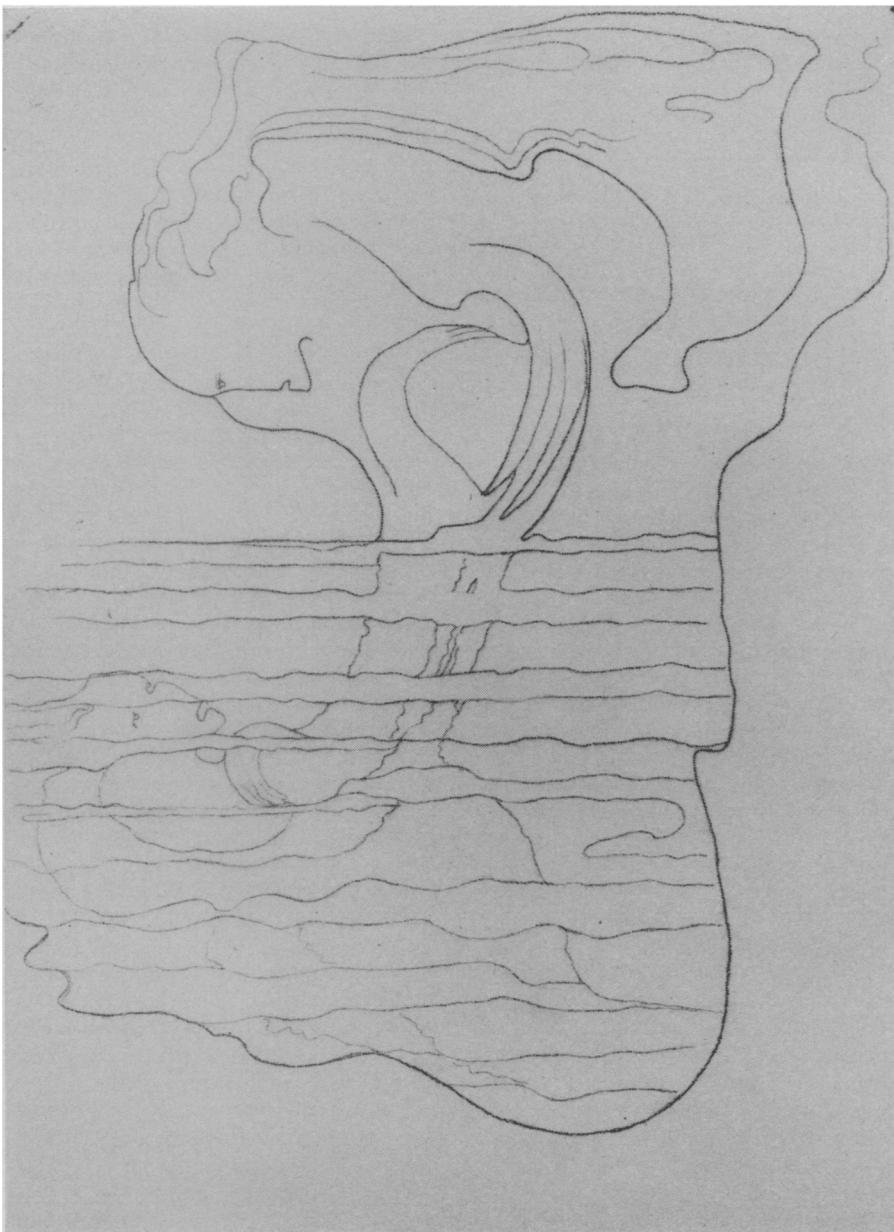


# A new look at the meaning of reality

New theorists say traditional behaviorism denies essence, man's "compassion and passion"

*They are playing a game. They  
are playing at not playing a game.  
If I show them I see they are, I  
shall break the rules and they will  
punish me. I must play their game,  
of not seeing I see the game.*

R. D. Laing, in "Knots"



National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution.  
*"Terrestrial Reflections" by Romaine Brooks*

by Richard H. Gilluly

Insane Liberation is the name of a group formed this year in New York City to combat what members say is the oppressive treatment of the mentally ill by many psychologists and psychiatrists and by society as a whole. Founders of the group claim their illnesses are really inner revolts against an inhuman society and that many members of the psychotherapeutic professions are, in effect, allied with the society in taking an authoritarian and moralistic attitude toward mental illness. The group calls for a new kind of therapy: open interaction between human beings in community "freakout centers" where no one would have authority over another.

Many traditional psychotherapists view the new group with extreme skepticism. But bizarre as the movement may seem in traditional terms, it represents a further step in a trend gaining more and more adherents, even among the traditional therapists, and which now has the beginnings of a theoretical framework, if not yet a traditionally empirical one.

The theoretical framework so far has been applied mainly in the area of psychotherapy (or "human growth," for "normal" persons, as well as the mentally ill) but it increasingly promises to produce a new view of the human condition that could have profound effects on all of the behavioral sciences.

It is difficult to speak yet of a school of thought that clearly includes certain individual researchers and therapists who have formulated the new theoretical concepts. Rather, many have made contributions—and they are by no means all in agreement with each other. Dr. Abraham Maslow, with his concept of "self actualization," was an early harbinger of the new views. Dr. Frederick Perls, with his "gestalt therapy," is currently highly popular among a group who call themselves "humanistic psychologists" (SN: 9/19/70, p. 256). But perhaps Dr. R. D. Laing, a British psychiatrist, has come nearest to formulating a coherent total statement of the new theories.

"The task of social phenomenology,"

Laing says in "The Politics of Experience," "is to relate my experience of the other's behavior to the other's experience of my behavior." Or, the only way to learn about human interactions is through human interactions.

Freudian psychology, says Laing, tends to isolate an individual as a discrete entity with a psyche which is believed to be susceptible to objective examination by a therapist—without reference to the possibility of new experience for both patient and therapist but only to all the defense mechanisms, repressions, transferences, etc., that have been produced by the patient's earlier experiences. Behavior therapy, he says, coldly ignores the essence of both the patient and the therapist—which includes "pathos and sympathy . . . compassion and passion"—and manipulatively deals with superficial behaviors.

Instead of taking these fragmented approaches, Laing insists that psychotherapy must be "*an obstinate attempt of two people to recover the wholeness of being human through the relationship between them*" (Laing's emphasis). This, he insists, can be achieved only through a perception of the illusory nature of the entity individuals refer to as "I"—the ego—and a penetration to the essential humanness, to what Maslow called "self actualization."

Standing as a mighty barrier to this realization of self, says Laing, is the "mystification of experience" widely practiced in civilized nations in child-rearing, education and other social institutions. "By the time the new human being is 15 or so, we are left with a being like ourselves, a half-crazed creature more or less adjusted to a mad world," says Laing. ("Normal" people have killed 100 million other "normal" people in the past 50 years, he points out.)

The mechanism of this alienation, he says, is the early cultivation of moral notions of "right" and "wrong" that have no relationship to the real needs of the essential human being. (An example might be the cultural prohibition in northern Europe and North America against crying by males.) Ostensibly such training is aimed at ethical behavior; in reality, says Laing, it is aimed at emotional exploitation. The only truly ethical behavior, he suggests, is that which originates in the essential nature of human beings.

It would be easy to label Laing's views as merely a restatement of Rousseau, a romantic and unsubstantiated belief in the essential goodness of the Noble Savage, or the child, corrupted by civilization. But Rousseau's views, especially his notion of

a social contract, were Newtonian and static. Laing postulates instead a dynamic and relativistic view that specifically classifies contracts—or what he calls "transactions"—as being themselves reflections and mechanisms of alienation.

In this view, there is no separation between men and their culture, or between men and the particular groups to which they belong, the apparent separation being an aspect of the illusion of the static ego. Each individual, he suggests, has internalized all the other individuals to which he has been exposed, particularly his parents. Then he projects these internalizations upon others. The process is endless and has a capacity for creating infinite reflections between human beings, the reflections taking the form of the "transactions" or destructive games that people play with each other in efforts to achieve the gratifications that are substitutes for (and avoidances of) discovering the real self. Laing specifically rejects the old social psychological view, however, that a social entity is really a kind of organism.

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Rather, he says, because the transactions are based on destructive falsehoods they create immense and painful contradictions—double, or triple, or infinitely oscillating, binds—not only in the individual but also in the entire body politic. If social entities are organisms, then they are organisms in the process of tearing themselves apart. More specifically, however, the transactions, based as they are on what each man *thinks* the other man is thinking, in an endless series of projections, are profoundly antibiological, profoundly opposed to the kind of open, cooperative, functional activity suggested by the organismic view.

Laing's model of the social organization, be it a family or a nation, is one of individuals held together by what he calls the "nexus," a kind of social cement in each human being taking the form of a belief in the expectation by others of certain behaviors from him and his expectations of certain behaviors from others. The nexus, in turn, is based upon the early internalizations of what is regarded as "right" and "wrong" behavior. A social organization based

upon such illusions, suggests Laing in a lecture included in a recent anthology, "To Free a Generation," is bound to use certain individuals as final receptacles for its psychological garbage. Thus, he says, within families one member may become the black sheep, the scapegoat for all the moralistic resentments of the other members. In the larger society, certain people are emotionally channeled into certain behaviors and labeled "criminals" or "mentally ill" and can then become the focus for hostility and for (usually unconscious) identification. Psychiatrists and psychologists, he suggests in the lecture, often are unwitting participants in these processes (although he concedes that many traditional therapists only ostensibly practice their structured disciplines and thus sometimes achieve authentic relationships with patients).

In Laing's view, insanity is a desperate effort by the individual to throw off the terrible burdens imposed upon him by his social group. And, he adds, it may be a valid and natural way to do just this. Thus the administration of electro-convulsive therapy or tranquilizers, or conditioning designed to alter superficial behaviors, may all be interferences with nature's way of achieving reintegration of the individual. Laing cites cases of patients allowed to live through their insanity who finally achieved what Maslow would call peak experiences—who got in touch once again with their real selves and recovered.

Dr. Perls' later writing often are reports of therapeutic sessions using his "gestalt therapy." But Perls, too, makes major contributions to the theory of the new psychology, which he interweaves with these reports. In "Gestalt Therapy Verbatim," Perls suggests that the ego in civilized human beings is divided into a "super-ego" and an "infraego," representing, respectively, a kind of inner prosecutor and inner defense counsel (perhaps imposed by the early labeling of experiences as "right" and "wrong"). In his efforts to demystify the new psychology through the use of simple, Anglo-Saxon words, Perls usually refers to these as "topdog" and "underdog." These two components of the civilized psyche carry on an endless interaction composed of moralizing and rationalizing. The arrival of the patient at a realization of the unreality of a problem he is attempting to solve through the interaction, Perls calls a "mini-Satori." (*Satori* is a Zen Buddhist word for enlightenment, the discovery of the true self.)

Perls' techniques partake of Moreno's psychodrama, but rather than involving a patient in dramatized interactions with others, Perls instead

instructs the patient to play each role himself, in turn. Thus in one filmed session, Perls had a young woman who had severe conflicts with her mother play the roles of both herself and her mother, physically moving from one position to the other. The aim here was to allow the woman to perceive that she had internalized the mother's moralizing and destructive exploitations and that the conflict between her and her mother, which existed both in her inner world and in the outer world, was totally within her power to end.

In this way, Perls says, each individual is responsible for what he is, but Perls carefully explains he means the word in the sense of "response-able," rather than in the old judgmental sense of being liable for assignment of guilt or ethically subject to the expectations of others. "Response-able" means that what the individual is, or appears to be, he created himself, for whatever reasons. Thus there is the possibility of the individual changing—through responding in new ways, which will be closer to an expression of his true self. Along with Laing, Perls, a former psychoanalyst, rejects the old techniques that focus on the past.

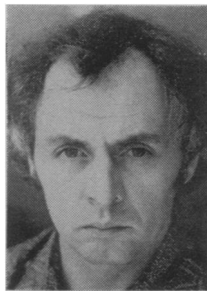
Perls tends far less than Laing to generalizations about the nature of society, and Laing has been faulted for the polemic and angrily radical ways in which he sometimes expresses himself, evidence, say his detractors, that Laing himself is projecting many of his own resentments. Perls tends to see each patient, and each relationship, as a new situation requiring its own new and spontaneous response—thus producing a consistency of action and philosophy. The recently deceased Perls, for instance, might have suggested to Laing and the members of Insane Liberation that hostility toward the psychotherapeutic professions and society is still playing society's game (although, according to reports, Laing's work with patients shows the same spontaneity and concern as Perls').

Laing in his reflections on society may have the more profound impact on the behavioral sciences—which he discusses at some length in "Politics of Experience." Laing's speculations suggest that just as in physics, where the very techniques of observation of subatomic particles alter the observations, so the observations of social scientists are conditioned by the nexus which they carry to the observations. "We must then repudiate a positivism that achieves its 'reliability' by successfully masking what is and what is not, by serializing the world of the observer, by turning the truly given into *capta* which are *taken as given*, by denuding the world of being and relegating the ghost of being to a shadow land of subjective

'values,'" Laing explains (his emphases). In other words, "objectivity" in the social sciences is a pretense at tough-mindedness which obscures human reality, this reality being what social scientists now dismiss as mere mysticism.

Thus whatever empirical evidence exists to support the new theories, most of it would be viewed by traditional social scientists as tainted by subjectivism, and Laing, Perls and the humanistic psychologists in general make no great claims for success through their techniques, perhaps primarily because they believe the success or failure of the techniques depends so much more upon the love and integrity of the therapist than upon any particular structure.

The April 1971 issue of *THE PERSONNEL AND GUIDANCE JOURNAL* surveys various techniques of group therapy, including the techniques that partake of the new theories. Although a majority of participants in "T-groups" for instance, report favorable results, little evaluation has been done, says one article. "Research on the effective-



Pantheon Press

Laing

ness of encounter groups [another variant] is almost totally nonexistent." But many of the new therapists reply that they do not want their techniques evaluated in the traditional ways—exactly the ways of observation of which Laing is so critical.

Apart from the question of formal empirical evidence, however, many therapists are impressed by Laing's work. Dr. Donald W. Hammersley, chief of professional services at the American Psychiatric Association in Washington, for instance, says the evidence is that "Laing can reconstruct some very sick people."

He emphasizes, however, that this is no necessary endorsement of Laing's theories. "I really have nothing to say about him theoretically," he says. "But practically, I don't think many would disagree with his individual approach to a sick person. The question here is: How do you apply it to millions of schizophrenics? It's the practical aspect I am interested in.

"These theoreticians polarize, push

the truth one way or another. I am interested in the best mileage on a quality basis for indigent people." Dr. Hammersley concedes, however, that younger psychiatrists nowadays tend to be "more specifically focused on the humanistic aspects" of their profession and that theories such as those of Laing and Perls are gaining in popularity.

The major opposition to the humanistic theories appears not to be coming from Freudians or neo-Freudians, many of whom no longer have theoretical objections, but from the behaviorists, who emphatically do. Behavioral psychologists tend to dismiss any notion of a psyche, mind, soul, etc., as non-objective, and see the human animal as a being whose feelings come only *after* contact with the environment, rather than from some innate center of life. Their view is that the entire human being is mechanistically determined by the impingement of outside events on a fairly blank slate to begin. Laing also postulates a mechanistic (although less Newtonian) system of human behavior in his nexus and transactions. The major difference is Laing believes that underlying these is a far more essential human reality. The behaviorists reject such a notion, sometimes vehemently, as quackery.

(Harvard's noted behavioral psychologist, Dr. B. F. Skinner, for instance, declined to discuss Dr. Laing. Dr. Skinner suggested any comment would start an argument he does not wish to get into.)

The temptation arises to apply the new philosophies—which tend to wipe out the boundaries between individual psychology, social psychology and cultural anthropology—to broad social concerns, and Laing, of course, has done so. But many of the new therapists tend to see such speculations as fruitless and even inherently contradictory to the essence of the philosophies. They stress that a prime implication of the new beliefs is that social disciplines cannot be imposed successfully on human beings from the outside.

Rather, they insist, each individual must be free to develop in his own way without the pressures for achievement and status that now exist in modern civilizations. Any attempt to coerce, or even convince, people that they should abandon an achievement orientation so as to get in touch with their real selves would simply be another destructive pressure from outside, they say.

If they have any prescription for change, it would be Laing's abjuration to people to show "unremitting concern and respect" for other human beings. There are not many who would disagree with this in theory. As Laing points out, there are millions who disagree with it in practice. □