



## The Politics of Experience/The Bird of Paradise

*R.D. Laing*

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## The Politics of Experience/The Bird of Paradise R.D. Laing

R.D. Laing is at his most wickedly iconoclastic in this eloquent assault on conventional morality. Unorthodox to some, brilliantly original to others, *The Politics of Experience* goes beyond the usual theories of mental illness and alienation, and makes a convincing case for the "madness of morality." Compelling, unsettling, consistently absorbing, *The Politics of Experience* is a classic of genuine importance that will "excite, enthrall, and disturb. No one who reads it will remain unaffected." (Rollo May, *Saturday Review*)

## The Politics of Experience/The Bird of Paradise Details

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Author : R.D. Laing

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## From Reader Review The Politics of Experience/The Bird of Paradise for online ebook

### Roberta McDonnell says

Even more mindblowing!!

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### Ricardo Acuña says

One of the best books I have ever read, where Laing exposes the real nature of our social madness. The world in which we live, inevitably leads us to alignment, and make us blind. We can see other people's behavior, but not their experience. Therefore, the experience of each other are inaccessible, invisible, and interpreted through the observed behavior. Laing says that psychiatrists have paid very little attention to the experience of the patient and the diagnosis, psychotherapy and treatment of madness (schizophrenia) needs a new approach. *"There is no such 'condition' as 'schizophrenia', but the label is a social fact and the social fact a political event"*.

Through the entire book, you could find important references to psychologists and philosophers like Sartre and Kierkegaard's existentialism, and the Freud and Jung's insights. I enjoy the "Ten day Voyage" last chapter to discover that a "psychotic episode" is not really a madness case, but a significant and transcendent experience that confronts us to our alienated view of the world.

I keep with me a key concept from the Laing's great book: Insanity is not what we all believe to be. We need to reconsider our understanding of our social reality, self-alienation and the relativity of experience and behavior to diagnose who is insane, and who do not.

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### Sean A. says

I haven't really read anything quite like this before and found it very insightful. The part that kicks off the book with defining experience and the way interpersonal experience can be strident and tricky was excellent and set a great tone. I thought perhaps, however, his thesis that schizophrenia was a sort of right of passage that just needs those who suffer to come out the other side was somewhat challenging and edgy, but wonder how someone who presumably doesn't suffer from the disorder can say to those who suffer that they just need to look at their experiences in a different light, as well as downplaying the idea of curing what I still think is a disease of sorts. Still a lot of unique and valuable and dare-i-say revolutionary ideas for those interested in taking a step closer at looking at mental health as well as the malcontents of civilization.

Further thoughts, in hindsight, 3/27/13:

While this book has a lot of interesting things to say that don't get said nearly enough, since i originally read this my own view of madness, and more importantly my own madness (diagnosis of schizophrenia) has matured a bit since reading this, and i must say that the viewpoint that schizophrenia is a moral or existential issue is not just a little bit twisted and backwards, no matter how sick this fucked up greater society tends to be. as a schizophrenic, when it all started going (downhill) i used to think that i could just think or will myself out of a psychotic episode...this might be an effective strategy for some disorders but definitely did

not work for me...just FYI for all those enraptured by Laing's yes, surely eloquent and provoking PHILOSOPHICAL and EXPERIENTIAL and EXISTENTIAL insight into mental illness.

am i anti-psychiatry?

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## Edward says

I was attracted to Laing's book because it has been said to be a source of Doris Lessing's novel, *A Briefing for a Decent into Hell*, which she denied. Laing's text is a compilation of reworked articles he published between 1962 and 1965 and center on human perception and its relationship to schizophrenia of society as a whole.

Existential relationships are characterized in terms of experience and behavior within the framework a feedback loop but Laing's method of presentation seems to be too repetitive and has a tone that smacks of the mystic dialogue of the 70's revolutionary youth movement and Lao Tzu's mindfulness mumbo jumbo. It can leave you feeling that you understand a concept simply because you're only carried along by the cadence of the prose.

There is an element of validity to Laing's thesis that society is insane but it's presented at a superficial level and is cloaked in the radical coffee house banter of the Vietnam era that, at times, has the academic preachiness of a screed. Nonetheless, the text can be more useful in understanding the cultural mindset of that period than it can in helping understand and treat schizophrenia.

The first half of Chapter 4, *Us & Them*, is understandable in the framework of control theory with feedback loops but the second half veers off into New Left rhetoric with reference to Sartre's Marxist dialectic which can be unintelligible in today's culture. Laing's articles have their origins within the transition between the Beat and the Hip culture and the influences of Taoism and Herbert Marcuse are clearly visible. Laing's ideas easily dovetail with the early prophets of the drug culture such as Leary and Castaneda.

The Schizophrenic Experience in Chapter 5 is presented from a clinical perspective rather than in New Left/New Age rhetoric of earlier chapters; hence more credible. According to Laing, schizophrenia has its origins in the separation between our inner self bereft of substance, our outer self bereft of meaning (i.e. alienation) and confusing the realities of one with the other. The concepts of We, Them, Us, and the Other presented in earlier chapters helps support Laing's thesis that it's not really evident whose sane and who is not, viz. The Gadarene Swine Fallacy which seems to have originated by him.

Chapter 6 proceeds into transcendental experience (guided & purposeful) and its similarities to schizophrenia (unguided & terrifying). It is here that we see the outlines of Lessing's novel and his own subtle references to drug induced exploration of the 70s culture. Chapter 7 is a clinical transcription of a recovered schizophrenic patient and, although mundane, is helpful in understanding that a patient can occupy two worlds and can recollect the emotional impact of both.

The final chapter, *The Bird of Paradise*, is apparently Laing's articulation of his own drug induced exploration of the schizophrenic state but it seems more like his foray into a new literary form than it being meant to support his thesis. His prose is neither mundane nor clinical but is related to us like a reading of a rambling Ginsberg poem using syntactically correct but meaningless sentences like Chomsky's, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."

In retrospect Lessing clearly articulates her character's vivid schizophrenic experiences as well as the mundane clinical experiences. The schizophrenic experiences of her patient are lucid and have the "logic" of

a dream sequence whereas Laing's presentation in his Bird of Paradise may sound profound but is meaningless.

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### Christine says

Interesting read on perception, consciousness, id/ego etc. Quite Jungian in my mind...a fun juant.

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### Andrew says

What if the "delusions" reported by patients during psychotic episodes were not symptoms of a disease, but valid descriptions of their experiences?

Laing describes schizophrenia as a kind of journey into the inner self, one that is misunderstood by people in the "normal" world and labelled as madness. Why do we misunderstand it? Because we are so alienated from our own inner worlds that we cannot comprehend someone else's experiences there. Indeed, we are so alienated that even the thought of going there scares us, threatens us. So we lock people up and call them crazy.

I don't know nearly enough about schizophrenia to know whether this view of schizophrenia is correct. I am a complete layman. I know that Laing's views have not been accepted by mainstream psychiatry, which has, in the 40 years since he wrote this book, simply gone further down the road of clinical diagnosis which Laing criticised so vehemently.

Still, I was fascinated by his description of psychotic episodes as a kind of misunderstood spiritual journey back to something we've lost. After quoting a lengthy and fascinating first-person account of a psychotic episode by a former sailor called Jesse Watkins, Laing concludes:

"We can no longer assume that such a voyage is an illness that has to be treated... If we can demystify ourselves, we see 'treatment'... as ways of stopping this sequence from occurring. Can we not see that *this voyage is not what we need to be cured of, but that it is itself a natural way of healing our own appalling state of alienation called normality?*" (emphasis in the original).

Laing uses the analogy of a formation of planes. One plane may be out of formation, and viewed as abnormal, but in fact it may be the formation of planes that is off course and the solitary plane that is going in the right direction. Laing sees society as being off course in major ways, and so individuals are put in a "double bind" - they find themselves subject to so many contradictory forces that in some circumstances a psychic break is the only way to cope. He is scathing about the "normal" person, who is so worldly, has forgotten about childhood and dreams, has no idea of the inner world and consequently is a "shriveled, dessicated fragment of what a person can be." He sees this as contributing to the insane state of society:

"The condition of alienation, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years."

The book is one of those cobbled-together affairs - one chapter was a lecture here, another was an essay there. They've been edited into a whole, but not a particularly coherent one. The ideas in the book are

fascinating, and in places, particularly towards the end, the writing was clear and even beautiful. But some parts were tangential or even impenetrable to me. The book's opening chapter, with long explanations of how I do not experience your experience, but I experience you as experiencing, and experience myself as experienced by you, etc., etc., etc., etc., almost put me off. I'm glad I persevered, though. The payoff came later in the book, in the form of fascinating ideas that set me thinking in new ways.

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### **Erik Graff says**

This is a short collection which, as I recall, contains the most substantial piece I've seen by Laing about psychedelic drugs. I read the thing in the midst of studying a lot of other work by him and his colleagues in "the antipsychiatry movement" in the context of doing independent study work in the nebulous field of "humanistic psychology" in college. The essay, "The Bird of Paradise", appears to have been written under the influence.

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### **Esteban del Mal says**

Psychology as imperialism.

While the writing is at times clunky and some chapters are top-heavy with psycho-analyst speak -- gibberish to the non-specialist -- Liang does string together some powerful stuff at times:

“Madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death.”

“The family’s function is to repress Eros; to induce a false consciousness of security; to deny death by avoiding life; to cut off transcendence; to believe in God, not to experience the Void; to create, in short, one-dimensional man; to promote respect, conformity, obedience; to con children out of play; to induce a fear of failure; to promote a respect for work; to promote a respect for ‘respectability’.”

Stuff with which he indicts the social structure at large, and psychology in particular.

His thesis is that we are socialized to function in a mad world. No great insight here, but his claim that madness (schizophrenia) is a way for the truly sane to cope, his flirtation with mysticism (citing the Gospel of Thomas, Zen Buddhism, the Tao Te Ching) and rage against duality is comforting to read, although it has been said better and more completely elsewhere. And while he acknowledges the symptoms of alienation, he never seems to make the effort to treat the root disease. But perhaps this is too much to ask of such a short work.

In all, a decent primer. If you are sympathetic to the concepts of the unconscious, the quest and the archetype, I would suggest reading Joseph Campbell, Aldous Huxley (The Perennial Philosophy), Jung and even Nietzsche, among others. If you are of a literary inclination, The Lively Image (Richard Hughes) and Mrs. Dalloway (Virginia Woolf) come to mind.

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### **Robert Wullenschneider says**

this was a mind-blowing book to read as a young man coming of age in the sixties and seventies...in a few words, it's lasting premise is that 'everything is political' in the broadest sense of the word...and the subtle truth that the decision to view the world 'objectively' is itself a 'subjective' choice

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## **Sarah says**

I love R.D. Laing.

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## **James says**

You can feel the feverishness of the writing as soon as it begins. Nonsensical in parts - a lot of words to communicate ideas that are neither complex nor thoroughly thought.

*'The sky is blue' suggests that there is a substantive 'sky' that is 'blue'. This sequence of subject verb object, in which 'is' acts as the copula uniting sky and blue, is a nexus of sounds, and syntax, signs and symbols, in which we are fairly completely entangled and which separates us from at the same time as it refers us to that ineffable sky-blue-sky. The sky is blue and blue is not sky, sky is not blue. But in saying 'the sky is blue' we say 'the sky' 'is'. The sky exists and it is blue. 'Is' serves to unite everything and at the same time 'is' is not any of the things that it unites... 'Is' is that no-thing whereby all things are.*

This made me laugh:

*The relevance of Freud to our time is largely his insight and, to a very considerable extent, his demonstration that the ordinary person is a shrivelled, desiccated fragment of what a person can be.*

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## **Matthew says**

I admit I haven't read this in years, not since my youth. I barely remember you. But I do remember you were one of those books that pretty much completely altered my perception of reality. And now that I've been out of therapy for a number of years I can say that remnants of that shattering are still there, and really more important now. Now that the "madness of morality" is a lot more evident in this world.

Even looking on later psychological events, like say the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment, becomes looking at madness as not something exclusive to "insane people" but to everyone at some point.

Also, I seem to remember that Laing is a wonderfully compact writer, those hardest of writers to find that can do that well.

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## **Ryan says**

dear reader,

hello! what weather! welcome to another edition of "small talk" wherein i review a VERY recently published

novel by an up-and-coming author! on the docket this week, it's "the politician's experience" by r.d. "swingin' low" laing (you may know his sister, k.d. laing!). ok, let's GO!

#### REVIEW:

all previous psychiatry is fundamentally flawed.

what is considered "mental illness" is rather a healthy reaction to an oppressive society, and insane standards of living.

existentialism.

psychoses - schizophrenic episodes, in particular - are "growing" experiences, which one must necessarily pass through, and which can have extreme benefit.

if nobody listened to what you said, because they thought you were crazy, wouldn't you start writing on the walls with your own shit too?

#### VERDICT:

make sure you put your kids on ritalin and prozac! it will really help them develop into whole, well-balanced people!

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### **David Balfour says**

Offensively bad.

He completely denies the practicality of the (admittedly subjective) views society forces upon us regarding 'normality' and mental illness. While these are arguably an evil in themselves, they are necessary for the effective functioning of society which in turn is necessary for our physical and emotional security. A schizophrenic is dissociated from the collective reality and is thus less able to attain contentedness within it. Madness is the most profound form of loneliness and it is in their interests to be brought back to 'sanity', no matter how much people like Laing romanticise their illness.

All I know is that my girlfriend would seriously harm herself and others if it weren't for her medication. She thinks Laing is highly misguided. She passionately espouses the practical necessity of modern psychiatry and medicine and is incredibly thankful that she was not born in an earlier time.

I must concede that Laing's description of the construction of group identity in the earlier chapters is very interesting and well-written, however.

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### **Thadd says**

A disturbing, compelling book about Schizophrenia, a disease that is hard to treat. Because mental health professionals know so little about the brain, helping Schizophrenics is difficult. This book raises interesting questions. Are Schizophrenics crazy or are they enlightened individuals who don't fit in?

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## JJ Vid says

Schizophrenia, in some cases, may be a healthy reaction to an unhealthy situation. Laing views society and the family as positively destructive to its members; that shared, naked experience with another human being is nearly impossible. He claims we connect with others only by forming an Us mentality where a nexus of kinship is formed, but in doing so the nexus necessarily excludes some group of others and calls it Them. By forming these nexuses we create antagonistic relationships with Them and, often as a result of viewing the nexus of Us as an entity in itself, we form antagonisms toward each other in the hopes of maintaining the group of Us. Quickly the group becomes superior to the individuals that compose it and seemingly takes on a life of its own.

So what is the rational choice to an irrational situation? Laing believes schizophrenia sometimes is, and further that psychotherapeutic interventions in attempt to "cure" schizophrenia, more often than not, have the reverse effect of stalling a natural process of recovery. Shock therapy, psychoanalysis, or any form of forcing the patient to exit the interior space where the problem is currently being solved will only hinder recovery. Laing thinks it is sometimes necessary to stand back and allow the schizophrenic to go through the process (however he doesn't give any hint of how you differentiate these \*some\* from the others who would benefit from therapy).

The first chapter will probably boggle the reader, not because it is difficult to grasp the concepts but because Laing uses the word "experience" so many times in such rapid succession that the word itself becomes devoid of meaning. Say any word twenty times in a row and it starts to sound strange or meaningless. This is essentially what Laing does "I experience you experiencing me experiencing you, and you experience me experiencing you experiencing me, and I experience you experiencing me experiencing you experiencing.... ad infinitum".

The final chapter, Birds of Paradise, is Laing's attempt to portray a schizophrenic voyage deep into the "illness" and back out again, so don't expect it to make much sense. It's more like a poetic autobiographical narrative than anything else. Just remember the egghead is the patient, and he thinks he is dead but is pronounced alive by the doctors and treated by frying the egg. Don't fry the egg.

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## Holly Lindquist says

Is schizophrenia an understandable response to the unreasonable pressures of a terminally insane society? It's a notion with perennial appeal, one that's been brought up by many, many people (not just this guy). Certainly our modern world is a three-ring circus of demented behavior accepted as "normal". In a world of Honey Boo Boo, Beliebers, drone strikes, and mass government surveillance, the concept of what is "sane" or "normal" may just as well be vacationing off-planet at this point.

However, it's dangerous to enclose something as diverse as schizophrenia in a prefabricated box created specifically for an existential hate letter to modern society. Yes, some people termed as mad may be having a genuine mystical experience.\* But many others may have a physical difference in the way their brains are operating.. Not a religious experience, and not something that merely causes distress to friends and family, but significant distress and sometimes danger to the person experiencing the symptoms. Why invalidate an entire illness to make a philosophical statement? And if it IS the fault of our modern society and first world family dynamics, then where does that leave the mad people who existed before our current culture? In third world countries? In indigenous societies? And how would the author explain childhood schizophrenia, which

can present very early and in the absence of obvious external stresses?

The good news is that since this book was written, medical scientists have learned a lot more about the biologic and genetic components of schizophrenia. Also, the treatments since Laing's time are considerably less torturous, although there's still vast improvements to be made. It is sometimes true that subtle undercurrents in society can come into crystalline focus through the lens of madness. Paranoid fantasies can scrape at truths the majority aren't aware of. At times, the ramblings of the mad can even anticipate the future in uncanny ways. (Examples: the visions of Philip K. Dick, James Tilly Matthews\*.) But every schizophrenic is unique. They shouldn't be generalized and squeezed into someone's personal agenda mailbox. It's really not helpful.

(Giving this book 3 stars, though I can't say I particularly liked it. Never-the-less, 4 stars for bringing up interesting points about the intersections between mystical experience & mental illness.. For the delivery of said points and the associated personality of the writer, 2 stars only. Averages out to 3.)

\* Pet peeve: Just because you did a truckload of acid, it does not make you the omniscient director into the world of schizophrenia. They are not the same.

\* For a fascinating read on James Tilly Matthews, one of the first officially diagnosed schizophrenics, *The Air Loom Gang* by Mike Jay is highly recommended.

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## Adam says

I am having a hard time finding words for this book. It is ostensibly about Psychiatry, and a few sections treat that subject fairly specifically, but the more striking parts of the book seem to have a much more general significance. In particular, chapters 1, 3, and 4 are . . . woah. They are incredibly striking and left me stunned. It fits in a lot with Derrick Jensen themes, although his wording is much more severe and "prophetic" than Jensen's. Particularly, Chapter Four, *Us and Them*, takes the traditional Anarchist rejection of nations and borders and all that garbage, and applies it in a much wider, more profound sense, bringing it to its logical and very scary conclusion.

Definitely read this, put it on the top of a list or something, go get it, and read it now! It is very short and very worthwhile.

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## Stephanie says

The book starts off very theoretical, but once you get past the beginning it becomes entirely absorbing. It entirely changed my perspective from which to view mental illness, in a good way -- basically, Laing posits that we're all alienated from ourselves in some shape or form; those labelled schizophrenic just express this alienation in forms non-acceptable to mainstream society. His ideas were very liberating for me.

## Alan says

What started out as a promising and innovative read has turned out to be a disappointment. While Laing's writing is much clearer than many other psychoanalyst's I've come across, the evidence for his claims is shotty at best. *The Politics of Experience* is a book that tries to fundamentally tackle the claim that mental illness (particularly schizophrenia) is a natural reaction to an insane human social world. While a part of me would like to believe this - as to do so implies that mental illness is curable without medication - there is simply too much evidence favoring the reality that schizophrenia is genetically inherited. While studies show that carriers have about a 50% chance of getting 'triggered' by real life circumstances, schizophrenia is still primarily a genetic issue. In this, Laing's work, while well intentioned, argues against what I believe is in the best interest of those suffering from schizophrenia. Understandably, asylums in the 60's (when this book was written) were far from pleasant, and in this I give Laing a pass - asylums were perhaps doing more harm than good! Unfortunately, I cannot say I agree with the book's core point. I believe sufferers of schizophrenia need help and social support from trained professionals. Both suicide and depression are strongly correlated with schizophrenia and to believe that schizophrenics would be best off without professional help (from institutions) is naive.

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