In his book <u>The Divided Self</u>[1], R.D.Laing proposes that our sense of ontological security is a prerequisite for psychological health and that many instances of mental illness are primarily a result of a lack in basic security of the self. Leaving aside those cases of mental illness which may be biologically caused, Laing observes that it is the essence of our experience of the self in relation to others which is felt as either nurturing or destructive to the development of an integral sense of ourselves. Laing states:

> The sense of identity requires the existence of another by whom one is known; and a conjunction of this other person's recognition of one's self with self-recognition (Ibid.139)

The development of an integral sense of self is thus contingent upon an affirming relationship with the outside world. The manner in which we are treated by the first 'other' in our world (the primary caregiver) defines our own view of self, which in turn contributes to our perception of the experience of being-in-the-world. The conditions of ontological security are those of a sense of our own and other's legitimacy, vitality, autonomy, reliability, and physical substantiality, which is felt "as having begun in or around birth and is liable to extinction with death" (Ibid.41). Ontological security affords us the perception of our world as basically stable and thus relatively safe.

The ontologically insecure person has failed to internalize a sense of the self as trusting and trustworthy, autonomous and vital, or as valid and valuable. As Erik Erikson pointed out in his theory of the *Eight Developmental Ages of Man*, the early psycho-social stages of development are crucial in defining and solidifying a sense of self with respect to these basic components of integrity in selfhood. Ontological insecurity creates a state of emotional deficit such that the relation to the self and the world is predisposed to develop in an unintegrated way. Without a secure sense of identity there can be no buffer against the anxiety of potential loss of self in, or by, others. The individual experiences others' love, understanding, or mere observation of him as a threat to be constantly defended against, and thus his only sanctuary is found in isolation.

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[1] Penguin Books Ltd.: England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, 1990. © Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1960.

Laing defines this type of "Engulfment anxiety" as one of the three basic forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person. A second form, "Implosion", is the anxiety of experiencing the self as a vacuum and reality as potentially filling that void, which on the one hand would ease the sense of emptiness, but which simultaneously would destroy the self that IS this emptiness. A third form of anxiety is "Petrification/ Depersonalization" which is a result of the anxiety of becoming an object in another's perception. The very existence of the other's reality precludes one's own, hence the autonomy of the self is threatened with reification. An individual suffering from this form of anxiety is led to view others as objects lacking subjectivity, since it is only by depersonalizing the other that he feels his own autonomy cannot be usurped by theirs.

In the case of James (Ibid.47), we observe that he is aware of his lack of a sense of identity and that he suffers from all three of the anxiety forms described above. He states, "I am only a response to other people, I have no identity of my own". Laing adds that James "was always on the brink of being overawed and crushed by the formidable reality that other people contained" (Ibid.48) and that he blamed his mother for treating him as her emblem, by which refusal to recognize his identity she had not let him become a person. James depersonalized himself as a "cork on the ocean" in order to keep from being petrified and, similarly, he viewed others as objects in order to deplete the threatening power of their subjectivity and aliveness. He thus "undercut the risk to himself of this aliveness either swamping him, imploding into his own emptiness, or turning him into a mere appendage" (Ibid.).

In two subsequent case descriptions, those of Mrs.R and Mrs.D, Laing shows the relationship between their own testimonies of a lack of parental contribution to their attempts at identity formation in early childhood and their current neurotic symptoms. Mrs.R suffers from agoraphobia, at the root of which is her anxiety about a loss of self in anonymity. She reports that "She wanted to be significant to someone else in whatever capacity, in contrast to her abiding memory of herself as a child that she did not really matter to her parents, that they neither loved nor hated, admired nor were ashamed of her very much" (Ibid.54). Such ambivalence from her parents left her ontologically insecure and thus unable to feel her existence in the absence of someone for whom she exists.

Mrs.D complains of being frightened of everything, of feeling dissatisfaction and anger which she does not attribute to herself but rather to her mother-in-herself. She describes "a feeling of bafflement and bewilderment" (Ibid.59) and says that "nothing she did had ever seemed to please her parents." Laing quotes her further as saying that her parents "hadn't given her any way of knowing who or what she really was or had to become" and that she felt they were "completely unpredictable and unreliable in their expression of love or hatred, approval or disapproval". In this case, the resultant ontological insecurity led Mrs.D to adopt her mother's personality in order to compensate for her own unreliable sense of identity and autonomy. In therapy with Laing she would need to come to terms with her true self's feelings of loneliness, loss, fear and bewilderment in order to validate this self and accept the freedom and responsibility of defining her own identity. These two cases demonstrate that ontological insecurity results from parents in some way neglecting to reliably mirror back to the child a sense of their being consequential, separate, and authentic.

By attempting to understand the forms of anxiety to which the ontologically insecure person is subject, we can now observe how they may be led to defend themselves with a false-self system and we can make the connection between the lack of a basic sense of identity (and therefore of ontological security) and the development of borderline personality traits with possible schizoid or psychotic manifestations. When the lack of a secure and healthy self-awareness is severe enough, an uncomfortable exaggerated awareness of the self may develop causing the individual to have difficulty behaving spontaneously, to lack an inner conviction to their actions and to become dissociated from their interaction with the outside world. The self-consciousness of the schizoid individual is extreme both in his awareness of himself and in his awareness of himself as seen or seeable by others.

Because of his lack of basic security, he experiences being seen by others as potentiating his own destruction by engulfment or petrification. His goal therefore is to be inaccessible to others and to maintain control by scrutinizing himself with increasing lucidity. This self-observation becomes highly critical however, and perpetuates the fear of potential critical regard from others. This experience of others as a threat to the self is one possible cause of the splitting of the self into an inner guarded self and an outer false self (or 'system of false selves') whose actions in the world do not implicate the inner

('true') self. When this happens, the body is felt to be the locus of the false self, and the mind is felt as the core of the true self whose function becomes to observe, control, and criticize the false self.

The case of 18-year-old David (Ibid.69), describes a schizoid personality which manifests just such a mind/body split, or false-self system. Upon coming to therapy, David's manner is described as artificial and his speech made up largely of quotations, yet "his outward appearance could not reveal the fact that his 'personality' (false-self) was no true self-expression but was largely a series of impersonations" (Ibid.72). Laing discovered that David had been overly close to his mother and had concentrated great effort on being what she wanted him to be. He acted according to her will, not his own; this was easy for him to do because he thought that everybody was an actor, having an inner "true" self and an outer "false" persona. When he was 10 years old, his mother passed away, and he then took on her role around the house - shopping, housekeeping, sewing, cooking, even embroidery. Laing notes that David's father was pleased with this behavior and found it normal. Although for outward appearances David played the part of a developing schoolboy, "he had made it his aim and ideal to make the split between his own self (which only he knew) and what other people could see of him, as complete as possible" (Ibid.71).

The point at which such a splitting of the self into a 'mind' (inner) and a 'body' (outer) may lead toward psychosis is when the individual identifies himself more exclusively with the unembodied inner self. This can occur if the false-self system begins to take on an autonomy which threatens the sanctity of the inner self and its control over the structure of the self. When he was in his teens, David's split-self structure began to be threatened when on one occasion, dressing in his mother's clothes before a mirror, he became so absorbed that his true inner self became spontaneously involved, after which he compulsively walked, talked and thought like a woman. This threat of being engulfed by his false-self disturbed him so much that he forced himself to dress in the male camouflage of a cloak and cane in order not to totally lose control and mastery of the organization of his being. He began to see his false-self as an entirely other person whom he hated and objectified. Laing observes that at this point "The self is not felt to participate in the doings of the false-self or selves, and all its or their actions are felt to be increasingly false or futile" (Ibid.74). David began to feel that he was "not real", that he was "...outside

reality and not properly alive".

The duality created by the false-self system and the resulting deadening effect of experiencing one's perceptions and actions in the world as separate from the self, becomes unbearable and all attempts are made to keep some sense of potentiality alive. As Laing explains:

> The self...is precluded from having a direct relationship with real things and real people. When this has happened...one is witness to the struggle which ensues to preserve the self's own sense of its own realness, aliveness, and identity (Ibid.82)

However, such attempts remain within the false system itself because any real involvement in the world of others continues to be felt as a threat to the inner self. The world of a person in this situation becomes increasingly self-contained as he proceeds to try to become completely self-sufficient within his inner self, relating, as the autistic does, to no one and nothing outside himself. In creating what Laing calls a "microcosmos within himself", he feels a sense of omnipotence within the realm of his own imagination. Paradoxically he also feels the impotence inherent in the fact that his 'power' is divorced from any action in the *real* world. Because such a relationship with oneself is a dead-end, and is actually impoverishing to the inner self, the sense of despair and futility only increases. This is one of the points at which such an individual may seek therapy in order to have professional support in letting go of the false-self system. If the loss of this defense system is instigated without support, the psychotic behavior which ensues as part of the healing process may create a situation in which being placed in therapy is inevitable anyway.

Using examples from selected cases in Laing's The Divided Self, I have attempted to demonstrate how Laing's theories conceive of a problem of worlds as related to ontological insecurity. Specifically, how the state of ontological insecurity creates a need to defend the self against perceived threat from the world of others. In some cases, a 'false-self system' may develop to interact with the outside world in order to protect the intensely insecure 'inner true self' from having to do so. Although this protection is motivated in the interest of the self, it is structured in such a way that, over time, the inner self becomes completely isolated from interrelationship with reality, and furthermore, the body

becomes identified with the false self's interaction in the world of the 'other'. This disembodiment

results in the inner true self being prevented from obtaining the nourishing affirmation derived from a

relationship between the self and the world. Thus the very system which allows for the protection of the

inner self, through its isolation, also prevents its health and growth and becomes a form of death in life.

Laing quotes the recovering Peter, whose case he has documented (Ibid.120), as having described the

experience concisely:

> I've been sort of dead in a way. I cut myself off from other people and
> became shut up in myself. And I can see that you become dead in a way
> when you do this. You have to live in the world *with* other people. If you
> don't something dies inside (Ibid.133)