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'The Voice of Experience' by R.D. Laing<sup>1</sup>

by

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So we move from 'The Politics of Experience' to "The Voice of Experience" and Laing's most recent contribution to the field of "experience, science and psychiatry". Just whose voice Laing is expressing is not always clear; is it the voice of the unborn infant, is it the voice of someone trapped in experiences incomprehensible to the rest of society or is it the voice of Laing himself? In reading the text it seems that Laing's voice is the voice that indeed emerges most strongly.

In "The Voice of Experience" Laing appears to be at his most esoteric in exploring an area seemingly somewhat far removed from his previous focus on the inner and interpersonal experience<sup>3</sup> of madness or schizophrenia in particular. The text again attacks the so-called objectivity of scientific methodology particularly in investigating human experience, but then moves into the unexpected domain of embryology, perinatal experience and mythology. As Laing's chapter "Embryologems, Psychologems, Mythologems" indicates, the substance of the text is concerned with establishing links between these three areas, links which may serve to elucidate case material, dreams and people's lived experiences and reserve to elucidate case material, dreams and people's lived experiences and

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<sup>1</sup>Harmondsworth : Penguin Books Ltd, 1983.

relationships. However, the balance of the text is devoted to exploring Laing's proposition that pre-and perinatal experience has a hitherto unrecognized effect on personal and social development without really elucidating the implications of the relationship for psychiatric practice. One has the sense that Laing has moved away from an intense, felt commitment to making comprehensible the experience of so-called psychotic persons, into something of a "head trip". It is true that this work challenges many of the assumptions of contemporary science, psychology and psychiatry but the implications for practice are lacking or mystified. It seems that Laing has become something of a mystic and in so doing has lost the critical potency of some of his earlier writings.

Laing's recent work is fascinating and certainly innovative. As one reads through the text it seems that some of the slow, dreamlike sometimes tortuous experience of conception, intra-uterine development and birth is mirrored in the development of the text. There are points at which Laing becomes cogent and precise but generally there is a somewhat meandering, unfolding sequence of ideas. As is true of most previous texts Laing leaves the reader to make her own conclusions or connections.

Drawing from the work of anthropologists, scientists, gynaecologists, poets, philosophers, psychiatrists, psychologists, and others, Laing weaves various threads of ideas into a central theme centering around human experience of conception implantation, intrauterine growth, birth and the severance from the placenta.



In conjunction, Laing presents excerpts of case material illustrating that these supposedly pre-cognitive experiences are expressed symbolically in a number of experiences reported by clients. Ultimately Laing seems to be arguing that much of the basis for our normal schizoid contemporary Western existence stems from our attempts to deal with the impact of conception and birthing experiences. His concluding argument reads:

"The cut-off is done. You don't know you've done it after you have, since the cut-off entails not seeing yourself make the cut-off."

The steps consists in not knowing one has taken one step into ignorance. The step consists in not knowing one has taken one step into ignorance. The cut-off cannot be seen by the cut-off mind. After this type of cut-off, the person does not know he is cut off. He regards it as an insult, were it not ridiculous, if anyone suggests he is. He may however attach and destroy anyone who is not cut off like him, who remembers having forgotten, or who merely speculates that he might have nor must have. We recognize here the achievement of the usual sort of normal ego boundary." (Laing, 1982, pp 163 and 164).

In his usual paradoxical style Laing offers this final comment on contemporary "adjustment".

The sequence of the "The Voice of Experience" can be seen to parallel the sequence of Laing's writing to some extent. In the initial chapter Laing adopts a phenomenological critique of so-called 'objective' science. Although many readers of this text

will be familiar with some of these arguments against a positivist approach to human experience, Laing phrases much of his argument in new and cogent language.

"The same scientific look can be applied to anything and everything from stars to atoms, from microbes to human beings. When applied to ourselves it entails more than the elimination of some or all of experience and sense data. While it is operative within itself, it has to cancel the live presense of the other person. To look at the other as an object is not only to change the person to a thing but, by the same token, to cut off, while one is so looking, any personal relation between oneself and the other." (ibid, pp 16 and 17); and,

"It is something of a paradox that non-objective acts create activity. That the 'objective' world comes into view only when we are objective. Nothing is more subjective than objectivity blind to its subjectivity." (ibid, p 17).

Laing does not stop short at arguing against the supremacy and limitations of an 'objective scientific' investigation of human experience, but as a precursor to his later propositions goes further to argue that such an approach leaves humanity devoid of many of the magical, metaphysical, emotional and transcendent aspects of life. Jacques Monod believes that the refusal of objective science to pander to man's nostalgia for the days of meaning before it came along accounts for so much of the hostility towards it. This hostility stems, he thinks, from a refusal to accept its 'essential message'. If we accept this message in its full significance,

"... man must at last walk out of his millenary dream and discover his total solitude, his fundamental isolation." (Monod, 1974, in (Laing, 1982, p 23).

Laing's critique of the objective scientific method is a preface to



the second, more speculative, body of the text, an area which he maintains exists unexplored because of the adherence to positivist methodology.

The third chapter expresses Laing's present view of psychiatry. From Laing's perspective little has changed since his earlier references (1959, 1961, 1964, 1967) criticisms of the psychiatric profession. In Laing's view psychiatry remains dominated by the objective scientific method limiting its conceptualization and intervention to those aspects of experience that are intelligible to this perspective.

"Biology as such itself is no more than a pretext to objective psychiatry. It presents itself as objective, or is objective only in so far as it is useful to do so or be so, for the unobjective end of controlling undesired experience and conduct. Objective psychiatry is an unobjective attempt to control largely non-objective events by objective means". (Laing, 1982, pp 40 and 41).

Practising psychiatrists continue to operate as if medical descriptions of pathology literal rather than metaphorical approaches to 'abnormal behaviour'.

"What are all these metaphorical psychiatrists doing literally treating metaphorical diseases?...  
"It is too easy for him or her to be bemused by his own rhetoric, so that he comes to regard his diagnosis as an explanation, rather than a social strategy, or possibly, a speculative hypothesis. When this happens the truth is eclipsed by what is supposed to illuminate it....  
It is unintelligible, therefore it is uncanny, therefore it is psychotic because it is uncanny because it is psychotic because it is unintelligible." (ibid, p 48).

In this respect Laing is as vociferous as ever in his challenge to practising psychiatry, however this is not the focus of this text. This comment on the psychiatric profession is also a preface to the

focus on perinatal and birth experiences. Adhering to the 'scientific' medical paradigm psychiatry cannot encompass the speculative and metaphysical aspects of human experience that Laing presents, and therefore the possible impact of these early experiences on the development of pathology remains unexplored. The practice of psychiatry does not really come under attack but rather some of its conceptual limitations. In this sense "The Voice of Experience" could be said to fall into Laing's third period of thought (Cf. Heather, 1976) following in the vein of "The Politics of Experience".

The substance of "The Voice of Experience" is an amalgam of different scientific 'facts', anecdotes, poems, philosophical premises and case material which serve to put forward Laing's speculating investigation into pre-cognitive experience. Not only orthodox science and psychiatry come under attack by implication but psychoanalytic dream interpretation is directly questioned by Laing (Cf. 141-146). However it appears that the critiques he levels at the analysts i.e. of forcing material into a preconceived framework. Laing asks the reader to make tangential and sometimes highly subjective connections in order to follow his train of thought. One is left wondering whether one has entirely understood what he is trying to convey or whether Laing's own presentation of the subject is deliberately mystified. This is certainly a journey into inner space rather than an exposure of social or economic forces affecting human experience. Towards the beginning of the text Laing offers the purpose of the



book as the following:

"A judge within us may be prepared to listen to the claims on our credulity, both from the testimony of scientific reason and from our unscientific experience, even though each may pay no heed to other. This book is addressed to such a judge in each of us. The discord, the collision, is not only between different theoretical abstractions, espoused by different people. The conflict is also within us, especially within scientists, in so far as they are human." (Laing, 1982, p 27).

Such conflicting appraisals certainly surfaced in my reading of the test as is reflected in this review. However, I encourage you to engage your own inner judge.

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