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This is Freedom Essay 48

R.D. Laing’s fearlessly honest descriptions of the human condition

Written by Jeremy Griffith, 2017

In FREEDOM: The End Of The Human Condition it is finally explained that far from being the flawed, banishment-deserving, bad, even evil creatures we have for so long been portrayed as, humans are actually the heroes of the story of life on Earth, and so extraordinarily wonderful that we could be considered divine beings! (This breakthrough redeeming explanation of the human condition is also presented in Video/F. Essay 3*.)

And in fact, the human race has always believed that one day it would find this redeeming understanding of ourselves, but, the tragic reality was that until we found that relieving insight we had no choice but to block out and deny any condemning truth about ourselves; metaphorically, we had to hide in Plato’s cave of darkness. We couldn’t accept any implication that we were bad when we believed that one day we would explain that we weren’t bad.

Since searching for that relieving understanding unavoidably led to us becoming extremely upset angry, egocentric and alienated, it makes sense that we have had to employ a great deal of block-out or denial of just how upset we became; to keep with the analogy, we have had to hide very deep inside Plato’s cave of darkness. (See Video/F. Essay 11* for analysis of Plato’s cave allegory.)
It follows then that it would be a bold person indeed who would venture outside the ‘cave’ and face the exposing and confronting light of truth and admit the full extent of how upset we humans really are, and how estranged from our original innocent instinctive soulful true selves we have become, but that is exactly what the great Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing did!

Laing is one of the most quoted thinkers in my books and essays about the human condition, and for good reason, because Laing admitted how profoundly estranged or alienated we humans have become—almost completely blocked-off from the truth of the extent of our self-corruption and from the truth of the amazing and wonderful soulful real world that we lost access to when we had to start living deep inside Plato’s dark cave. (See F. Essay 21* for explanation of how we acquired our original instinctive moral soul.)

Incredibly revealing ceremonial tribal masks are included in F. Essay 43* to help illustrate just how upset and alienated humans have now become, while F. Essay 44* includes similarly revealing paintings by Francis Bacon and Edvard Munch. However, when it comes to written descriptions of our condition, only a rare few in human history have managed to be as honest as Laing.
Ronald David (R.D.) Laing (1927–1989) was, as mentioned, a psychiatrist, and spent his entire life treating mental illness. Core to his approach was the belief that insanity could be understood, because it was, as he famously said, ‘a perfectly rational adjustment to an insane world’. Laing was soon considered a maverick within his profession, at loggerheads with a medical orthodoxy that considered mental illness ‘un-understandable’, and was content to medicate patients and consign them to asylums.

In defiance of the orthodoxy, and indeed of the whole world of denial, Laing cultivated this honesty about our ‘insane world’, and while the resulting transparency of the falseness
of the world around him eventually led him to a state of lonely despair, it did allow him to describe the human condition as clearly as anyone who has ever lived:

‘We are dead, but think we are alive. We are asleep, but think we are awake. We are dreaming, but take our dreams to be reality. We are the halt, lame, blind, deaf, the sick. But we are doubly unconscious. We are so ill that we no longer feel ill, as in many terminal illnesses. We are mad, but have no insight [into the fact of our madness]’ (Self and Others, 1961, p.38 of 192). (see paragraph 123 of FREEDOM*)

‘Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any aspect of present inter-human life…We are born into a world where alienation awaits us. We are potentially men, but are in an alienated state [p.12 of 156] …the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be. As adults, we have forgotten most of our childhood, not only its contents but its flavour; as men of the world, we hardly know of the existence of the inner world [p.22] …The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man [p.24] …between us and It [our true selves or soul] there is a veil which is more like fifty feet of solid concrete. Deus absconditus [God has absconded]. Or [more precisely] we have absconded [from God/the integrative ideals] [p.118] …The outer divorced from any illumination from the inner is in a state of darkness. We are in an age of darkness. The state of outer darkness is a state of sin—i.e. alienation or estrangement from the inner light [p.116] …We are all murderers and prostitutes…We are bemused and crazed creatures, strangers to our true selves, to one another [pp.11-12]’ (The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise, 1967). (see par. 123 of FREEDOM*)
In describing just how complete our alienation had become, it is notable how closely Laing’s words echo those of the Biblical prophet Isaiah, who was Plato-like in his honesty about how much the human race has been living in darkness, saying, ‘justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. Like the blind we grope along the wall, feeling our way like men without eyes…Truth is nowhere to be found’ (Isa. 59). Isaiah was equally forthright about the extent of our now horrendously upset condition when he wrote, ‘From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sore…Your country is desolate…the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her’, and ‘the world languishes and withers…The earth is defiled by its people; they have disobeyed the laws [become divisively rather than integratively behaved]…In the streets…all joy turns to gloom, all gaiety is banished from the earth’, and ‘This people’s heart has become calloused [alienated]; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes [hence the problem of the ‘deaf effect’ described in F. Essay 11*]’ (Isa. 1, 24 & 6:10 footnote). (see pars 278*, 182* & 681 of FREEDOM*)

Not content to merely chronicle the all-enveloping ‘age of darkness’ in which we dwelt, Laing was also remarkable in his realisation that what was needed was to find the source reason for the madness. Indeed, Laing realised that finding understanding of the human condition was the most urgent and important task facing humanity:

‘The requirement of the present, the failure of the past, is the same: to provide a thoroughly self-conscious and self-critical human account of man…Our alienation goes to the roots. The realization of this is the essential springboard for any serious reflection on any aspect of present inter-human life [pp.11-12 of 156] …We respect the voyager, the explorer, the climber, the space man. It makes far more sense to me as a valid project—indeed, as a desperately urgently required project for our time—to explore the inner space and time of consciousness. Perhaps this is one of the few things that still make sense in our historical context. We are so out of touch with this
realm [so in denial of the issue of the human condition] that many people can now argue seriously that it does not exist. It is very small wonder that it is perilous indeed to explore such a lost realm [p.105]’ (The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise). (see par. 649 of FREEDOM*)

And it is this ‘thoroughly self-conscious and self-critical human account of man’ that has at last been found. And you will know this account is the true explanation of our condition because it is based on the ‘essential springboard’ of recognition that our ‘conscious’ mind is deeply psychologically troubled—that we are a psychotic and neurotic, immensely alienated species. (Laing’s phrase about our alienation being like ‘fifty feet of solid concrete’ is amongst the most used phrases in all of my writing).

But it needs to be emphasised here that while humans have been as torturously alienated as Laing observed, this is not the full story about humans. As has been stressed throughout these essays, and across all of my work, the greater truth is that humans have also been the most courageous, heroic, successful and meaningful creatures to ever exist on Earth. We are not the awful beings we appeared to be; rather, given the magnificence of our fully conscious mind, nature’s greatest invention, and all the injustice we humans have had to endure for some two million years, we fully deserve to be considered divine beings!

Watch Jeremy Griffith present the breakthrough redeeming explanation of the human condition in Video/F. Essay 3*, or read chapter 1 of FREEDOM*. You can also read more about the extent of our denial in chapter 2*. The irreverent honesty of R.D. Laing is also mentioned in the previous F. Essay 47: Humour and swearing explained*. 

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* indicates a link
These essays were created in 2017-2019 by Jeremy Griffith, Damon Isherwood, Fiona Cullen-Ward, Brony FitzGerald & Lee Jones of the Sydney WTM Centre. All filming and editing of the videos was carried out by Sydney WTM members James Press & Tess Watson during 2017-2019. Other members of the Sydney WTM Centre are responsible for the distribution and marketing of the videos/essays, and for providing subscriber support.