The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness

Tavistock 1960
Pelican Books 1965
Penguin 1967

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Summary

R.D. Laing's first book, _The Divided Self_, was published in 1960. At the time of its publication, Laing was merely 28 years old, and had just completed his psychoanalytic training. Numerous publishers had rejected earlier drafts of the manuscript, and initial sales were disappointing - only 1,600 copies in hardback. But by 1989, the year of his death, The Divided Self sold 700,000 copies in England alone, and has since been translated into more than thirty languages.

As its enormous popularity indicates, _The Divided Self_ was not a book for specialists. On the contrary, it attempted to make madness and the process of going insane intelligible to ordinary people. In contrast to the prevailing psychiatric approach, which enumerates the "signs and symptoms" of schizophrenia from the perspective of a detached outsider, Laing sought to understand these distressed and distressing states of mind from the inside out. He rejected the terminology of psychoanalysis and behaviorism as unsuitable to this end, because they were too burdened and to deeply infused with dubious theoretical preconceptions. Instead, to accomplish his task, he opted for the descriptive and hermeneutic approach of existential-phenomenology, and dwelt at length on memorable "case histories" known to posterity as John, Peter, Rose, Julie (and others). Laing noted that these patients suffered from a radical fear of "authentic self-disclosure". Why was this prospect so threatening to them?

In the process of working with these patients, Laing carefully distilled the underlying processes that fosters the emergence of schizoid and psychotic states of mind, introducing the notion of 'ontological insecurity'. Ontological insecurity begins in childhood, or even earlier, in infancy, due to an absence of bonding and reciprocity between a mother and her new born
child. In such cases, the mother does not experience, affirm or respond to the infant's genuine needs and feelings, and tries to mold the infant's behavior and experience to meet her own needs and expectations. As a result, the infant is only affirmed by the mother (or parent) when and if its adopts a "false self". If this pattern persists, the child grows up, in a certain sense, without ever really being seen by others, because of how its identity is defined by them as good, compliant, etc. Thus, no matter how "good" or accomplished the child is, outwardly, it remains haunted by feelings of being phony, unreal, worthless, empty, and disconnected from others - feelings which feed the fear of authentic self-disclosure.

In such circumstances, said Laing, the child lacks the sense of being completely alive and having a genuine self, or feels that its existence is precarious, and contingent on the presence of the other person. In Laing's terminology, it becomes "schizoid". In due course, the child's "false self" - or its "being for others" - becomes radically detached from the person's "real self", or "being for himself", which is never genuinely experienced or addressed by others. The tragic dilemma of the divided self is that the more isolated the "real self" becomes, the less equipped it is to contend with reality and ordinary developmental processes. Moreover, the "false self" becomes increasingly identified with the (publicly observable) body, and the real self with the person's (invisible) mind. As mind and body become more split, the "real self" becomes more volatile, disembodyed, more invested, and eventually lost, in phantasy.

Meanwhile, as the real self becomes more precarious and embattled, the "false self" becomes an almost autonomous entity, so polished, automatic and alien to what the schizoid person experiences inwardly that it threatens to overwhelm or annihilate the "real self" unless desperate (psychotic) measures are taken. Eventually, the intense self-loathing occasioned by years of accommodating and/or deceiving others demands and expectations then leads to the total repudiation of the "false self". But the "real self" having been radically disconnected from others, cannot express itself in a coherent fashion. Hence the "signs and symptoms" of psychosis.

In additional to a repudiation of the "false self", psychotic behavior often represents the patient's way of responding to one of three kinds of anxiety that are produced by the widening chasm between the "real" and the "false" selves: the fear of engulfment, the fear of implosion, and the fear of petrification. The fear of engulfment is the fear of losing one's identity, of absorption in the other, or of being actively taken over by someone else's mind. The fear of implosion is a product of inner emptiness, a sense of being brittle; the fear of having annihilation when the false self disintegrates. The fear of petrification is the fear of objectification in the eyes of the other, the idea being that another person's gaze or regard can rob you of your own subjectivity, and turn you into a thing. To defend against this eventuality, the
person frequently treats others like objects instead. But whether the person is responding to one or more of these fears, the final result is much the same - a concerted flight from the communal and corporeal dimensions of human existence.

In other words, Laing's initial understanding of psychosis was that it was a tragically misguided attempt to live an authentic life, but to live it in ways that are not actually given to human beings, i.e. radically disconnected from others, and from one's own body. Understanding and engaging schizoid and psychotic patients therapeutically is not possible unless the therapist is capable of 1) bracketing many of their own theoretical preconceptions, and 2) entering empathically into the patient's frame of reference. This latter requirement is not possible unless the therapist is aware of his or her own "psychotic potential".

*The Divided Self* is possibly Laing's best book, and certainly the easiest to read. There is a coherent narrative structure, the prose style is vivid and clear, and the case history material illustrates his theoretical arguments beautifully throughout the book.

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