, specifically one’s experience it. I employ the term experience because this deceptively simple if ambiguous

term was the foundation of Laing's treatment philosophy. It should be apparent to anyone who is familiar with Laing's work that experience plays a principal role in his thinking. Two of his books - *The Politics of Experience* (1967) and *The Voice of Experience* (1982) - even include the word in their titles. Yet, just because a term is included in the title of one's books doesn't guarantee that the author gives it much weight. Other psychoanalysts have included this term in the title of their books as well, though the concept plays no discernible role in their thinking. Wilfried Bion (*Experiences in Groups* [1961], *Learning From Experience* [1983]); Neville Symington (*The Analytic Experience* [1986]); and Thomas Ogden (*The Primitive Edge of Experience* [1989]), for example, have also included experience in the title of their books, but they have summarily rejected the notion that experience should be equated with consciousness and substitute in its place the notion of "unconscious experience," a contradiction in terms (a point I examine in greater detail below).

What Laing intended by experience is of immeasurable importance because no other term more poignantly demonstrates the differences between the psychoanalytic tradition and Laing's phenomenological rendering of it. Because Laing's interpretation of experience is rooted in phenomenology, his conception of this term serves, more than any other, to differentiate his approach to psychoanalysis from more conventional schools of thought, including recent trends in the interpersonal, relational, and intersubjective perspectives. In order to demonstrate the inherently enigmatic nature of experience I now take a moment to review the etymology of the term and how it has been typically conceived.

The English term for experience is derived from the Latin *peritus*, cognate with the word peril, meaning risk, jeopardy, or danger. The Greek root of experience, which is older than the Latin, derives from the word *empeiria* which gives us the word empirical, a term that was adopted by the British empiricists (e.g., John Locke and David Hume) who

founded their philosophy on the primacy of sensual experience. *Pathos*, meaning suffering, is yet another Greek antecedent to the English experience, which gives us the term, pathology, the study of passion. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, to experience something means to feel, suffer, and undergo, in the sense that what we experience is not of our own making. The term experience also give us experiment, which serves as a technical term for the empirical scientific method, connoting the means by which one endeavors to test a theory through practical application. In our century, the words empirical, experiment, and experience are often used interchangeably, though each has vastly different connotations when invoked outside a scientific framework.

Over the past two centuries the German language has offered subtle variations on the specific types of experience of which we are capable that the English language subsumes under the one term. It should not be surprising then that German philosophers have dominated nineteenth and twentieth-century investigations into the nature of experience that subsequently influenced other European cultures such as France, Great Britain, Switzerland, and Spain. Most relevant are the German philosophers Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl, and Heidegger, each of whom elaborated on the meaning of experience in their respective philosophies, granting the concept a pivotal role in phenomenology and existential philosophy. These philosophers, in turn, influenced the French existentialists, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Gabriel Marcel, and the Spanish philosophers, Miguel Unamuno and Jose Ortega Y Gasset. I shall say more about phenomenology below, but first I review the German treatment of experience and the etymology from which their conception of it is derived.

The first is the German *Erfahrung*, derived from *Fahrt*, meaning journey. Hence, *Erfahrung* suggests the notion of temporal duration, such as when one accumulates experience over time and the accruing of wisdom from old age. The other German word

for experience is *Erlebnis*, derived from *Leben*, meaning life. Hence, *Erlebnis* connotes a vital immediacy in contrast to the predominantly historical (or temporal) *Erfahrung*. When invoking *Erlebnis*, the speaker is referring to a primitive unity that precedes intellectual reflection. When one integrates these nuances into the other etymological references to the word listed above we can appreciate the inherent subtlety of the concept that is often overlooked. For example, in the scientific community experience entails the accumulation of empirical knowledge through the use of experimentation, an inherently active emphasis. On the other hand, experience may suggest something that happens to us passively when we are sensitive to stimuli, such as the experience of watching a movie in a darkened theater. Experience also refers to the process whereby one submits to education, including the accumulation and memorization of knowledge over time. Moreover, the term may also connote a journey I have taken when traveling to a foreign country, perhaps in wartime when faced with great peril and danger, the experience of which may have expedited my journey into manhood. In other words, experiences are essentially transformative, depending on how deeply I permit a given experience to move me.

One can appreciate from this excursion into the etymology of experience that even though it offers tantalizing hints as to what the word is often taken to mean, there remains something ineffable about the concept that defies categorization and definition. This presents us with yet another paradox since the word is often employed, according to Martin Jay, “to gesture towards precisely that which exceeds concepts and even language itself” (Jay 1998: 3). In fact, the notion of experience has often been employed as a marker for what is so private or personal that it cannot be rendered in words. One’s experience of love, for example, is a type of experience that some insist is impossible to express or grasp in words alone, because it is experienced long before it is ever understood. Even when I try to communicate my experience to others, only I can know what my experience is. Hence, just as experience resists definition, our efforts to convey the particular features

of our experience are imperfect because experience is impossible to convey in words, let alone reduce to them. This ineffable dimension to experience made a profound impression on Laing and many of his clinical vignettes emphasize the power that silence often plays in the treatment situation.

This observation has significant implications for the psychoanalytic experience for patient and analyst alike who rely almost entirely on the passage of words between them. This also raises questions as to the nature of nonverbal and even preverbal experience, as well as so-called unconscious experience. Experience also plays a pivotal role in analytic interpretations because whenever the analyst interprets what he takes the patient's utterances to mean he is raising an important question: Is the analyst in a better position than the patient to determine the nature of the patient's experience than the patient himself? Moreover, are there dimensions to experience that the patient is resistant to experiencing because the patient is inclined to intellectualize his experience instead of allowing himself to take it in and experience it, fundamentally? In other words, is there is a *meta*-level to experience beyond the mere feeling or thinking about something that involves finally *experiencing* one's experience, even serving as a precondition to free associating? These questions defy conclusive explanations, yet we grapple with the consequences of them at each moment of the treatment situation.

The Phenomenology of Experience

Despite our common sense appreciation of the role experience plays in our lives, such considerations pale when contrasted with the contribution that phenomenology has made to our understanding of potential experience and what experience specifically entails when we make it the focus of our attention. No psychoanalyst has given more thought to the primacy of experience than Laing himself. In order to appreciate the contribution of

phenomenology to our understanding of experience it is necessary to return to the distinction between the two kinds of experience that are delineated by the German terms, *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. Phenomenology is concerned with determining the significance of the relationship between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*; in other words, with the question: What does it mean to genuinely experience something? As noted earlier, empiricist philosophers such as Hume separated experience from rationality by consigning to experience sensual data alone. Hence scientific methodology, which endeavors to combine the experience we derive from our senses with our capacity to think about and reflect upon the nature of such experiences through objective experimentation, is unable to account for the human subject's experience of ideas, thoughts, and imagination. This is because philosophers have traditionally split human being in two, assigning one portion of the human project to rationality (the mind) and the other portion to sense experience (the body). Though the notion of reflecting on the data provided by our senses is supposed to bring the two together, this doesn't explain how the two can be re-connected given the presumed disparity between them. Indeed, given the underlying assumptions of this schema, the possibility of reconciling the two would be theoretically impossible.

The singular contribution of Husserl at the turn of the last century was to reconcile the split between sense experience and rationality by suggesting that all experience is already inherently thoughtful because the nature of consciousness is intentional, which is to say the act of consciousness and its object are given at one stroke. One is not "related" to the other because each is irrevocably dependent on the other, so that neither can stand alone. As Buddhists have traditionally argued, the presumed split to which Western thought has been devoted is illusory because the two are actually One. Hence, phenomenology is able to claim that there are *levels* of experience, just as there are levels of awareness (or consciousness) depending on how diligently I set out to see (rather than comprehend) what my experience discloses to me through the painstaking activity of

critiquing my experience as it unfolds. This thesis is especially relevant to psychoanalysts who endeavor to direct the patient's attention to the patient's experience by interpreting what it means. Viewed from this angle, a good interpretation is not intended to explain one's experience, but to deepen it, in the phenomenological sense. Many psychoanalysts are puzzled with the phenomenological preoccupation with experience and confuse phenomenology with cognitive psychology, assuming (mistakenly) that consciousness is simply a matter of cognition when in fact many of our cognitive acts, though conscious, are not necessarily experienced in the manner that phenomenologists emphasize.

Not all phenomenologists, however, conceive experience the same way. Whereas Husserl, for example, was concerned with finding a means through subjective experience to absolute knowledge, Heidegger rejected absolute knowledge in principle and adopted a more sceptical approach to what experience makes available to us (Thompson, 2000a, 2000b). For Heidegger, experience is essentially the revealing of Being. In other words, my experience discloses who I am and the world I inhabit: the two are interdependent because each serves to constitute the other. By anticipating my experiences with a specific aim in mind I can make use of my experience to gain insight into the person I am because experience is always *my own*. In other words, there are degrees to experience; it isn't all or nothing. This is why I am also capable of resisting experience, avoiding it, and even forgetting experiences (due to repression) that are too painful to bear. In turn, the degree to which I am even capable of experiencing anything, whether a piece of music, a work of art, even a psychoanalysis, is determined by how willing I am to submit to the experience in question. According to Heidegger, the notion of submission, an essential feature of Eastern philosophy, is vital to the role experience plays in my life and the use I am able to make of it.

The Psychoanalytic Experience

What role does experience specifically entail in the psychoanalytic treatment situation? Is experience antithetical to my capacity to reason, as some have suggested? Or does my ability to reason depend on my capacity to experience the very thoughts my words endeavor to reveal? Moreover, how do these considerations pertain to Laing's employment of the term in his conception of psychoanalysis? First, it should be acknowledged that Freud also allowed experience a critical role in the evolution of pathogenic symptoms, even if his conception of experience relied on the common sense notion of the term. For example, Freud believed that our capacity to bear painful experience as children determines whether we develop neurotic symptoms or worse when we grow up. This is actually a Heideggerian conception of experience, though Freud never knew this. According to Freud, when a child is faced with an experience that is too painful to bear, the child simply expels the experience from consciousness via one defense mechanism or the other, allowing the experience of frustration to magically disappear as though it had never occurred in the first place. The only problem with this solution is that the repressed memory finds an alternate means of expression when it is transformed into a symptom. The adult subsequently suffers and even complains about such symptoms though he hasn't a clue what caused the symptom or what purpose it serves.

For Freud, the purpose of pathogenic symptoms is simple, though diabolically ingenious. It shields the individual from a painful disappointment that the person who suffers the symptom wants desperately to forget, minimize, or ignore. Because the disappointment in question was only repressed but not entirely eradicated, the individual instinctively avoids experiencing the disappointment and anything that subsequently reminds him of it. The irony of Freud's thesis is that so-called traumatic experiences are never actually *experienced* as such, but are deferred until a later date when, with the help of a psychoanalyst, perhaps, the repressed (or projected, denied, etc.) memory can be

elicited and finally experienced, but for the first time. In other words, it is the belated *experience* of trauma, not its mere “recollection” or comprehension, that gives the psychoanalytic moment its power.

Based on this hypothesis, psychoanalysis is nothing more than an investigation into the patient’s experience, suffered over the entirety of one’s life. Hence, analysts seek to learn about the experiences (*Erfahrung*) that patients remember over the course of their history, and they also seek to understand the patient’s experience of the analytic situation (*Erlebnis*) which is to say, the patient’s experience of the relationship with the analyst — so-called transference phenomena. But analysts are also interested in eliciting what may be characterized as lost experience (or what Heidegger would call potential experience) through the patient’s free associations. Change comes about through the patient’s ability to speak of his experience instead of concealing it, as he has in the past. In other words, giving voice to experience serves to deepen it (in the Heideggerian sense), but only if the kind of speech elicited succeeds in plunging the patient to the depths of his suffering.

What I have said about psychoanalysis so far may sound more like phenomenology than psychoanalysis, *per se*. All I can say in response to this observation is that, in its latency, psychoanalysis *is* phenomenological in its latency, at least in the way Laing conceived it. On the other hand, there is something about Freud’s notion of the unconscious that is adverse to the phenomenological perspective when it alludes to experiences occurring “in” a person’s unconscious that the patient has no awareness of experiencing. These areas of contention notwithstanding, the phenomenologist and the psychoanalyst both recognize that we are perfectly capable of engaging in acts that we claim no awareness of and, hence, that we have no experience of either. Awareness and experience, from a phenomenological perspective, are necessarily interdependent concepts. According to Husserl, experience presupposes an I who *suffers* his or her experience, so that no matter how de-centered or obscure one’s I or ego may be,

experience is a determinant of subjectivity. Yet we saw in Heidegger how it is possible to account for levels or degrees of experience, depending on whether one is prepared to undergo the suffering that is entailed in determining what one's experience is.

The proposition that there are levels of experience and, hence, levels of consciousness as well offers important implications for what Freud depicted as unconscious motivation and intentions which, when interpreted in the treatment situation, are seldom remembered by the patient to which such intentions are attributed. Yet, there are undeniable moments in every patient's treatment when one does remember or realizes one's part in a drama that had heretofore been inaccessible to recollection. Laing accounted for this phenomenon by suggesting that Freud's conception of the unconscious is nothing more than a mode of thinking (consciousness) that the patient is "unaware" of thinking. In other words, the patient has no experience of *thinking* the thoughts attributed to him because he did not hear himself thinking the thoughts in question. At the moment such thoughts occurred to him, his mind was "somewhere else." The psychoanalyst says he was unconscious of what he was thinking, whereas the phenomenologist says he simply failed to listen to, and hence *experience*, what he was saying, though the thoughts no doubt occurred to him on an intuitive, pre-experiential level. Hence, the psychoanalytic experience is designed to reacquaint us with that dimension of our Being that we typically abhor and endeavor to conceal. By actually listening to what we say to the analyst *when* we say it, we reflect on our free associations at the moment they are uttered and hear them for the first time, and *experience* them.

Whereas Laing says that the ambiguous aspect of experience should be assigned to its inherently mysterious nature and treated with appropriate attentiveness, Freud argues that experience is subject to repression when a person's anxiety becomes insupportable and renders it "unconscious." In Freud's schema, something must be done

to retrieve and finally return such repressions to consciousness by giving voice to experience as it becomes manifest in the analytic situation. The *raison d'être* of psychoanalytic theory assumes that neurotics live in their heads and have lost touch with what they think is so and how they genuinely feel about their existence. Consequently, the purpose of psychoanalytic treatment is to return to the ground of an ordinary experience from which the patient has become estranged, allowing such patients to finally claim their experience *as their own*, as they recount it to the analyst. Are these two perspectives hopelessly at odds with each other or are they simply speaking to the same phenomena with different terminology? Laing's phenomenological rendering of the psychoanalytic concept of defense mechanisms offers an apt example of how he incorporated the basic tenets of phenomenology into his psychoanalytic perspective. According to Laing (1967),

Under the heading of "defense mechanism," psychoanalysis describes a number of ways in which a person becomes alienated from himself. For example, repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection. These "mechanisms" are often described in psychoanalytic terms as themselves "unconscious," that is, the person himself appears to be unaware that he is doing this to himself. Even when a person develops sufficient insight to see that "splitting," for example, is going on, he usually *experiences* this splitting as indeed a mechanism, an impersonal process, *so to speak*, which has taken over and which he can observe but cannot control or stop. [Hence] there is some phenomenological validity in referring to such "defenses" by the term "mechanism." (p. 17) [Emphases added]

Laing uses phenomenology to emphasize what the patient *actually experiences* in relation to the analyst, not what the analyst believes, supposes, or imagines what is going on in the patient's (unconscious) mind. Analytic patients, Laing allows, may indeed have a

sense of themselves as living “in a fog,” “out of it,” “going through the numbers,” “on automatic pilot,” and so on. Hence, when the analyst suggests that such experience (or non-experience) may be construed as a mechanism, the patient is perfectly capable of appreciating the metaphoric quality of this terminology. Laing’s point, however, is that psychoanalysts tend to take this notion, not metaphorically but literally, as though there are indeed mechanisms and the like controlling our behavior, the nature of which we are unaware and may never become aware, no matter how much analysis we have experienced.

Laing also emphasizes the importance of extending this notion even further by examining the ways in which so-called unconscious aspects of a person’s behavior (as well as “unformulated” experience) must be accounted for *in terms* of what one experiences and how, rather than speculating about what a given patient may be said to be experiencing when the experience in question is inaccessible to the patient and, for that matter, the patient’s analyst as well. Laing proposes, for example, that the patient’s defenses “have this mechanical quality because the person as he experiences himself is dissociated from them,” because he is alienated from his own experience and, hence, himself (Laing 1967: 17). Indeed, what are defenses if not *protective maneuvers against the immediacy of experiencing one’s experience*? Hence, phenomenologically speaking, repression would characterize the patient’s capacity to forget painful experience; denial is essentially the denial of one’s experience; projection is the means by which the person attributes his or her experience to others; splitting characterizes the person’s ability to divide experience into two isolated worlds whereby the existence of the one is kept in abeyance from the other. And so on.

This reading of psychoanalysis is probably unfamiliar to most analysts because it entails an existentialist reading of Freud from the perspective of phenomenology. Unfortunately, this reading of Freud — and, by extension, of psychoanalysis generally —

is hardly evident in the psychoanalytic community, though there have been recent attempts to address the situation by incorporating some of the basic tenets of phenomenology into psychoanalytic theory (cf. Loewald 1980: viii; Leavy 1980, 1988; Atwood and Stolorow 1984; Schafer 1976.) In the main, however, such efforts have fallen short of reframing the corpus of psychoanalytic theory and practice along phenomenological lines, which would necessitate greater emphasis on the immediacy of experience from a phenomenological perspective. Indeed, the mainstream of psychoanalysis, including adherents of the postmodern perspective, has virtually factored the very notion of experience out of play, despite frequent claims to the contrary.

Ironically, recent efforts to incorporate the phenomenological conception of intersubjectivity into the psychoanalytic landscape (cf. Atwood and Stolorow 1984; Stolorow 1997; Stolorow and Atwood 1992; Benjamin 1990) have misconstrued phenomenology's aim as that of doing away with subjectivity altogether. Although Heidegger has played a principal role in replacing the Cartesian preoccupation with subjectivity with the de-centered component to personal existence, Heidegger never did away with the subject entirely and even deemed that the self is the instrument *through* which conscious experience comes into being. On the contrary, the specific focus of phenomenology is and always has been to delineate *the precise features of experience as they become manifest in the here and now of the situation one is in*. Any form of intersubjectivity that proposes to dispense with this critical component of the phenomenological perspective ceases to be intersubjective, properly speaking, and withdraws into a theory-driven *rationalization* of the therapeutic process that is closer to the Cartesian tradition than a, properly speaking, phenomenological one.

On the other hand, American analysts who are sympathetic with postmodernism tend to emphasize matters of technique over theory. Elliott and Spezzano (1998: 73), for example, suggest that the work of Irwin Hoffman is postmodern due to his lack of certainty

about what is going on between himself and his patients, in contrast to analysts who are more invested in determining what is allegedly happening in the analyst's and patient's unconscious. This is a point well taken and consistent with the sceptical outlook in contrast to the dogmatic assertions of previous generations of analysts. Similarly, the work of Schafer is said to be consistent with the postmodern perspective when Schafer questions whether patients should be characterized as "deceiving" themselves simply because the analyst suspects it is so. Of course, these features of Hoffman's and Schafer's respective work could just as easily be characterized as existentialist in nature, so they are neither necessarily nor essentially postmodern (Thompson 1998: 332-335). Elliott and Spezzano argue, however, that just because postmodernism embraces a perspectivist framework doesn't necessarily imply that one interpretation is just as good as any other, a frequent criticism among analysts who reject postmodernism. Thus Elliott and Spezzano conceive a form of mitigated version of postmodernism in contrast to the more radical position of French psychoanalysts such as Lacan and Kristeva, offering a more pragmatic interpretation of the relatively theoretical European application of postmodernist principles that is common among American analysts who identify with the relational perspective.

The Question of Authenticity

Despite the similarities between the postmodern and phenomenological perspectives (due to their respective roots in a sceptical sensibility) the principal difference between these two philosophical traditions is the postmodernist rejection of authenticity, a principal feature of both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective philosophies, important sources of Laing's clinical perspective. Although Heidegger was the first philosopher to employ authenticity as a technical term, both Nietzsche's and Kierkegaard's respective philosophies were forerunners of this component of Heidegger's philosophy. For

Nietzsche, authenticity characterizes the person who is not afraid to face up to the fundamental anxieties of living. Such an individual is embodied in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, usually translated into English as overman or superman, who is capable of coming to grips with his fears and overcome the weight of his or her existence by accepting reality for what it is, unbowed and unafraid. Such a person would permit the more passionate, Dionysian aspect of his being to dominate over his more rationalistic, Apollonian side.

Postmodernists have rejected Nietzsche's ideal as merely the latest edition in a long history of such mythic figures (e.g., the Marxist proletarian, Freud's perfectly analyzed individual, Sartre's existentialist hero) that fails to take into account the severe limitations that human beings must contend with and ultimately accept. While there is some truth to this assessment of Nietzsche's hero, one would be mistaken to construe Heidegger's authentic individual as nothing more than a twentieth-century edition of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the so-called superman who Nietzsche predicted would appear in the future as an exemplar in overcoming human weakness and hypocrisy.

One of the principal differences between Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and Heidegger's conception of authenticity is that for Heidegger there is no such person who epitomizes the "authentic hero" in juxtaposition to people who are inauthentic. Authenticity is characterized instead as a specific act or moment in any individual's life where the context in which a situation arises offers an opportunity to behave authentically or not. Indeed, the concept is so central to Heidegger's philosophy that it is difficult to appreciate what authenticity entails without an understanding of his philosophical outlook. Space doesn't permit me to summarize Heidegger's philosophy, but suffice it to say that, unlike Nietzsche, Heidegger was not talking about an ideal person who would some day emerge to replace the stereotypical contemporary neurotic, a view that is moralistic as well as pathogenic. Instead, Heidegger argues, all human creatures are inauthentic by their

nature, but sometimes behave authentically when they rise to the occasion, or as Laing would observe, when they are capable of being honest with themselves. Of course, we are challenged to do so virtually every moment of our lives, but too distracted or anxious to give it much thought. So how do we manage to act authentically in spite of our condition and, more to the point, what would doing so entail?

In order to understand what authenticity entails it is helpful to know what it means to be inauthentic. Carman (2000) observes that there are two depictions of inauthenticity in Heidegger's magnum opus, *Being and Time* (1962), that on the surface appear to contradict each other but in fact are complementary. Both are aspects of "fallenness" (*Verfallenheit*), a fundamental component of inauthenticity, which characterises the individual who sells out to public opinion in order to curry favor and success. A central theme throughout Heidegger's early work is the relationship between the individual and society and how this relationship sets up a tension that the individual, contrary to Nietzsche, never entirely overcomes. For Heidegger and Nietzsche alike, we spend all our lives searching for a feeling of communion only to find our reward is always one more step out of reach. This quest is inconsolable, says Heidegger, because the only way of approximating this feeling (short of falling in love) is by abandoning an essential aspect of what we are about: our personal integrity. Hence, one version of "falling" into inauthenticity describes an aspect of the human condition from which we cannot escape, whereas the other is manifested when a person *tries* to escape his isolation by capitulating to social incentives to conform, a kind of second-order mode of inauthenticity that compounds it even further.

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger recognized the terrible sense of anxiety that lies at the bottom of authenticity, but Heidegger was more adept at characterizing the features of this dread for what it is, the experience of being alive. Instead of trying to flee from our

anxieties by suppressing them we can instead choose to listen to what they tell us about ourselves and, hence, respond to our *angst* authentically, by accepting it. Heidegger observed that because there is no ultimate foundation for our values or our behavior we can never feel at home in the world. Yet because we are thrown into a world that is not our choosing, it is up to us to determine what meaning our lives will have. The inauthentic individual, like the neurotic, is incapable of accepting the anxiety and hardship that everyday existence entails. Instead, he complains about his lot and the unfairness of the hand that is dealt him. For Heidegger and Laing alike, the ability to accept life on its terms and to suffer the day to day blows that are impossible to avoid or escape brings with it a reward that only authenticity can offer: the experience of genuinely being oneself.

Heidegger's and Laing's respective depictions of authenticity have no foundation other than the individual's conscience, for better or worse. In order to *be* one's own, honestly and authentically, one is obliged to suffer the isolation and loneliness that follow when we refuse to compromise our personal values for material or popular gain. For Heidegger, postmodernism is antithetical to a philosophy of authenticity because it embraces inauthenticity as its point of departure. Any perspective that lives on the surface while rejecting a depth to one's deliberations, that celebrates a conception of selfhood which changes as easily as the channels on television, that dismisses traditional values such as conscience, honesty, and goodness just because we lack immutable standards against which such values can be assessed, and whose apparent purpose is to find fault with any aspiration that endeavors to stake a position of one's own, celebrates inauthenticity at every turn. As such, it is a nihilism that feeds on the traditions that preceded it while applauding itself as the latest intellectual fashion.

The Primacy of Interpretation

If authenticity is the source of divergence between the existential and postmodern traditions, the art of interpretation (or hermeneutics) joins them in common cause. Following Freud, the question of interpretation is of fundamental importance to Laing's conception of psychoanalysis as well as contemporary relational, intersubjective, constructivist, and hermeneutic perspectives. Freud was not alone in his tendency to treat interpretations as pronouncements from the gods, as though he could divine that truth of the matter by virtue of his superior intelligence. Indeed, most psychoanalysts have tended to treat interpretation as *translation* from the patient's utterances into a given theory of underlying reality instead of a means of "opening up" an otherwise closed area of discourse. It is surprising, however, that contemporary hermeneutic and constructivist models would imply that this more sceptical, allegedly postmodern take on the handling of interpretation is something new. Many of the existential analysts from the 1950s and 1960s (who were also critical of Freud in this respect) came to the same conclusion after integrating Heidegger's philosophy into their clinical perspective, evidenced in the publications of Laing (1960, 1969), Binswanger (1963), Boss (1963, 1979), and a host of European psychoanalysts. Laing noted, for example, that Heidegger's conception of experience *already presupposes* an act of interpretation that, in turn, elicits one's capacity for getting to the heart of the matter. This is a conception of interpretation that has more recently been noted by hermeneutically-oriented psychoanalysts such as Donnel Stern (1997), derived from Heidegger's former pupil, Hans Georg Gadamer. According to Laing:

Our experience of another entails a particular interpretation of his behavior. To feel loved is to perceive and interpret, that is, to experience, the actions of the other as loving . . . [Hence] in order for the other's behavior to become part of [one's] experience, [one] must perceive it. *The very act of perception [and hence*

experience] entails interpretation. (Laing, Phillipson, Lee 1966: 10-11). [Emphasis added]

In other words, everything analytic patients experience is the consequence of interpretations patients have already, instinctively given themselves. This, in turn, influences what a given patient is capable of taking in during the course of analytic work. What the analyst says to a patient is never actually “heard” in the way the analyst necessarily intends it to be, because it is *unconsciously interpreted* and, hence, experienced by the patient according to his or her interpretative schema, a culmination of everything an individual has previously endured and understood by such experiences in the course of a lifetime. In other words, analytic patients experience the world according to a personal bias that is resistant and oftentimes impervious to anything a patient encounters that contradicts it, including the analyst’s interpretations. The dogmatic nature of a person’s views, held together by a lifetime of neurotic impasse maneuvers, helps explain the difficulty patients experience when invited to question their most basic assumptions. Since both analyst and patient are always already instinctively interpreting everything each says to the other (but without necessarily realizing they are doing so), what is actually heard by each and in turn experienced is impossible to grasp directly. Every account of a person’s experience entails the use of words that, when uttered, are immediately translated by the listener into a schema that the individual, whether analyst or patient, either wants to hear or expects to. This constantly changing interplay of speech, recognition, and misunderstanding helps explain the extraordinary difficulty analysts encounter in their endeavor to converse with their patients and, in turn, understand them, because every attempt at communication is at the mercy of the patient’s originary experience, the source of which is notoriously opaque. Because I can never know what a patient’s experience is, I can only make a calculated guess as to what it might be, based

more or less entirely on what the patient tells me.

Analysts who were influenced by Heidegger's hermeneutic theory of language often focus on the patient's tendency to deflect the analyst's efforts at understanding by resorting to self-deception and even incidents of overt deception. Analysts, in turn, are similarly prone to self-deception and subtle forms of coercion, a point exhaustively chronicled by Laing (Thompson, 1998) who cites it as an example of inauthenticity by the analyst (or what Freud characterized as therapeutic ambition). More recently, psychoanalysts who are influenced by Gadamer's application of hermeneutics emphasize the difficulties encountered with virtually all attempts at communication and depict the analytic situation as one of "unraveling" the inherent complexities of speech acts as they occur, a vital feature of Laing's analytic method.

The postmodern rejection of the existentialist conception of self-deception is based on the claim that self-deception is a myth because there is no standard of truth against which one is able to deceive and because there is no "self" to lie to. This criticism is also raised against Freud's conviction that his patients harbored secrets and that the goal of analysis is to determine what those secrets are by helping patients to disclose them. The fact that neither Laing, Heidegger, Gadamer, or postmodernist thinkers believe that truth is objectively verifiable, however, doesn't negate the proposition (adopted by both Freud and Laing alike) that human beings are prone to deceive themselves about the nature and content of their experience, no matter how unreliable or objectively inaccurate one's experience may be. What counts is that patients believe in the veracity of what they deceive themselves (and others) about, so the resulting conflict, as Freud points out, is between opposing inclinations "in" oneself, which are in turn derived from a cleavage in the individual's relationship with the world. It seems to me that by rejecting the concept of self-deception postmodernists have taken the terms, self, deception, and truth literally, mistaking the organizing principle of subjectivity for a materialistic notion of the self.

There is an increasing tendency among analysts identified with the relational perspective to characterize the analytic relationship as one between equals, more or less collaborative in spirit, thus minimizing the tension that has traditionally characterized the patient's transference with the analyst. Yet none of these innovations are new, nor are they derived from the postmodern turn in contemporary culture. Matters of technique have been debated since the beginning of psychoanalysis and there is a long history of disagreement between analysts who advocate a more authoritarian posture and those who opt for a user-friendly variety. While some analysts believe that technique should follow theory, others argue that practice is inevitably a creature of experience, a more existential perspective. I remain sceptical that recent so-called innovations in technique are anything new. Psychoanalysis is such a flexible instrument that what finally matters is the person who employs it, not which theory or technical regime the analyst is educated to follow.

The Crisis in Psychoanalysis

I have tried to show that Laing's relationship with psychoanalysis is both more subtle and complicated than typically appreciated. Many of the so-called innovations of the contemporary relational and postmodern perspectives in psychoanalysis were common coin to Laing and other European psychoanalysts and psychiatrists whose views were then too subversive to be embraced by the conventional psychoanalytic community. Perhaps the American aversion of philosophy helps to account for why even now there is relatively little knowledge of Laing's contribution to psychoanalysis in the United States. If this is so, it may also explain why so many psychoanalysts feel it is necessary to incorporate ideas from other disciplines, such as philosophy, linguistics, and religious studies, into psychoanalytic theory and technique instead of employing them as a means

of broadening their understanding of the human condition which, in turn, would inform their behavior with patients but on a more subtle level. To do so would require becoming conversant with other disciplines in order to expand the narrowly conceived boundaries of psychoanalytic theory and its hopelessly narrow technical nomenclature.

Perhaps the day will come when Laing's contribution will finally receive the attention it deserves, when his heretofore extreme ideas will appear less enigmatic than they did a generation ago. There is little dispute that contemporary psychoanalysis, for all its efforts to keep up with the world around it, is in a state of crisis. The culture has turned away from it for a variety of reasons that are difficult to assess, but for all its purported innovation the typical conventional psychoanalyst today is, like the instrument he wields, woefully out of fashion. Laing excited a generation of clinicians and patients alike to use analysis as a vehicle for self-exploration and, ironically, many contemporary analysts attribute their embryonic interest in the field to Laing's influence. It is perhaps doubly-ironic that many analysts today fault Laing for having abandoned psychoanalysis when it was they who dismissed his early efforts at innovation. Whether recent efforts to address these developments are too late, on the one hand, or whether there is still time to reverse these trends, on the other, we do not know because the future, like the outcome of every treatment experience, is impossible to predict.

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