

**R. D. LAING**

**The  
Divided  
Self**

RD Laing on the distinction between the true and false self from his chapter "The inner self in the schizoid condition" in "The Divided Self".



**'Dr Laing is saying something very important indeed ... This is a truly humanist approach'**  
– Philip Toynbee in the *Observer*



## 5 The inner self in the schizoid condition

*You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world, this is something you are free to do and is in accord with your nature, but perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering that you might be able to avoid.*

FRANZ KAFKA

In the schizoid condition here described there is a persistent scission between the self and the body. What the individual regards as his true self is experienced as more or less disembodied, and bodily experience and actions are in turn felt to be part of the false-self system.

It is now necessary to consider the two elements in this split in more detail, and also the relationship of the one to the other. First, we consider the mental or unembodied self.

It is well known that temporary states of dissociation of the self from the body occur in normal people. In general, one can say that it is a response that appears to be available to most people who find themselves enclosed within a threatening experience from which there is no physical escape. Prisoners in concentration camps *tried* to feel that way, for the camp offered no possible way out either spatially or at the end of a period of time. The only way out was by a psychical withdrawal 'into' one's self and 'out of' the body. This dissociation is characteristically associated with such thoughts as 'This is like a dream', 'This seems unreal', 'I can't believe this is true', 'Nothing seemed to be touching me', 'I cannot take it in', 'This is not happening to me', i.e. with feelings of estrangement and derealization. The body may go on acting in an outwardly normal way, but inwardly it is felt to be acting on its own, automatically.

However, despite the dream-nature or unreality of experience, and the automatic nature of action, the self is at the same time far from 'sleepy'; indeed, it is excessively alert, and may be thinking and observing with exceptional lucidity.

The temporary estrangement of the self from the body may be represented in dreams.

A girl of nineteen, the date of whose marriage was fast approaching, a marriage she had come to dread for various reasons, dreamed that she was in the back seat of a car, which was driving itself. This girl was not a basically schizoid person but was reacting by a schizoid defence to a particular situation.

R. had a dream shortly before starting treatment. He was on the footplate of a bus. The bus had no driver. He jumped off and the bus went on to crash. One is tempted to regard a dream he had after four months of psychotherapy as a measure of some change in a desirable direction. 'I am running after a bus. Suddenly I'm on the footplate of the bus, and at the same time, I'm running after it. I'm trying to join up with myself on the bus but I can't entirely catch up on the bus. I felt frightened at this.'

One could multiply instances of this common experience of temporary dissociation. Sometimes it is intentionally induced; more often, it occurs without the individual's control. But in the patients here considered, the splitting is not simply a temporary reaction to a specific situation of great danger, which is reversible when the danger is past. It is, on the contrary, a basic orientation to life, and if it is followed back through their lives one usually finds that they seem, in fact, to have emerged from the early months of infancy with this split already under way. The 'normal' individual, in a situation all can see to be threatening to his being and to offer no real sense of escape, develops a schizoid state in trying to get outside it, if not physically, at least mentally: he becomes a mental observer, who looks on, detached and impassive, at what his body is doing or what is being done to his body. If this is so in the 'normal', it is at least possible to suppose that the individual whose abiding mode of being-in-the-world is of this split nature is living in what to him, if not to us, is a world that threatens his being from all sides, and from which there is no exit. This is indeed the case for such people. For them the world is a prison without bars, a concentration camp without barbed wire.

The paranoid has specific persecutors. Someone is against him. There is a plot on foot to steal his brains. A machine is concealed in the wall of his bedroom which emits mind rays to soften his brain,

or to send electric shocks through him while he is asleep. The person I am describing *feels* at this phase *persecuted by reality itself*. The world as it is, and other people as they are, are the dangers.

The self then seeks by being unembodied to transcend the world and hence to be safe. But a self is liable to develop which feels it is outside all experience and activity. It becomes a vacuum. Everything is there, outside; nothing is here, inside. Moreover, the constant dread of all that is there, of being overwhelmed, is potentiated rather than mitigated by the need to keep the world at bay. Yet the self may at the same time long more than anything for participation in the world. Thus, its greatest longing is felt as its greatest weakness and giving in to this weakness is its greatest dread, since in participation the individual fears that his vacuum will be obliterated, that he will be engulfed or otherwise lose his identity, which has come to be equated with the maintenance of the transcendence of the self even though this is a transcendence in a void.

This detachment of the self means that the self is never revealed directly in the individual's expressions and actions, nor does it experience anything spontaneously or immediately. The self's relationship to the other is always at one remove. The direct and immediate transactions between the individual, the other, and the world, even in such basic respects as perceiving and acting, all come to be meaningless, futile, and false. One can represent the alternative state of affairs schematically as shown opposite.

Objects perceived by the self are experienced as real. Thoughts and feelings of which the self is the agent are alive and are felt to have point. Actions to which the self is committed are felt as genuine.

If the individual delegates all transactions between himself and the other to a system within his being which is not 'him', then the world is experienced as unreal, and all that belongs to this system is felt to be false, futile, and meaningless.

Everyone is subject to a certain extent at one time or another to such moods of futility, meaninglessness, and purposelessness, but in schizoid individuals these moods are particularly insistent. These moods arise from the fact that the doors of perception and/or the

Figure 1

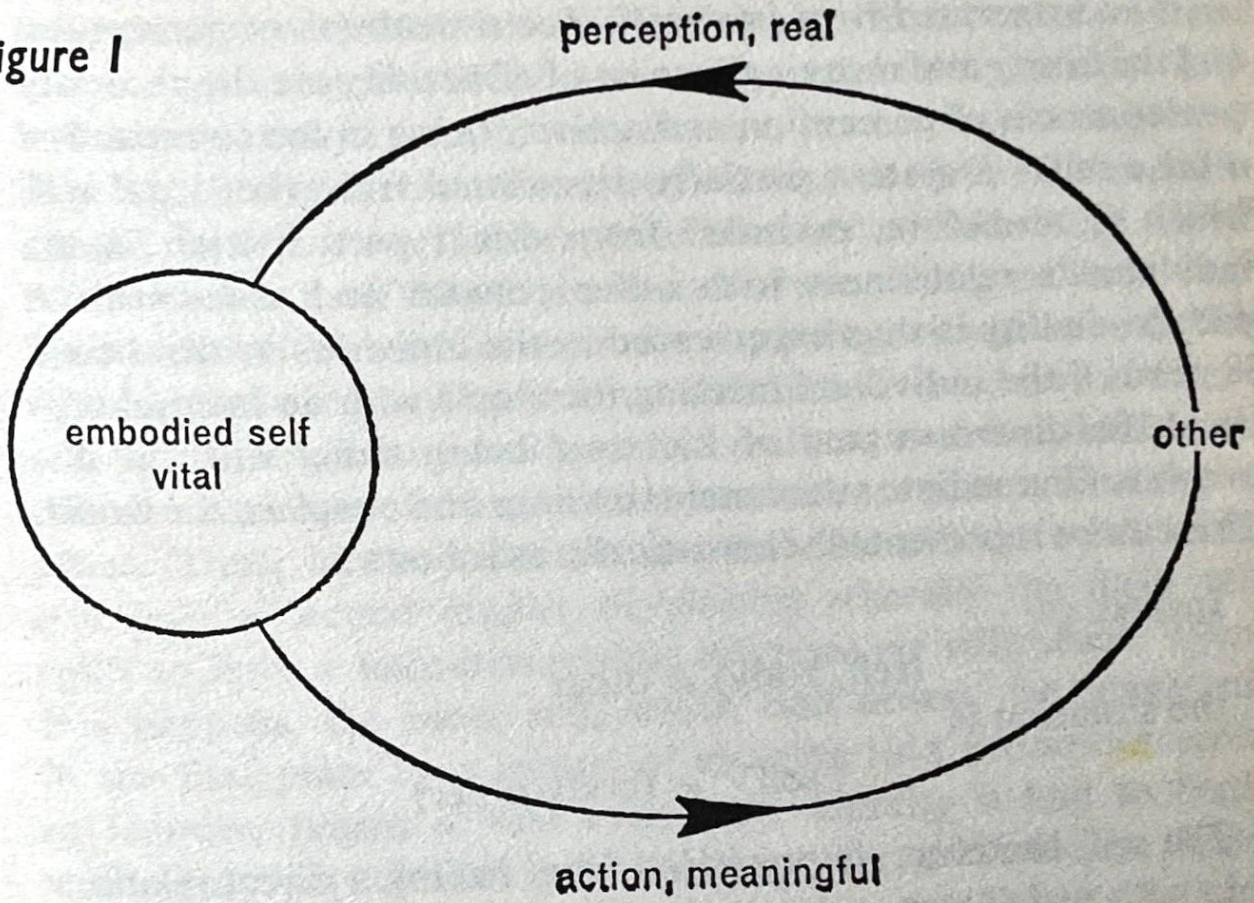
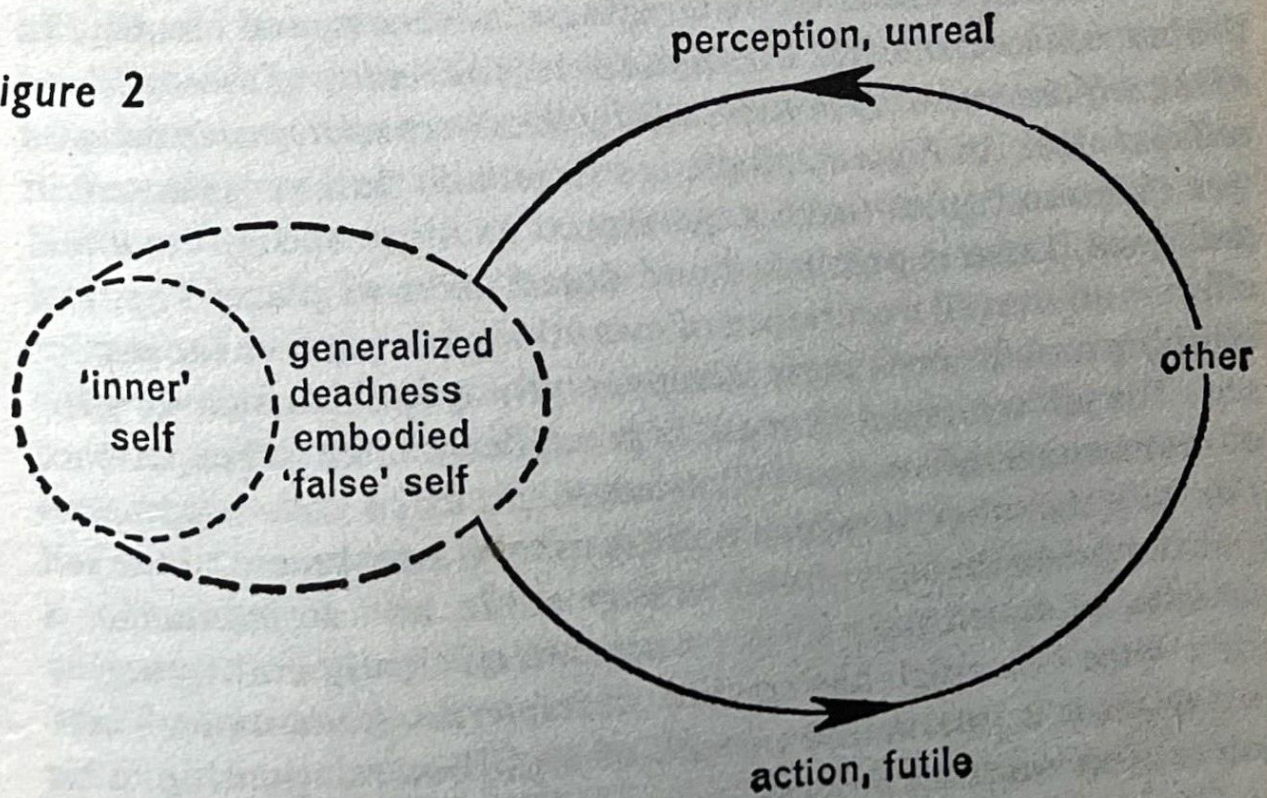


Figure 2



gates of action are not in the command of the self but are being lived and operated by a false self. The unrealness of perceptions and the falsity and meaninglessness of all activity are the necessary consequences of perception and activity being in the command of a false self – a system partially dissociated from the 'true' self, which is, therefore, excluded from direct participation in the individual's relatedness with other persons and the world. A pseudo-duality is thus experienced in the individual's own being. Instead of the individual meeting the world with an integral selfhood, he disavows part of his own being along with his disavowal of immediate attachment to things and people in the world. This can be represented schematically as follows:

Instead of

(self/body)  $\rightleftharpoons$  other

the situation is

self  $\rightleftharpoons$  (body-other)

The self, therefore, is precluded from having a direct relationship with real things and real people. When this has happened in patients, one is witness to the struggle which ensues to preserve the self's own sense of its own realness, aliveness, and identity. In the first scheme, one has a benign circle. *The reality of the world and of the self are mutually potentiated by the direct relationship between self and other.* In Figure 2, there is a vicious circle. Every element in this diagram comes to be experienced as more and more unreal and dead. Love is precluded and dread takes its place. The final effect is an overall experience of everything having come to a stop. Nothing moves; nothing is alive; everything is dead, including the self. The self by its detachment is precluded from a full experience of realness and aliveness. What one might call *a creative relationship* with the other, in which there is mutual enrichment of the self and the other (benign circle), is impossible, and an *interaction* is substituted which may seem to operate efficiently and smoothly for a while but which has no 'life' in it (*sterile relationship*). There is a quasi-it-it interaction instead of an I-thou relationship. This interaction is a dead process.

The inner self seeks to live by certain (apparently) compensating advantages. Such a self cherishes certain ideals. One, which was

very clear in the schoolboy David, is an inner honesty. Whereas all the exchanges with the other may be fraught with pretence, equivocation, hypocrisy, the individual seeks to achieve a relationship with himself that is scrupulously sincere, honest, frank. Anything may be concealed from others, but nothing must be hidden from himself. In this, the self attempts to become 'a relationship which relates itself to itself'\* to the exclusion of everything and anything. We have here the seeds of secondary splitting within the self. The individual's being having become cleft into a 'true' and a 'false' self, the true and false selves lose their realness as already indicated, but also they both in turn break into sub-systems within themselves. Thus, in the relationship that the self has with itself, one finds a second duality developing whereby the inner self splits to have a sado-masochistic relationship with itself. When this happens, the inner self, which had arisen, we suggested, in the first place as a means of clinging to a precarious sense of identity, begins to lose even what identity it had to begin with. (In the clinical illustrations, see particularly Rose, p. 150.)

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. The individual is frightened of the world, afraid that any impingement will be total, will be implosive, penetrative, fragmenting, and engulfing. He is afraid of letting anything of himself 'go', of coming out of himself, of losing himself in any experience, etc., because he will be depleted, exhausted, emptied, robbed, sucked dry.

The isolation of the self is a corollary, therefore, of the need to be in control. He prefers to *steal*, rather than to be given. He prefers to give, rather than have anything, as he feels, stolen from him; i.e. he has to be in control of who or what comes into him, and of who or what leaves him. This defensive system is elaborated, we suggest, to make up for the primary lack of ontological security. The individual who is sure of his own being does not require to adopt such measures. However, the effort to sustain a transcendent self, out of danger and in remote control of direct experiencing and

\* Kierkegaard's phrase in *The sickness unto death* (1954), but used here with quite different connotations.

action, issues in unwished-for consequences that may far outweigh what apparent gains there seemed to be.

Since the self, in maintaining its isolation and detachment does not commit itself to a creative relationship with the other and is preoccupied with the figures of phantasies, thought, memories, etc. (imagos), which cannot be directly observable by or directly expressed to others, anything (in a sense) is possible. Whatever failures or successes come the way of the false-self system, the self is able to remain uncommitted and undefined. In phantasy, the self can be anyone, anywhere, do anything, have everything. It is thus omnipotent and completely free – but only in phantasy. Once commit itself to any real project and it suffers agonies of humiliation – not necessarily for any failure, but simply because it has to subject itself to necessity and contingency. It is omnipotent and free only in phantasy. The more this phantastic omnipotence and freedom are indulged, the more weak, helpless, and fettered it becomes in actuality. The illusion of omnipotence and freedom can be sustained only within the magic circle of its own shut-upness in phantasy. And in order that this attitude be not dissipated by the slightest intrusion of reality, phantasy and reality have to be kept apart.

Sartre expresses this split very well in his *Psychology of Imagination* (1950, pp. 165–6):

... we can recognize two distinct selves in us: the imaginary self with its tendencies and desires – and the real self. There are imaginary sadists and masochists, persons of violent imagination. At each moment our imaginary self breaks in pieces and disappears at contact with reality, yielding its place to the real self. For the real and the imaginary cannot coexist by their very nature. It is a matter of two types of objects, of feelings and actions that are completely irreducible.

Hence, we may think that individuals will have to be classified in two large categories, according to whether they prefer to lead an imaginary life or a real life. But we must understand what a preference for the imaginary signifies. It is not at all a matter of preferring one sort of object to another. For instance, we should not believe that the schizophrenic and morbid dreamers in general try to substitute an unreal and more seductive and brighter content for the real content of their life, and that they seek to forget the unreal character of their images by reacting to them as if they were actual objects actually present. To

prefer the imaginary is not only to prefer a richness, a beauty, an imaginary luxury to the existing mediocrity *in spite of* their unreal nature. It is also to adopt 'imaginary' feelings and actions for the sake of their imaginary nature. It is not only this or that image that is chosen, but the imaginary state with everything it implies; it is not only an escape from the content of the real (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's enterprise, etc.), but from the form of the real itself, its character of *presence*, the sort of response it demands of us, the adaptation of our actions to the object, the inexhaustibility of perception, their independence, the very way our feelings have of developing themselves.

This split between phantasy and reality is central to Minkowski's concept of autism.

But the person who does not act in reality and only acts in phantasy *becomes himself unreal*. The actual 'world' for that person becomes shrunk and impoverished. The 'reality' of the physical world and other persons ceases to be used as a pabulum for the creative exercise of imagination, and hence comes to have less and less significance in itself. Phantasy, without being either in some measure embodied in reality, or itself enriched by injections of 'reality', becomes more and more empty and volatilized. The 'self' whose relatedness to reality is already tenuous becomes less and less a reality-self, and more and more phantasticized as it becomes more and more engaged in phantastic relationships with its own phantoms (imagos).

Without an open two-way circuit between phantasy and reality anything becomes possible in phantasy. Destructiveness in phantasy goes on without the wish to make compensatory reparation, for the guilt that prompts towards preserving and making amends loses its urgency. Destructiveness in phantasy can thus rage on, unchecked, until the world and the self are reduced, in phantasy, to dust and ashes. In the schizophrenic state the world is in ruins, and the self is (apparently) dead. No amount of frantic activity seems to have the power to bring back life again.

Thus, what comes about has the very opposite effect to that desired. Real toads invade the imaginary gardens\* and ghosts walk in the real streets. Thus, in another way, the identity of the self is again jeopardized.

\* Marianne Moore, *Collected Poems*.

***The Divided Self***

is a unique study of the human situation.

Dr Laing's first purpose is to make madness and the process of going mad comprehensible. In this, with case studies of schizophrenic patients, he succeeds brilliantly, but he does more: through a vision of sanity and madness as 'degrees of conjunction and disjunction between two persons where the one is sane by common consent' he offers a rich existential analysis of personal alienation.

The outsider, estranged from himself and society, cannot experience either himself or others as 'real'. He invents a false self and with it he confronts both the outside world and his own despair. The disintegration of his real self keeps pace with the growing unreality of his false self until, in the extremes of schizophrenic breakdown, the whole personality disintegrates.

'It is a study that makes all other works I have read on schizophrenia seem fragmentary ... The author brings, through his vision and perception, that particular touch of genius which causes one to say "Yes, I have always known that, why have I never thought of it before?"'

- *Journal of Analytical Psychology*

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