

R. D. Laing revisited

A dialogue on his contribution to authenticity and the sceptic tradition

Michael Guy Thompson and John M. Heaton

Introduction

R. D. Laing was one of the twentieth century's most controversial psychoanalysts and, at the peak of his fame in the 1970s, he was the most widely read psychiatrist in the world. Renown of that magnitude is dependent on the happy coincidence of multiple factors, including the right message at the most opportune time. In an era when authority figures of every persuasion were suspect, the counterculture movement of the 1960s entrusted this disarming Scotsman to explain to them how they were being manipulated by the very people – their parents, teachers, and other authority figures – they had been most influenced by and dependent upon. Laing's searing portrayal of the duplicitous and oftentimes mystifying politics of everyday life, which he outlined in one explosive bestseller after another (e.g. Laing 1960, 1961, 1964, 1967, 1970, 1971) made him a social icon for a generation of psychology students, intellectuals, and artists in European and American academic circles.

In this exchange of perspectives, Michael Guy Thompson and John Heaton, both friends and colleagues of Laing's, will engage in an exchange of opinions addressing their respective views about the core of Laing's existential assessment of the human condition. Their dialogue will focus on the role that authenticity played in both his personal and professional life, and the way that the sceptic philosophical tradition both influenced and illuminated critical aspects of his thinking and clinical philosophy.

R. D. LAINGS'S AMBIGUOUS CONCEPTION OF AUTHENTICITY

Michael Guy Thompson

Ronald Laing was alternately a wonderful man and a terrible man and his struggle to determine the nature of authenticity, to articulate precisely what he believed it entailed, and to measure up to that standard in his personal and professional behaviour brought out the best and the worst in him.

Despite Laing's affinity with Jean-Paul Sartre and the significant influence that Sartre had on many of Laing's ideas, his conception of authenticity relied predominantly on the thinking of Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger. In order to understand Laing's radical take on what it means to be authentic and the extremes of behaviour he adopted in this pursuit, it would be instructive to first review the basic points that comprise Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective views on this existential principle. Given the space I have available I will be brief.

The currently popularized notion of authenticity that has swept contemporary America and Europe tends to reduce it to more or less whatever one *feels* as opposed to what one *thinks* about the matter at hand. This view originates with the Romanticist philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who objected to the emphasis his contemporary Enlightenment thinkers assigned to the role of rationality at the expense of feeling states, which Rousseau believed were essential to artistic expression. This is a simplification, but Rousseau's critique was rooted in the notion that individuals have an inner self that is hidden and for the most part comprised of feelings that say a lot about who a person genuinely is, so the more in touch a person is with his or her feelings the more authentic that person is said to be. This view suggests that the more authentic a person is, the more pleasing, kind, and compassionate that person will be to others. In other words, the authentic person is a *kinder* and more generous person, the kind of person you might want for a friend. Carl Rogers is a contemporary champion of this vision of authenticity.

Now Nietzsche and Heidegger would have none of this, first because they did not believe in the notion of a self, so for them there could be no 'inner core' of feelings to get in touch with; and second, however one may wish to characterize the subjectivity or human nature of a person, there is no discernible or even necessary relationship between authenticity and ethics of the kind Rousseau implied. From this angle, behaving authentically may make one extremely controversial, as both Nietzsche and Heidegger¹ demonstrated in their personal conduct. For Nietzsche the authentic person is one who is not afraid to face up to the fundamental alienation of everyday life. Such a person was embodied in Nietzsche's conception of the *Übermensch*, usually translated into English as superman or overman: a person who will arrive some day in the future and come to grips with his deepest fears and embrace reality for what it is, however difficult or threatening it may feel. Nietzsche loved the Greeks and though he rejected the conventional view of morality – that we should conduct ourselves by a set of rules that are dictated by a God or society – Nietzsche devoted much of his thinking to the topic of personal values (or character traits) and what kind of values are important for the *Übermensch* to embrace. Like the Greeks, Nietzsche believed that courage was the greatest virtue for the authentic person to cultivate and he saw the *Übermensch* as a courageous,

even heroic figure. This is because it entails a special kind of courage to go against society's dictates and to follow the beat of one's own drum, which is more or less how Nietzsche wished to conduct himself.

It is telling that Laing's most famous and polemical book, *The Politics of Experience* (1967), where he rails against contemporary society as a toxic wasteland, is a homage to Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (2006), one of Laing's favourite books. Courage is another theme to which Laing referred countless times, noting that, etymologically, the root of the word means 'heart', implying that the original sense of being courageous was *openheartedness*. Laing often suggested that behaving authentically takes courage or guts and that on a deeper, more profound level to behave authentically entails opening one's heart to another person. Laing believed that such an act assumes courage because placing oneself in such a vulnerable situation is an extremely risky thing to do because when we love we put ourselves at the other person's mercy.

Heidegger's conception of authenticity was indebted to many, including Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but he also took the concept in new directions and made it very much his own. Heidegger rejected Nietzsche's romantic characterization of the heroic *Übermensch* and argued instead that all human beings are necessarily *inauthentic* pretty much all the time, because this is our lot in life and the essence of our anxiety-prone human condition, from which we can never entirely escape. Despite our condition, we can nonetheless relieve ourselves of our plight, if only momentarily, with acts of authenticity, in moments when we are able to rise to the occasion. But most of the time we are caught up in the pursuit of our daily affairs, trying to get ahead in our unremitting inauthentic fashion, and simply coping with life as best we can. We court popular favour, compete for promotions to further our ambitions, seek to enhance our reputations and 'look good' professionally, all the while slyly lying when it suits our purposes and when being truthful might prove embarrassing, or worse. In effect, we get caught up 'in the crowd' of our own making, whatever crowd or circle we identify with and comprises our world, so that the crowd becomes the arena of our inauthenticity rooted in our self-identity. Unfortunately, our success at this endeavour is all too often the source of our estrangement from ourselves, where our authenticity is situated.

From Heidegger one gets the sense that we are imperfect, fallen creatures. One also gets the sense of a profound loneliness that is co-extensive with authenticity in both Nietzsche and Heidegger. Sticking to your principles and doing what you believe is right often comes at the expense of political expediency and may cost you not only public favour but also the very friends who expect you to serve their interests. Both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's meditations on authenticity had a profound impact on Laing's conception of and relationship with the matter. For Laing, the capacity to be honest about our inauthentic transgressions and own up to them could

be just as authentic as conforming to Nietzsche's and Heidegger's characterization of authenticity! As we shall see, this exegesis of Laing's extension of authenticity also planted a seed of confusion for him that became a source of inconsistency.

What were the basic elements of authenticity in Laing's thinking? Laing couldn't stand people whom he thought 'fake', who put on airs and pretended to be who they were not, who were too timid to speak up for fear of making fools of themselves, when they tried to impress you as something or someone they were not. On the other hand he admired those who exercised effort and courage to at least try to be themselves, which was not an easy thing to do in Laing's intimidating presence. Laing was never really comfortable with people, and much of his preoccupation with the nature of the true- and false-self dichotomy in his first book, *The Divided Self* (1960), speaks to his preoccupation with the inherent *falsity* that people erect around themselves in order to fit in with society. This is a tributary of inauthenticity that Laing derived from Sartre's conception of *bad faith*.² According to Laing, they pretend to be someone they are not and become alienated from who they genuinely, if unconsciously, are. Both D. W. Winnicott (1960), one of Laing's supervisors in his psychoanalytic training, and Sartre (1981) influenced his use of this terminology to convey his early thinking about authenticity, though Laing abandoned these terms as his thinking evolved. Yet Laing never wavered from his distaste for what he termed 'putting on airs' and the kind of pretence that Kingsley Hall and the other Philadelphia Association houses were so adept at stripping away. Laing's conception of Kingsley Hall was explicitly designed to pare away the inherently false currency of social niceties, proper manners, and common courtesy that are the standard of social relations in virtually every culture on earth – except for Kingsley Hall!³ For those of us who lived in such places, the idea was to simulate the same types of interaction with other members of the household (regardless how psychotic or disturbed) that one would more typically experience in psychoanalysis. This meant dispensing with small talk entirely and speaking from the heart with the same sense of urgency, reflection, and honesty that you would in therapy. The effect was disconcerting, even transformative, and served as a *rite of passage* into the life of the 'Laingian community'.

On occasion, Laing could be confrontational and by contemporary standards even cruel in the way he sometimes got in someone's face to call them on this or that breach of genuine relating, a tactic he adopted from Esalen Institute techniques that were practised in Big Sur, California in the heyday of the 1960s encounter group movement. Yet he could also be uncommonly gentle, kind, and sensitive; it depended on what he drew from in a given moment. Perhaps the most important litmus for Laing's characterization of authenticity derived from the golden rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. I cannot recall another expression that I

heard him refer to more frequently in terms of basic human decency, as a rough and ready guide to I-and-Thou relating. In his seminars, Laing would sometimes read from the Lord's Prayer, influenced, I believe, by a book of Aldous Huxley's on the subject, where he critiqued each line of the prayer to give it a contemporary interpretation. Laing was particularly taken with the part of the prayer that speaks *trespassing* against one's neighbours and the need to forgive both those who trespass against oneself as well as one's own trespasses against others. Laing seemed particularly sensitive to crossing that line, when therapists, for example, including psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, trespass into that space of vulnerability of their patients that is not always therapeutic, but potentially injurious. The concept of trespass seems to be the one irreducible element in Laing's critique of psychiatric and other forms of therapeutic practice that runs through the entirety of his published work. Though his rhetoric was sometimes brutal, Laing didn't seem to care how many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts he alienated, and he paid a heavy price for speaking out against the kinds of manipulative clinical interventions that even today typically pass for normal. The contemporary clinical establishment has still not forgiven him for it. I consider this pretty heroic stuff and a contemporary example of Nietzsche's admonition to 'philosophize with a hammer!'. It didn't win Laing many friends.

This raises the question: what are we to make of a man who at the time of his death in 1989 had managed to damage his relationships with most of his closest friends and colleagues as a consequence of his unpredictably hostile and erratic behaviour, who delighted in intellectually bullying those closest to him, whose drinking and drug use (marijuana and LSD) drove him to behave so irresponsibly over the last ten years of his life that it was apparent to those closest to him that he was systematically compromising his legacy – a new standard for ethical clinical behaviour that had taken him more than two decades to develop? For those of us who knew Laing and adored him, witnessing this process was a painful affair, and we remain haunted by this perplexing legacy of a man to whom we owe so much yet understand so little. Was Laing's penchant for bullying a form of unmitigated boorish rudeness masquerading as a radical therapeutic intervention? Or was it a manifestation of genuine authentic self-expression, true to his personal values (which were by their nature guaranteed to confuse and intimidate) and which he believed to have therapeutic value?

According to John Duffy, one of Laing's oldest friends from his youth in Glasgow, Laing had been 'a kind, sensitive, and loving young man, a really outstanding individual who was different than the rest, caring and gentle' (Mullan 1997: 100–101). He observed that Laing changed over the years and became increasingly self-absorbed and sometimes brutal. Some of this Duffy attributed to Laing's first, unhappy marriage to Anne. But later after Laing married Jutta, his boorish behaviour escalated and encroached into

their friendship. Laing's drinking escalated and he became increasingly self-absorbed and belligerent. Eventually Duffy had enough of it and ended their friendship, much to Laing's shock and dismay.

What Duffy was complaining about was familiar to all of Laing's close friends and associates: the drinking, the baiting, bullying and aggression, in a word, crossing the line – *trespassing*. Yet, Laing often argued that such expressions of turmoil were intended to be *authentic*, that it wasn't a case of being drunk or out of control, but rather a method to his madness in the tradition of William Blake – 'the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom' was one of Laing's favourite adages. Such accounts were often bewildering because Laing usually apologized for such breaches as if to say he hadn't meant it, while on other occasions he might insist he was provoked and merely 'teaching a lesson'.

An example of the latter was recounted by Maureen O'Hara, a follower of Carl Rogers who helped organize a one-day public event in London featuring Laing and Rogers and their respective cronies (Mullan 1997: 314–322). The event itself was uneventful, but the evening before was a night the participants would never forget. Laing and Rogers had never met, so Laing invited Rogers' group to his home the evening before the workshop to get acquainted. From the moment they arrived at his home an air of discomfort invaded the room. Rogers' group introduced themselves while Laing and his group sat in stony silence. Finally, as the silence became unbearable, Laing announced: 'If you [Rogers] and I are to have any kind of meaningful dialogue, you are going to have to cut out the California "nice-guy" act and get to something approaching an authentic encounter.' The two groups exploded into argument and Laing eventually suggested they go out to dinner to cool off. At the restaurant Laing immediately isolated himself from the others and proceeded to get drunk, much to Rogers' and his group's discomfort. As other customers entered the restaurant Laing shouted, 'See that bald-headed man sitting there' [pointing to Rogers]? 'Well, he's not a man, he's a *pairrrson!*', alluding to Rogers' most famous book, *On Becoming a Person*, in Laing's taunting Scottish burr. As the room fell into stunned silence, Laing ambled over to O'Hara's table and poured some Scotch into her empty water glass. He asked if she liked it and she said she did, thinking this was a gesture of rapprochement, at which point he spat into her drink and asked, 'Well, how do you like it now?' O'Hara tossed the drink in Laing's face and the situation devolved into pandemonium.

Though the groups eventually patched things up and went on with the programme, the damage had been done; Laing and Rogers never spoke again. Later, Laing explained to me that making Rogers and his group feel uncomfortable by his extreme behaviour was his way of teaching them something about authenticity in a way they seemed incapable of being, because they were so *nice* and artificially 'appropriate'. Laing's position was

that anything goes when it comes to stripping away such artificial niceness whenever and wherever one meets it, no matter how much trespassing is required in order to get the message across. In her account of this story, O'Hara tells us that after her initial shock, in the following months she came to see Rogers in a fundamentally different way and became so disturbed by his 'artificiality' that she eventually severed her relationship with him; all because of the way that Laing had 'opened her eyes' to what she had heretofore been blinded. However many people Laing managed to alienate that evening, for O'Hara it was an awakening and even a life-changing experience!

Laing was a mass of contradictions. He was essentially a solitary figure with a profoundly spiritual centre that fuelled his quest for authentic relating with both himself and with others, especially with people whom he treated; yet he pursued fame and notoriety in a way that was difficult to reconcile with an authentic engagement with the world. It is perhaps ironic that Laing's last and unfinished book was devoted to love, a topic that was central to his conception of authenticity. Heidegger allowed that none of us is perfect and that we cannot be authentic all (or even much) of the time; simply being honest about our darkest moments may be the most authentic act at our disposal. But following Kierkegaard (1956), Laing insisted that love is essential to authentic relating with others, and that *Caritas*, or charity, is the epitome of such engagement. He also argued that hate is consistent with, and sometimes indistinguishable from, love so that acts of cruelty may be deemed authentic if that is how a person genuinely feels in the moment, in counterpoint to Rousseau's characterization of more benign feeling states at the core of the self.

In his biography of Laing, John Clay (1996) notes that Laing used to have a painting of Breughel's *Fall of Icarus* hanging on the wall of his consulting room on Wimpole Street in the early days of his practice. Anthony Clare interprets Laing's choice of this famous Greek myth as particularly, if unconsciously, relevant, in that Laing also flew too close to the sun, as a consequence of his elevation to the status of a guru. I believe that even in his frequent acts of rebelliousness Laing was convinced he was simply being faithful to his capacity for what measure of authenticity he was capable of accessing. In a way, I admired this about Laing, his inability to grovel, to act the part. So long as this hurt no one but himself, I saw something heroic in his inability to pander to the crowd. I think I even loved him for this and I will always admire his tenacity, if not his inconsistency. When it comes to crossing the line and trespassing on others in the name of teaching them something about how to become more authentic themselves, I believe Laing was engaged in acts of aggression that are difficult to reconcile with his views about *Caritas*, peace on earth, and the like. However complicated and contradictory Laing's legacy remains, we owe him a debt of gratitude for the courage it took to fashion a conception

of authenticity that is as illuminating as it is disturbing and, perhaps necessarily, contradictory.

LAING, AUTHENTICITY, AND SCEPTICISM

John M. Heaton

In order to make sense of my critique of some of Michael Thompson's remarks on Laing and authenticity I will first give an outline of my understanding of Heidegger on authenticity. Authenticity has become a key word amongst existential therapists, indicating that it is something good that we should strive for, a key ethical term. Of course they are entitled to use the word how they wish, but I want to argue that for Heidegger, at any rate, it was much more problematic. His distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity was a question rather than an answer; he was interested in the relation between the two and questioned the assumption that we ought to be authentic all the time. Most therapists, including existential ones, want answers; philosophers mostly question and a good one asks highly pertinent ones.

Heidegger followed the *path* of phenomenology; he came to question some of Husserl's assumptions, but, nevertheless, phenomenological questioning was the path that led him to the question of Being (Heidegger 1972). In one of his later works, he claims that *errancy* arises from 'out of truth'; the true, when it is understood as 'what is correct', has degraded errancy into incorrectness. Correctness is an unacknowledged metaphysic and distorts the 'way' of truth (Heidegger 2006: 93–94). He was critical of too ready labelling of what is correct or not in phenomenology; to err is human.

The distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity is introduced early on in *Being and Time* (1962), since it is crucial to his theme that *Dasein* be understood as *my own*. This way of being is contrasted with 'falling in' with a crowd of my own making, as Mike mentioned above (p. 000), and also with relating to myself and others as if they were objects which are merely there, present-at-hand. Such a self-relation would be inauthentic as it denies the way in which *Dasein* is its possibilities, rather than merely having them. However, we may need at times to objectify ourselves and/or others; for example, when the doctor and I discuss the pain in my knee. Are we behaving inauthentically? Most of us sometimes chatter to other people; is this necessarily 'idle' and inauthentic? Is being idle always something bad which we should avoid? Can we always draw a distinct line between chatter that can be evaluated negatively and chatter that is positive? As Heidegger wrote later, inauthenticity is not a mere *lack*, a privation, but a fully fledged mode of existence (Heidegger 1962: 388, 339).

Authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1962: 236, 191). A temptation is to believe that we can gradually make a

transition to authenticity during the course of our life or perhaps during psychotherapy. Should the aim of existential therapy be to make us more authentic? Many philosophers and most existential therapists take this moralizing attitude to authenticity, certainly Laing did, most of the time, as Mike shows. We and our patients *ought* to be more authentic, follow Laing, the model of authenticity. I disagree and think the relation between authenticity and inauthenticity is far more subtle than the simple-minded dichotomies of conventional morality. Heidegger, if read carefully, took a very nuanced view of these concepts (Staehler 2008: 293). He did not think it correct to be authentic.

Heidegger wrote: '*Authentic-Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the "they"; *it is rather an existentiell modification of the "they" – of the "they" as an essential existentielle*' (1962: 168; 130). So authenticity is not separated from inauthenticity in any simple way, but is a modification of inauthenticity.

Authentic being-towards-death is an existentiell possibility of *Dasein*. Some would claim that is the most authentic relation possible and some existential therapists have seen this as the ultimate end of existential therapy. Heidegger, however, shows that authentic being-towards-death cannot be characterized 'objectively' (1962: 304, 260). Heidegger, however, claims that it shows *Dasein* that its inmost possibility lies in giving itself up: in shattering all clinging to ideas and beliefs about itself and others that it may use to prop itself up. We cannot authentically say: 'I have achieved it', or claim that anyone else has done so. We cannot have it as an aim of therapy. Thus, for example, to search for a true self is a fantastical undertaking.

Authenticity is not a position that can be arrived at, possessed, and taught. What would teaching it mean? Of course we could try and define it, tell the person to read Kierkegaard and Heidegger and their commentators. They might end up knowing a lot about authenticity but would they understand what it is to be authentic? Could they make a transition from the inauthentic to the authentic by this way of knowing? Is it conceivable to make a transition from inauthenticity to authenticity? Is there continuity between them? Is one a simple negation of the other?

Authenticity and inauthenticity differ from one another perspectively, they are not metaphysical opposites, like good and bad. They are foci rather than polarities. They are orientational and perspectival within the structure of human living. They depend on one another, along with other terms and meanings in a person's life. That an authentic person is nevertheless inauthentic is the quintessence of practice. There is no privileging of authenticity as opposed to inauthenticity, as independent of one another. They cannot function without one another. Some people may no doubt be enslaved and fettered by their inauthenticity. But the human condition is

such that we cannot eradicate it, due to the fundamental limitations of our life with one another.

There is a long and ancient tradition that ponders this question. Probably its beginning in the western tradition is in Plato's *Parmenides*; Plato discusses 'the sudden', as the category of transition. What is sudden is a category of the between, which is neither here nor there, neither in being nor outside it, placeless, *atopos*. So the sudden must be thought of as placeless, irreducible to being and nonbeing. I do not know how familiar Laing was with the *Parmenides*, but he was certainly familiar with Dionysius the Areopagite; he could quote parts of his *Mystical Theology* from memory. Dionysius worked in the Neo-Platonic tradition and one of its most valued books was Proclus' *Commentary on the Parmenides*. This has been influential down to Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard and Heidegger. They understood the sudden as the 'instant' of salvation. Laing was even more familiar with Kierkegaard who, in *The Concept of Anxiety* and other works, discusses the instant, using the metaphor of the 'glance of the eye' (*Øie-Blick*). Here *nothing* becomes visible. Seeing, in this sense, is not representing but receiving, and receiving what cannot finally be received. Heidegger discusses the *Augenblick* which is translated in *Being and Time* as the 'moment of vision'. He defines it as: 'That Present which is held in authentic temporality and which is *authentic* itself, we call the "moment of vision"' (1962: 387, 338).

I think anyone who is even vaguely familiar with this tradition would see the absurdity and what Kierkegaard would call the *daemonic* element, in Laing's bullying behaviour as to who was authentic and who was not. The point of the 'instant' is an event that is not analysable on the horizon of presence. The instant is to-come, prior to any expectation. Laing's hierarchical and teleological attitude to it, his tendency to classify some people as superior, as they are authentic, whereas most of the world is wretchedly inauthentic, is deeply antagonistic to the tradition to which he gave verbal support. I think his biography, *Mad to be Normal* (Mullan 1995), is rather sad as it reveals his tendency to view people in terms of their authenticity or lack of it, his obsessional tendency to search for it in people, and his disappointment at finding so few authentic ones. He never seemed to waver in his belief that he was authentic!

I disagree with Laing on the question of the relation between honesty and authenticity. Laing, as Mike rightly says, put great emphasis on honesty. This in itself is suspect. It is con-men that emphasize how honest they are. Telling people bluntly what he thought of them was seen as being honest and authentic. This is an appalling confusion. Some Christians may have genuine (authentic) deep feelings about the Bible. But does this entitle them to thrust it down the throats of other people? Laing was something of a missionary too, assuming that what was important to him must be important to all.

Are people interested in being enlightened by us? Should we go round trying to convert them to our beliefs? Can we be sure our beliefs are true? Most people judge others by their actions, not their beliefs. I remember one of my early confrontations with Laing: he asked me to help him look in second-hand bookshops for some of his valuable books, which had been sold by his first wife in a pique of anger. As we were looking, he mentioned something he thought was inauthentic about me. I was angry and told him he was as bad as the psychoanalysts he had trained with, who think they know what everyone 'really' means and what everyone is 'really' up to. I added that I did not put much weight on his opinions of people, for why had he married such a horrible woman who sold his books unasked? He never tried preaching authenticity to me again.

Laing was a great connoisseur about other people's inauthenticity. He was an extremely good storyteller and would have me in fits of laughter in describing and imitating famous psychiatrists and psychoanalysts he had met, how they would be anxious to meet him out of envy, be very polite and 'interested' but at the same time obviously hating him. I knew Charles Rycroft, Laing's analyst, quite well. After Laing's death he would talk to me about him. He thought Laing was an interesting case of male hysteria, which is rather rare. He added that he would have treated him rather differently now than he did when he was younger. Many would balk at the diagnosis of hysteria, but I think Rycroft had a good point. Hysterics, in his meaning of the term, have great difficulty in differentiating between what is a genuine feeling and what is not; in a classical case, whether they are 'really' in love or not. Mike writes that Laing could not stand people who pretended to be who they were not. But, as it has often been pointed out, people we can't stand are often too near our own weakness for us to understand.

I do not think Laing was helped by the general atmosphere amongst psychoanalysts and other therapists. There is a deep tendency, widely encouraged, to identify with the beliefs of a particular therapist, particularly a famous one. I have heard analysts proclaim that Freud, Jung, etc. were geniuses and anyone who questioned them either did not understand them or suffered from envy or some sort of repression. There was no attention to the logic of their theories, or empirical evidence as to their truth. Laing would often complain to me how he could say any rubbish he felt like and large audiences of psychologists and therapists would love it, the greater the rubbish the more authentic it showed him to be! No wonder the poor man took to drink. I asked him why he continued to prostitute himself like this. Once he said he needed the money, mostly he could give no answer. It was a stupid question; of course he could give no answer.

Authenticity is nothing to do with a particular state of mind or superiority or inferiority. It is ridiculous to point to someone and say: 'You are inauthentic and ought to be ashamed of yourself!' Unfortunately, in the

world of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, there were many who would take this as a gospel truth when pronounced by Laing, and so hang around him in the hope he would one day pronounce them as authentic. Authenticity is not something that is present-at-hand; it is not a matter of correctness.

Why Laing was so wobbly on this matter I cannot say. He was highly ambivalent about authenticity. He was a great admirer of Montaigne and knew Merleau-Ponty's essay on him (1966). Montaigne was deeply influenced by Ancient Greek Pyrrhonian scepticism and Laing called himself a 'provisional sceptic' (Mullan 1995: 310), which is quite a good name for Pyrrhonian scepticism, a radical scepticism that is sceptical about scepticism! Montaigne did not preach Pyrrhonian scepticism, which would have been totally alien to its spirit, but wrestled with it, restated it, and took his distance from it. He often talked about his own weaknesses and faults. For him, scepticism is a philosophy constantly in suspense, affirming no opinion or dogma other than that of perpetual enquiry. He was open to the infinite and indefinite play of the mind in relation to possible objects, the elusive flow of thoughts. He is usually taken to be an extraordinarily genuine, authentic man. As Merleau-Ponty noted, the words 'strange', 'absurd', 'monster', and 'miracle' recur most often when Montaigne speaks of man. The self is, in the end, 'the place of all obscurities, the mystery of all mysteries' (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 198). To him, as well as for Laing, what we need in therapy is 'not self-satisfied understanding, but a consciousness astonished at itself at the core of human existence' (p. 203).

PERHAPS AUTHENTICITY IS NOT POSSIBLE TO DEFINE

Michael Guy Thompson

I more or less agree with John Heaton's assessment of Laing's selective interpretation of Heidegger's multifaceted meditation on the relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity. As I noted earlier, Laing's application of how he depicted a more authentic way of relating was at times inconsistent, if not contradictory. That being said, it also seems to me that John, in his more 'correct' rendering of authenticity, is being a little rough on Laing in suggesting that he was self-serving in the manner that he used authenticity as a licence, for example, to behave any way he liked. I want to argue that Laing had more integrity than that. Moreover, though Nietzsche and Heidegger were seminal influences on Laing's conception of authenticity, he was also influenced by myriad other philosophers, including Buber, Kierkegaard, Scheler, Montaigne, Sartre, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and assorted Christian and Buddhist thinkers. At the end of the day Laing made his conception of authenticity very much his own with a unique and characteristic sensibility. This sensibility in turn guided Laing in his

contribution to the existential tradition and clinical application. Clearly psychotherapy, existential or otherwise, has an objective that philosophy does not. At its essence, it is a contract between two people, one of whom is being paid for the benefit of the other. The value of psychotherapy as well as psychoanalysis is couched in many ways, but what all treatments share in common is that something should change for the patient who has invested so much in it. If Laing (and other existential practitioners) believed the dynamic between authentic and inauthentic ways of relating was a useful way of couching the outcome of such endeavours, that seems no less justifiable a way of articulating it as any other. I don't believe Laing ever stated that people ought to be more authentic than they are; he was merely trying to bring their attention to the possible costs of not being aware of such matters.

As John pointed out in his illuminating critique of Heidegger's conception of authenticity, the concept resists definition and necessarily requires from each of us our own relationship with it; not only in terms of understanding it, but more importantly, in the manner that we live it. I don't believe that Laing ever claimed that authenticity was a kind of contest. If anything, he tried to be quite honest about his own faults and limitations, even indiscretions, in his characterization of his role in the therapeutic relationship. He even admitted to wondering whether the people he typically saw in therapy were more together than he was! This kind of honesty represented a conception of authenticity that Laing was quite good at, and was consistent with a sceptical frame of reference. If anything, he frequently went out of his way, in virtually every public lecture of his that I attended, to state that he did not consider himself to be any healthier, or more sane, and by implication, more authentic than the people he treated in his clinical practice. It seemed to me that the point he was making was that the capacity to *be who you are*, and to level with your patients accordingly, just might be the most therapeutic way of connecting with them, on a man to man basis, as he was fond of saying.

I agree with John that, for Heidegger, authenticity is a very ambiguous concept, but I'm not certain that it follows Laing did not grasp this, nor that Laing relentlessly focused on whether he and those around him were behaving authentically. Laing was perfectly aware of the inherent problem in determining what is or isn't authentic relating. And embracing the fact of one's very human station as an inherently inauthentic creature was a conclusion that Laing took for granted, both in himself and his patients. Laing's critique of his own critique concerning authentic modes of existing is itself a Heideggerian sensibility in its essence. Naturally, Laing was not going to address this question in the same manner as Heidegger. Laing was interested in situating his questioning in an explicitly clinical setting, one with which Heidegger was not concerned. That being said, I agree with John in suggesting that Laing's goal, unlike Heidegger's, was to raise one's

awareness to what it means to live one's life in an inherently inauthentic fashion and to use psychotherapy as a means to becoming more authentic wherever possible – and desirable. This doesn't, however, constitute a 'moralizing' perspective, but a practical one. Our lives are improved by virtue of becoming acquainted with this distinction. One is still free to choose what seems right, expedient, or even necessary, without invoking an ought in the equation. That a state of mind or being is desirable does not render it moralistic. It seems to me this is precisely the point of an existential-based way of approaching psychotherapy.

I know that my time is running out, and I wish we had more space to carry our conversation further. I want to close with a statement as to Laing's legacy and his contribution to the existential clinical tradition. Most people know Laing from his many publications, and others from the extraordinary attention paid to his clinical experiments at Kingsley Hall and the subsequent houses that continue to operate to this day. It seems to me that these houses epitomize a more authentic way of establishing a therapeutic relationship with those who are usually too vulnerable to fend for themselves, and who seek a safe haven from those determined to 'treat' them whether they want treatment or not. This levelling of the playing field between 'doctor' and 'patient' was as radical an idea in 1965, when Laing established Kingsley Hall, as it is now. However complicated and contradictory Laing's legacy may be, every one of us owes him more than we can ever repay. And the world, despite having drifted away from environmental explanations for the causes of psychotic disturbance, owes him a debt of gratitude for bringing the treatment of the mentally disturbed from the back wards of mental hospitals onto the front covers of newspapers and magazines where they have remained ever since. Despite his faults and, at times, disgraceful behaviour, he was also, as his old friend Rollo May once remarked, 'on the side of the angels'. He persuaded an entire generation, including myself, to put our money where our mouth is and enter the cruel fray of the mental health establishment – an oxymoron if there ever was one, and play a role in helping those who are too vulnerable to help themselves. And for that we should be eternally grateful.

AUTHENTICITY AND GREEK CYNICISM

John M. Heaton

Perhaps the crucial remark which shows the difference between Mike Thompson and myself is: 'That a state of mind or being is desirable does not render it moralistic. It seems to me this is precisely the point of an existential-based way of approaching psychotherapy' (p. 000). There is a crucial difference between a state of mind and a state of being. A state of mind is a matter for psychology. A state of being is radically different, this

is studied by philosophy. From Aristotle to Heidegger it has been pointed out that the nature of being is the central problem for philosophy. To confuse the two is to fall into psychologism, which unfortunately many existential therapists do.

Let me illustrate this in the case of authenticity. A famous incident of Laing's occurred in Chicago (A. Laing 1997: 169). He was being shown round a mental hospital and came across a young girl, diagnosed as schizophrenic, who was naked and rocking herself, refusing to speak to anyone, in a corner of her room. He immediately undressed, went into her room, and sat beside the girl. Soon she started to speak to him, a human contact had been made. Now I would say this was an authentic act on Laing's part. Why? Because it worked – the girl was obviously in a state of despair and he managed to make human contact with her which is a difficult thing to do. Furthermore, to see that it was so, we do not need to look into either the girl's mind or Laing's – their state of mind is indifferent to us. This type of act was characteristic of Laing.

Now what about his 'disgraceful' behaviour, many incidents of which were reported by his son (A. Laing 1997), and by Mike in his treatment of Carl Rogers? Was that authentic? I would say no, because he was not properly attuned (*gestimmt*) to the people he was with, and so to himself, at the time. The people involved were not interested in being 'enlightened' by Laing, so felt he was merely being rude or abusive. Note that this judgement is not about Laing's state of mind but about the effectiveness of his actions.

Laing admired Nietzsche greatly. Nietzsche thought that Cynic scepticism is a necessary step to any new order. He wrote: 'The modern Diogenes – Before one seeks a human being, one must have found a lantern. Will it have to be the lantern of the Cynic?'; 'The highest one can reach on earth is Cynicism' (both quoted in Desmond 2008: 231–232) Much of Laing's writing (especially Laing 1967) and behaviour are reminiscent of the Cynics.

The ancient Cynics were notorious for outrageous behaviour, especially satire on the vanity of civilization. Thus Diogenes, a famous cynic, one day went out into the marketplace at noon with a lighted lantern, 'seeking a human being' (Desmond 2008: 21). This was a quote that Laing liked. Once Diogenes was visited by Alexander the Great, who found him lolling in the sun. The king offered him his choice of gifts. Diogenes replied dismissively: 'Stand out of my sun' (Desmond 2008: 2). Diogenes once did not behave well at a dinner and the guests called him a dog, so he lifted up his leg like a dog and urinated on them (p. 88).

There are many stories of Cynics' behaviour. They would have sex and masturbate in public, make rude and witty jokes, have fantastical humour and public antics, and satire of rich elites. Was this authentic? Yes, if it was timed appropriately and they were attuned to people. Cynicism flourished in the Greek and Roman world from about the fourth century BC until

about 529 AD when the Christians destroyed all pagan religion. Cynics were to be seen in the city streets, country roads, and would associate mostly with ordinary people but at times with kings and even the Roman emperor himself. They were mostly wanderers, with almost no possessions, who made it their business to chastise people for their greed, vanity, and lack of courage. Their aim was to live as close to nature as possible, to be self-sufficient and free.

When we judge authenticity we are not concerned with the state of mind of the participants but with their actions and their attunement to others. This is a matter of judgement, not definition or analysis of the mind. Thus many saw the actions of the Cynics as just crazy. Others were deeply impressed. The Cynics often changed people's lives.

Lastly I want to emphasize the relation between authenticity and integrity. Nietzsche sought to show that we each have a perspective on the world, that the world for us is the horizon of interpretive meaning within which judgements can be true or false. It is wrong to imagine we can dissociate from the world and judge it impartially – a position that many psychiatrists and psychoanalysts take. To use Kierkegaard's terms, the ethicist lacks 'subjective truth'; he imagines he can be a universal spectator of himself and others and so judge actions from a universalist point of view, what is now called a 'view from nowhere'. So he lacks integrity, he is estranged from his being in the world. Laing, however he expressed himself, was Laing.

Notes

- 1 See Thompson (2004, 2006) for a detailed examination of both Nietzsche's and Heidegger's respective views on authenticity.
- 2 See Sartre (1981) for a thorough discussion of bad faith and its relationship to psychotherapy.
- 3 See Thompson (1997) for a description of how a typical post-Kingsley Hall Philadelphia Association household functioned in its adherence to Laing's treatment philosophy; I lived in a house of this kind, at Portland Road, for four years, from 1973 to 1977.

References

- Clay, J. (1996) *R. D. Laing: A Divided Self*, London: Sceptre Books.
- Desmond, W. (2008) *Cynics*, Stocksfield: Acumen Press.
- Heaton, J. M. (2000) 'On R. D. Laing: style, sorcery, alienation', *Psychoanalytic Review*, 87 (4).
- Heidegger, M. (1962 [1927]) *Being and Time*, trans. J. R. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heidegger, M. (1972 [1969]) 'My way to phenomenology', trans. J. Stambaugh, in M. Heidegger, *On Time and Being*, New York: Harper and Row.

- Heidegger, M. (2006 [1997]) *Mindfulness*, trans. P. Emad and T. Kilarity, London and New York: Continuum.
- Kierkegaard, S. (1956 [1847]) *Purity Of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, trans. D. Steere, New York: Harper and Row.
- Laing, A. (1997) *R. D. Laing A Life*, London: HarperCollins.
- Laing, A. (1960) *The Divided Self*, London: Tavistock Books.
- Laing, A. (1961/1969) *Self and Others*, New York and London: Penguin Books.
- Laing, A. (1967) *The Politics of Experience*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Laing, A. (1970) *Knots*, London: Tavistock Books.
- Laing, A. (1971) *The Politics of the Family*, London: Tavistock Books.
- Laing, R. D. and Esterson, A. (1964) *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, London: Tavistock Books.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964 [1960]) 'Reading Montaigne', trans. R. McCleary, in M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Mullan, B. (1995) *Mad to be Normal: Conversations with R. D. Laing*, London: Free Association Books.
- Mullan, B. (ed.) (1997) *R. D. Laing: Creative Destroyer*, London: Cassell.
- Nietzsche, F. (2006) *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. A. Del Caro, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Proclus (1987) *Commentary on Plato's' Parmenides*, trans. G. R. Morrow and J. M. Dillon, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1981 [1943]) *Existential Psychoanalysis*, trans. H. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library.
- Staehler, T. (2008) 'Unambiguous calling? Authenticity and ethics in Heidegger's *Being and Time*', *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, 39: 293–313.
- Thompson, M. G. (1997) 'The fidelity to experience in R. D. Laing's treatment philosophy', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 33 (4).
- Thompson, M. G. (2004) 'Postmodernism and psychoanalysis: a Heideggerian critique of postmodern malaise and the question of authenticity', in J. Reppen, M. Schulman and J. Tucker (eds.) *Way Beyond Freud: Postmodern Psychoanalysis Evaluated*, London: Open Gate Press.
- Thompson, M. G. (2006) 'Vicissitudes of authenticity in the psychoanalytic situation', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 42 (2).
- Winnicott, D. W. (1976 [1960]) 'Ego distortion in terms of true and false self', in D. W. Winnicott *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, London: Hogarth Press.

