

Existential Knots: Laing's Anti-psychiatry and Kierkegaard's Existentialism.

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I. Despair and Schizophrenia.

The *Divided Self* has a clear emphasis upon the fact that in order to understand schizophrenia it is necessary to understand *despair*, because, actually, a schizophrenic is *in* despair. Anxiety and despair are the sins of our soul, but they can be healed. Laing knew of this position very well as he included it into his schizophrenic accounts. The search for the meaning of life and the searching for other possibilities and religions is characteristic within the human realm of unhappiness. We are never content—no matter what. Mental illness is, of course, a realm in which happiness and ignorance emerge with a stronger force, and it is this *impetus* that is the only exit we have for correcting further emotional problems. These emotional problems have an origin, an “original sin” which bring us to feel we are sinners, and being sinners we stay under dispiritidness: a lack of spirit or energy to success and to be happy. To be gloomy is to be ignorant, this pairing is the most important aspect within the philosophy of Laing. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard and the british psychiatrist Laing have many similarities with the Buddhist philosophy, if we do keep in mind the fact that Buddhism is a research path that examines primarily the issue of suffering and unhappiness. It is necessary to include here the concept of searching and meaning in Kierkegaard and Laing, my thesis is that the searching of Kierkegaard is quite Buddhist as well as Christian in itself. In a socratic context, to seek is to know yourself, and only in seeking will you find yourself. Searching is the beginning of happiness. For Laing and for Kierkegaard, to know yourself was true searching. The distinguishment is that as it has been bequeathed to us, for Socrates the concept of forgiveness had no place—or if it did it is not very definite. The writings of Laing appeals to eastern philosophies, especially because he felt that love and necessity covered the realm of human relations and satisfactions. Buddhism gave him the necessary clue: the enemy of love is hate, but to love, it is necessary to learn *how* to love; and to learn *how* to love, it is of pivotal essence to learn to forgive. One will not be able to love if beforehand he/she is not able to *forgive*, because love has implicit the possibility of forgiving, and if this possibility is not fulfilled, only then the illness—mental or not—will emerge by itself with a physical vitality. This ‘physical vitality’ is first heard by our own spirit, and only is “digested” by the unconscious, which makes it very hard to be heard. Thus is the origin of the sentence “listen to your heart,” where ‘heart’ means ‘essence’—your inward area of infinity. In a kierkegaardian sense one cannot be a true Christian unless he/she learns to listen and to improve that inwardness. Additionally, the true Christian has to be a master in the art of cleaning the inwardness. Now, we can say clearly that to be a *good* Christian is the greatest task a man can achieve in *this* life. In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard talks very eloquently about the association between sin and despair. Yet, *it is not a sickness unto death*. However, Laing saw that this, in fact, was and had been a sickness unto death. Where is the difference? First of all, suicide and despair are, of course, a perfect couple. Second of all, the circumstances wherein Kierkegaard analyzed the concept of despair, were superficially different from those of

Laing. For Laing, despair was a human condition which essentially was marked by a lack of love from others. Indeed, the society (especially our frozen society) does not contemplate the possibility of having a group of beings different from the whole. Thus the society expels them under the *flagellums* of hatred and alienation. Plainly, the essence of both philosophers is the same; however Laing is more social—more “political” as its scope only looks toward the acceptance of *eccentricity* (“mental illness”) as main factor. Kierkegaard is pathetically more “boring.” His scope rambles on to *infinity*, where he analyzes the human condition in terms of despair, anxiety, fear, trembling, dread, irony, etc.

If we were to do a comparison by metaphor, my choice would be as follows: imagine that the perspective of Laing as well as that of Kierkegaard are condos. In the laingian work the author and architect shows you his house, which is his ‘view, thought, perspective and philosophy.’ Laing enjoys showing the hall, the kitchen, the fire place, the furniture, even the garden with the ducks in it. Laing talks about the environment, about the furniture, about the ducks and even about the heaven and clouds as a whole. Always, Laing has ‘something- behind-something,’ which is a very important point to consider and to understand. This, certainly gives an extraordinary field of vision and attractiveness to his work, but in essence even he himself had to go to Sri Lanka, to a Buddhist monastery in order to grasp it! Laing understood that his work, such as the whole *medicus philosophicus* work, is filled up with words built on words. We can enjoy, as we actually do, the words; but we need to grasp the essence of the *wordiness*. To supplement, *Logos* (word) and *Psyche* (spirit) go internally linked. In a kierkegaardian sense (and here is his influence in Laing) mankind neither listen to its spirit nor to its word; therefore, how are we to be aware about the conjunction? Behind all stays God, and this God is *Myself*. Mankind has to walk a long way in order to catch this truth. Laing understood with mastery that men-women are more important by themselves than a piece of paper full of theories and words: words as mere calligraphy. The answer to the question of why Laing left the areas of writing and researching implicit in *The Divided Self*, for instance, is that he *saw* that *conjunction* between man and divinity, between love and soul. Then and thereafter Laing intensified the value of love within the human soul. Yet, Laing continued in the path of relating society-politics and mental illness. This “wrestling” is typical even in his last works. Typical and justifiable.

The Kierkegaard condominium is beautiful but boring, boring but unequivocal. Remember Laing’s house had everything, behind everything, we could find ‘another-something’. For Kierkegaard visibility is quite different. Behind his house there is *nothing*. No garden, no ducks, no flowers, not even furniture or heaven. Just the structure. What can we find behind his house? Although, we *could* find the most important fact that lies within the human and animal condition, behind Kierkegaard’s house there is an *abyss*. If God made world in seven days, man makes *this abyss* as soon as he/she is born. We feed this abyss, we get the appropriate food for it, and of course, we are proud of having it!:

“The light is among you still, but not for long. Go on your way while you have the light, so that darkness many not overtake you. He who journeys in the dark does not know where he is going. While you have the light, trust to the light, so that you may become men of light.” (John 12: 35-36)

Evidently, this is a dark abyss with a name: *Ignorance*. It is our foe, yet it also functions as our best friend. This friendship gives us the means to overcome it, and from the conquest we *shall find* that it was not an *illness unto death*. Interestingly, ignorance has a cursive role in the Bible. Jesus talks about it in these terms:

“There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now. However, when he comes who is the Spirit of truth, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but will tell only what he hears; and he will make known to you the things that are coming.” (John 16: 12-13)

The searching of Laing was in those terms. When Laing left London for Sri Lanka he went to try to find himself, to find himself in order to find the essence of the human mind. For this reason I see Laing very close to Kierkegaard. The Christianity in Kierkegaard is the last link that a man can grasp, behind which is nothing. There is not any parallel to the concept of “nothingness” in Mahayana Buddhism. The “nothing” in Kierkegaard means: *sadness*, such as that which he refers to as *wretchedness*. This *wretchedness* is what makes us human, maybe in a nietzschean sense *too human*. This is the quality of the difference between God and man: we are a target for unhappiness. To overcome this *wretchedness* is to become GOD. Hence, as Kierkegaard points out here, is the greatest difference between Christendom and Paganism. In the pagan world, the man become God, but in Christendom God become man. The following is the reason why Jesus was so important to Kierkegaard: Jesus being God reduced himself to the most insignificant being where poorness, illness, and hunger, instead of overcoming him, he overcame them. The words of St. Paul the apostle have great power, *“being nothing I found everything”*. In his teaching is included the most inner value of our existence. The teaching shows us that we are *spiritual beings*—that our body is only a *container* that transports our *spirits*.

Laing shared this vision of existentialism with Kierkegaard. Yet, Buddhism was the corner stone upon which Laing applied his own life. The concept of mind and spirit within the Buddhist sects, and the way how they handle the *human existence* attracted the mature Laing. Actually, those Buddhist concepts are beautiful examples of the “Christian existence.” On the other hand, those such as Rollo May¹ have highlighted the “existential psychiatry...identified with Zen Buddhism” is a “negative trend.” In this sense, Buddhism has been used for business purpose directed toward psychotherapy. Now, the confusion is obvious, since none can completely understand many points within psyche and psychoanalysis. This confusion between Buddhism and psychiatry is mixed by people who actually do not understand the reality of Buddhism. Although I do agree with May, on the other hand, I disagree in the fact that many people handle the human mind from a Buddhist perspective and this could be beneficial in lay terms. Generally speaking, Christendom is more difficult to grasp than Buddhism. The Buddhist give more examples, are more practical and the essence is applicable for everyone, which is why Buddhism has had a great acceptance in the Western world. Yet, Christianity in its essence is more occult, and its perspectives are even more diffuse. The way Kierkegaard handled the Christian mind is not only superior, but also unique. The view of Laing on human existence is a Christian view with an emphasis in the oriental concept of mind and spirit. On the other hand, this problem is seen by Laing from a psycho-somatic view, in which mind is the chief over the body. Unfortunately, Christianity does not offer us the clarity that Buddhism does: the concept of mind and its direct influence in our body. But all this has been partially because of the inquisitorial and political-subversive power of Church—any of them and anywhere.

I am inclined to believe that Kierkegaard was aware of the relationship between mind and illness, and even that illness is produced by ignorance and lack of *giving love*. So, when a individual does not give love, being selfish in any way, his life accumulates, such as has been called in Buddhism, *negative karma*, and this produces

¹ Rollo May, in *Psychoanalysis and Existential Philosophy*, Ed. H.M Ruitenbeck. E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. New York: 1962; pg. 179.

the unbalanced way of living. Kierkegaard does not use, of course, such a term, but he explains in his complete works the concept of it—for instance in his approaches to “anxiety.” Consequently, if a person is selfish, if a person is not content with his/her own life and has doubts about it, anxiety, dread, fear and trembling, even dizziness will eventually all appear. All this is what *makes us human, too human*. It is toward and through our humanity how we do find our redemption. When Ronald Laing says that for grasping schizophrenia it is necessary first to understand *despair*, he is in some sense being conscious of the importance of the work of Kierkegaard. Schizophrenia is a “mental illness” in the manner that medical science catalogues it. Existentially and philosophically schizophrenia is a “spiritual illness”. As Kierkegaard said, *despair is a illness of the spirit*. The spirit being the “driver” of this illness, the body being the “transportation.” The spirit being that which suffers this illness, it *is* the spirit *what* has to defeat it. You will make yourself stronger if you defeat it, but in order for this to happen, you need to know yourself. To know yourself is to know your own innermost sins, because sin *is* despair. In a Socratic way, the origin is *ignorance*:

“The intellectuality of the Greeks was too happy, too naive, too esthetic, too ironic, too witty -too sinful—to grasp that anyone could knowingly not do the good, or knowingly, knowing what is right, do wrong.”²

It is this ignorance that Laing tried to overcome in his travel to India. His interest in Buddhism and Asian philosophy was rooted in his thirst for truth—a search for God or perhaps, a search for himself. After his travel Laing’s thought changed considerably. Laing did not want to have any psychiatric commitment to the established way of nurturing and treating mental illness. This deeply affected his view about mind and man. In his first works, what really interested Laing was the pathological individual. After completing his travel to India, what really *then* interested him was the “normal” individual. For Kierkegaard, everyone was ill, deeply ill—fearing death and suffering existential anxiety and dizziness. There is no split in the kierkegaardian works, from which we can deduce that mental illness was his main interest. His main interest was redemption, but the way to get it was implemented explaining many things that can be extremely important to Psychiatry. The first works of Laing, such as *The Divided Self*, reflect a priority of interest in the “pathological mind.”

For Kierkegaard, everyone was ill. For Laing, the difference between a mentally ill and a normal person was given by the concept of *ontological security*. To be ontologically secure is to have *autonomy*. That is to say, the normal individual can face the pathetic and distressing situations daily life presents, and they will be able to bear it. The pathologically ill individual is more sensitive, more fragile. In Kierkegaard, this fragility is an inner quality of human being. The difference between the mad and the normal person is that the normal does not know yet about his/her despair, that is, about his/her *hidden illness*. I do understand this significant difference was more clearly maintained by Laing after his travel. Considering that the normal individual is only “normal” because he/she does not know yet about his/her illness, the schizophrenic becomes a kind of “chosen” person with the possibility for illumination. This illumination has its parallel in the Christian salvation, in the concept of redemption. Now, keeping in mind that the redemption in the context of mental illness is given by the spirit, in so much as the spirit is the *sick entity*. As Sheldon Kopp marked:

² Soren Kierkegaard: *The Sickness Unto Death*. Princeton University Press. Princeton: 1983; pg.90.

“Part of the reason that patients insist that I have already attained salvation is that if it were otherwise, how could I save them? Certainly at the beginning of treatment, they do not imagine for a moment that each of us must save himself.”³

Schizophrenia is a result of an *over-sensitive-mind*, the person feels differently from people. Under normal circumstances, a person can tolerate the anguish, the misfortunes that occur in life. A schizophrenic is schizophrenic precisely because he/she experiences *that which* others can not feel. It is not any kind of mystical feeling, it is just a type of inward feelings that *in* normal people does not occur. This *macro-sensitivity* was of special interest for Laing—macro-sensitivity is the producer of the *ontological insecurity*. Laing says:

“When a person is secure in his own being, they (anxieties) do not arise with anything like the same force or persistence, since there is no occasion for them to arise and persist in this way...The question that one must now attempt to answer is what form of relation with himself is developed by the ontologically insecure person...some such a persons do not seem to have a sense of that basic unity which can abide through the most intense conflicts with oneself, but rather to have come to experience themselves as primarily split into a mind and a body. Usually they feel most closely identified with the ‘mind’.”⁴

After having read this passage it would seem as though if the rest of the world were normal, with a strong being and spirit, with a tight responsibility; but, on the other hand, the psychotic individual seems to be a weakly spiritual person different from the rest of the world because of his/her weakness. I think Laing was aware about this incongruence and he tried to work out its possible consequences. In fact, the normal person and the schizophrenic are the same, with the slight difference that schizophrenic is *demonstrating* what others have a hard time to show. The real mystery of schizophrenia and psychosis is not that they have a unfundamented “genetic origin”, its mystery is not that they say and do many interesting things which offer some of them the possibility of a genius. The real mystery of schizophrenia and psychosis is that they *show* this illness, and the whole population, which is supposed to be “normal,” retain the *spiritual illness* so deeply that it *looks as though* it is healthy. Indeed, normal people have a “perfect” notion of everything, they can feel their own self and body, the different parts on it. The posses what Ronald Laing has called *embodied self*. The schizophrenic person is different in the sense that he/she does not have those kind of feelings. Schizophrenia has many weird sensations and feelings, and even the body looks like a foreign object without essence. The schizophrenic feels him/herself trapped *into a body*. The anxiety can not be worse. In consequence, the schizophrenic has to feel him/herself as “detached” from the body, he/she needs the *freedom* of being *independent* of the body. Laing explains it in this way:

“Of such a person one might say that ‘he’ has never become quite incarnate and he may speak of himself as more or less unembodied...It is possible to suggest from another point of view that the individual should try to disentangle himself from his body and thereby achieve a desired state of discarnate spirituality.”⁵

It is not unusual that we find in schizophrenia a series of mystical feelings where the schizophrenic says to be a god or even sometimes God or Jesus. The

³ Sheldon Kopp: *If you see the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!* Anchor Books, 1976; pg.133.

⁴ Laing, 1990; pg. 65.

⁵ Laing, 1990; pg.66.

similarity between shamanism trances and schizophrenia breakdown has been compared in order to better understand the internal mechanism of this “illness.” In fact, the LSD sessions that Ronald Laing held in the sixties was precisely in order to better comprehend the role of schizophrenia within the mind. When someone takes LSD, then he/she may go into a kind of feeling, which imitates, sometimes, the schizophrenic or psychotic breakdown. The emotions that can be felt by the person who takes LSD, are the “bad trip,” and the hope of Psychiatry was to bring about some advances about this mental illness. Unfortunately, it continues being a mystery.

Schizophrenia being a mental illness with a straight and strong underlying of despair and anxiety, Laing himself realized the axial position of Kierkegaard *theology*. As I said before, the kierkegaardian concept of the “mentally ill” is what we think as a “normal person.” Kierkegaard does not make a decisive distinguishment between despair in “mental illness” and despair in the “normal mind.” Once again, for Kierkegaard, everyone is holding an amount of despair. The psychiatric point should be *why* that difference of *exteriority* of the illness between schizophrenics and normal persons exists. And the key is *not* inside the genes! But inside the *spirit*. A good explanation is given directly by Laing in *The Divided Self* as he explained with kierkegaardian words that:

“Such a self cherishes certain ideals...Whereas all the exchanges, with the other may be fraught with pretence, equivocation, hypocrisy...In this, the self attempts to become ‘a relationship which relates itself to itself to the exclusion of everything and anything.’”⁶

In the footnote, Laing stated that the kierkegaardian expression had in his text “quite different connotations.” The connotation is that Laing is trying to use the “term” in a clinical sense, in a sense applied to mental pathology. In fact, Laing *here* did not see that the kierkegaardian use of the term *‘the relation relates itself to itself’* must not be directed to abnormal people, among other reasons because *we are all abnormal*. In this way, Soren Kierkegaard is really direct in not making any clear distinction. There is no distinction because, actually, despair is a “misrelation” in the relation between me and my self. A misrelation “that relates itself to itself.”⁷ This is when *Christianity arises* in people:

“The possibility of this sickness is man’s superiority over the animal; to be aware of this sickness is the Christian’s superiority over the natural man; to be cured of this sickness is the Christian’s blessedness.”⁸

Certainly, to be human is to undergo this sickness, this “mental illness” that in accepted psychiatry is incurable. Yet, the point of Kierkegaard was that, in fact, *it is curable*. Truly, is it a sickness that the self must fight and overcome. In truth is *not* a sickness unto death:

“Lazarus is dead. I am glad not to have been there; it will be for your goo and for the good of your faith.” (John 11:15-16)

It is obvious that resurrection is redemption, and it only can be resurrection, such as Nietzsche said, only where we find tombs can we find resurrection. For resurrection, it is necessary first to be dead, because without death, there is no resurrection. The death is the *spiritual death*, the sickness of the spirit: despair. In order

⁶ Ibidem, pg.83

⁷ Kierkegaard, 1983; pg.15.

⁸ Ibidem, pg.15.

to cure despair it is necessary to suffer it first. Hence, the sickness unto death is the most existential essence of humanity. Existence has a "eternal" companion: the blame of this sickness. The only way to be cured is to suffer it, and after all to vanquish it. But to vanquish it means that one has to delete its more inner roots. Only if persons erase the root of despair, only then they will be redeemed. Therefore, redemption is given by *oneself*. In a certain sense, the therapist cannot cure the mental patient because there is *not* anything to cure. The "healing ceremony" is held by the patient him/herself, and only he/she can heal his/her own soul. The way Laing acts upon his patients is more like a "shaman" who extracts the devil from the spiritual room. Yet, if he does it in that way it is in reality the *faith* of the patient which is curing him/her. The dissociation of the self from the body, as Laing remarks, is the extreme action of schizophrenia. Here, schizophrenic is in an abyss which divides him/herself and the rest of the world. Everything is a foe, and everything is seen in a diverse and different way. Laing called this the *unbodied self* that offers a *sterile relationship*:

*"There is a quasi-it-it interaction instead of an I-thou relationship. This interaction is a dead process... The substitution of an interaction with the other results in the individual coming to live in a frightening world in which dread is unmitigated by love."*⁹

If the above paragraph is true, the mental illness could be understood more like a metaphysical entity where the medicine and love can overcome everything. Love is the eternal medicine that cures everything. The secret is that love is more important giving than receiving. Additionally, man has to realize about his/her errors, and to try to resolve them. Only after doing so, the hope of curing can be conquered. Such as the prophet Jeremiah said: *For my love is unfailing, says the Lord, I will not be angry for ever. Only you must acknowledge your wrongdoing.* (Jeremiah 3:13)

⁹ Laing, 1990; pg.82-83.