A reading of pragmatics and paradox

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To appear in a special issue of Methods

“Pain, disease, loss, failure, despair, disappointment, the fear of death, or merely boredom—all lead to the feeling that life is meaningless. It seems to us that in its most basic definition, existential despair is the painful discrepancy between what is and what should be, between one’s perceptions and one’s third-order premises” (Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson, 1968, p. 266).

Introduction

In this paper I present an analysis of the interaction between Laing and Leila that pursues the pragmatics of their discourse into a consideration of its logical features. I am especially interested in any “pragmatic paradoxes” that are involved. Contemporary research tends to view schizophrenia as a disease involving a genetic predisposition, but Laing and others such as Watzlawick (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) and Bateson (Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956) and their co-workers considered schizophrenia primarily as a disorder of communication (not that these two are entirely contradictory beliefs). Watzlawick et al. considered the concept of “pragmatic paradox” of central importance to an understanding of the genesis of mental illness, particularly schizophrenia. They built on the notion of the “double bind” proposed by Bateson, Jackson, Haley and Weakland (1956) (and cf. Cohen, 1950). Whereas a logical paradox is “a contradiction that follows correct deduction from correct premises” (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 188), a pragmatic paradox is practical, arising in ongoing interaction, and consists of “paradoxical injunctions” (p. 190). In particular, they argued that the schizophrenic perpetuates a response to pragmatic paradox, for “schizophrenic communication is itself paradoxical and therefore imposes paradox on the other communicants, and this completes the vicious cycle” (p. 219). Laing knew the work of Watzlawick et al., and he cited Bateson et al.’s 1956 paper approvingly at some length in his Self and Others (1961/1969, pp. 144-145). (And Watzlawick et al. cited Laing, e.g., p. 214.) Like them, he saw schizophrenia as a functional, even rational, response to the contradictory demands of a dysfunctional family. His famous focus on the “knots” of human relationship (Laing, 1971/1972) was along the same lines.

It seems likely, then, that we would find Laing addressing contradiction and paradox at the level of pragmatics in his therapeutic discourse. This is the presumption that orients my interpretation in this paper. The concept of pragmatic paradox provides me with an interpretive scheme that organizes my interpretation. It enables me to go beyond a hermeneutics of everydayness into more of a depth or critical hermeneutic.
Such a step always runs the risk of imposing inappropriate conceptions on ones empirical material, but in this case I judge the risk to be slight, since the interpretive scheme I am employing is one that was familiar to Laing himself.

The “essential ingredients” of a pragmatic paradox are the following:

“(1) A strong complementary relationship [superior and subordinate]
(2) Within the frame of this relationship, an injunction is given that must be obeyed but must be disobeyed to be obeyed....
(3) The person occupying the one-down position in this relationship is unable to step outside the frame and thus dissolve the paradox by commenting on, that is, metacommunicating about, it (this would amount to ‘insubordination’)” (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 195).

An example would be provided by a parent who says to their child, “Don’t be so obedient!” (p. 200). If the child is to do what they are told, they must be disobedient, and not do what they are told!

Participants in any interaction move and are moved as they direct social acts toward one another with their talk (Nofsinger, 1991). Our methodology focuses on the pragmatics of interaction, viewing utterances not merely as statements conveying information. Rather, each utterance is a move in what Wittgenstein (1958), in his philosophy of ordinary language, termed a “language game.” To this perspective on language, both Laing and Watzlawick et al. would add that utterances are moves that can confirm, disconfirm, or reject the other speaker’s utterance and can validate or invalidate her status as a participant in the interaction. Each move of confirmation, disconfirmation, or rejection will shape the stance that participants hold in relation to other players of the game. Indeed, Laing (1961/1969) notes that “sanity or psychosis is tested by the degree of conjunction between two persons where the one is sane by common consent” (pp. 36-37). Different contexts serve as fields upon which different language games can be played. And within a single interaction, the game can change or more than one game be played simultaneously.

To anticipate, I’ll propose that Laing uses the bible passage to make an injunction that amounts to “prescribing the symptom.” Watzlawick et al. suggest that this is one way to break the hold of a pragmatic paradox. The bible passage tells Leila she must do what she is already doing--keeping her distance from her parents. But now she must choose to do this, whereas previously, one presumes, her distance has been an attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to evade the confusion of her familial knots. (Withdrawal is one of three responses to a double bind that Watzlawick et al. enumerate. The other two are obsessive search for hidden meaning and blind compliance; pp. 216-219.)

“I don’t see how you can be conscious of the universal mind....”

The first logical problem I shall describe is one that Laing himself points out:
I don't see how you can be conscious of the universal mind, the universal mind's conscious of you but you're not conscious of it.

The context here is one Bortle (this issue) calls “Eastern religion,” or “mysticism” or “new age,” and the topic under discussion is the “universal consciousness” (though Laing has recast this somewhat as “universal mind”). Laing has asked Leila to recount the teaching of her “guru”--someone she has referred to after declaring, of her purpose in agreeing to the demonstration, “I don’t know if it is worth it though” (48). To look ahead, I shall argue that it is this pessimistic declaration that occasions the moves that conclude with Laing’s subsequent “But, eh I I still put a collar and tie on under the circumstances” (90).

The paradox here is that if “universal consciousness” or “the universal mind” is “above” or “beyond” the individual mind, one can know nothing about it. Leila has described her guru as asserting that unless one can “attain [this] level of consciousness” then “there isn’t any sense in it,”--the “it” apparently referring specifically to her presence at the conference, and also more broadly to any efforts to do good. And she has announced that she herself “never attained” (52) this level.

Once Laing points out the paradox Leila demurs (“How’s that?”), Laing gives an odd chuckle (which we’ll hear again shortly) and murmurs what sounds like “Here we go!,” and Leila makes a metacommunicative assessment that grants his point: “Maybe so maybe so” (71).

Well, maybe so maybe so, I mean yeah maybe out of my bitterness I just say, well, the universal mind you know don't know anything, heh (.) I maybe, I say that because because um I look around and I don't see I don't see any superior intelligence taking care of anything.

This formulation recasts the lack of “sense,” the worthlessness, as the consequence her own perspective on the world, rather than as an objective property of an independent reality. That’s to say, it is not that the world is itself worthless, but that her “bitterness” makes her see things that way; it cause’s her to say “the universal mind... don’t know nothing.” Her 74-75 further develop this, though at the same time she steps back a little. She is ambiguous as to whether “superior intelligence” is not seen because it is really not there, or because she doesn’t expect to see it.

After a thoughtful pause Laing offers a tentative reformulation: that Leila sees “pain and suffering and stupidity and confusion” (78), and he proposes a logical formulation: “How can there be a universal mind if a universal mind allows that sorta stuff to go on?” (79). Leila agrees, and Laing develops the logic further. Several conclusions can follow:

So either the the maybe the either the universal
Given the presence of indications that cast doubt on the suggestion that there is “any superior intelligence taking care of anything” (75), this superior intelligence may not exist, or it may exist but be mad, or bad. Laing grants that he hasn’t found an answer himself to the logical conundrum he has spelled out, though he implies (“I’ve spent a lot of time trying to work out...”) that it is an important question. And this is where he offers that he “still put[s] a collar and tie on under the circumstances” (90).

Leila agrees, and offers:

L: Well, I guess if you’re dead, you blow any chance of make, of doing anything good, huh

Leila has moved from finding a “lack of sense” to an acknowledgement that it is difficult to know what conclusions to draw from the “pain and suffering...” she can see, and now an agreement that nonetheless this is no reason to quit.

“You know I know and um I know you know”

Talk about the conspiracy, to which Laing and Leila quickly turn after a brief distraction by the presence of the cameras, contains a number of paradoxical elements. I shall begin with Leila’s response to Laing’s request for elaboration: “And what conspiracy?”

L: Well, if there is one I suppose you’re a conspirator and so you know already. If there isn’t, I guess I just imagined it.

The force of her utterance here is to deny the necessity of a response. If the conspiracy exists then Laing must surely be a part of it and know about it, in which case she doesn’t need to tell him anything. On the other hand, if it doesn’t exist there is nothing for her to talk about. Either/or, she need not give him the account he’s asked her for.

But Laing won’t let her wriggle out in this way:

T: Well, ah whether or not I’m a conspirator and whether or not you are imagining it, are you prepared to er eh ah ah give me your account of what that conspiracy is?

Laing asks her to commit to giving an account, whether the conspiracy exists or not. Leila’s reply, interestingly, amounts to what Watzlawick et al. call a “level four response” (pp. 260-271). In their account, first-order knowledge is sensory awareness; knowledge about an object is second-order. Third-order knowledge is knowledge about the second order, a view of the world; premises about existence. And “psychotherapy is concerned with third-order premises and with bringing about change at this level. But to change one’s third-order premises, to become aware of the patterning of sequences of one’s own behavior and of that of the environment, is only possible from the vantage point of the
next higher, the fourth, level” (p. 267). This is a level at which one becomes aware that reality is not simply objective but “is our patterning of something that most probably is totally beyond objective human verification” (p. 267).

Interestingly, Watzlawick et al. also proposed that double-binding destroys the consistency of one’s third-order premises; it results in a “subjective state in which reality has receded or disappeared altogether” (p. 265). This amounts, it would seem, to the claim that the schizophrenic is already at the level of knowledge at which therapy operates. She recognizes that what seems objective reality is in fact an arbitrary interpretation.

It is in terms of reality being a product of human patterning that Leila now describes the conspiracy:

129 L: Ea, well, I think a conspiracy (.) doesn’t exist so I just don’t think about it. If I don’t think about it, it is not there too much. But, then, people like Peter, people like Dr. Stumpf, ea you know, they tend to make me believe in it again, so [sigh] so I try to avoid those people. I’m not going to talk to you any more. [to person off screen] No he’s alright=

And shortly:

143 L: the mind creates a whole lot of things.

And:

148 L: people see what they expect to see.
150 T: wa
151 L: So it stands to reason if I believe in a conspiracy, people are going to act like conspirators.

We are close to the first illustration of pragmatic paradox: G. E. Moore’s: “the cat is on the mat, and I don’t believe it” (Levinson, 1983, p. 235).

Leila proceeds to offer an illustration of the point that people do what you expect them to do. Laing waits for her to delivery the punchline (169) but then he challenges her.

174 T: I don’t see why (.) you are making a special point of telling me that eh eh just now since that sorta thing as you know I know and um I know you know happens all the time anyway.

Laing’s point appears to be that if Leila were sincere in saying that what she is describing “happens all the time,” and if she were sincere in saying that Laing knows this (cf. 62-65), then she would not be “making a special point” by telling him about it. What she has reported simply would not be newsworthy, either to him or in general.
Leila’s response to this challenge again elicits a chuckle from Laing. Her response—“Well, cause cause they are watching us”—makes reference to the situation of her remarks. Again, Laing’s challenge has been followed by a shift to a higher logical level: a metacommunication in the form of reference to the context. Recall that the topic of the conspiracy was introduced, by Leila (115), following Laing’s mention of the cameras. Now her explanation of why she said what she has said refers to this “watching” as its occasioning. The implication is that she has been performing for the audience, perhaps deliberately provocative. And Laing immediately grants the implication that the audience watching them is the conspiracy:

180 Well, I mean, this whole sit up set up is an enormous
181 conspiracy and you’re right in eh, right in the heart of
182 the conspiracy just now.

And now he offers a paradoxical account of the conference/conspiracy, describing it by refusing to describe it:

191 L: What kind of a conspiracy?
192 T: [clears throat] Eh, well, I’ve got a I’ve got a plane
193 booked eh, to get to Boston Sunday, so I’m not going to
194 say what sorta conspiracy is because I want to go on
195 that plane in a, in good order as far as I’m concerned.

But then:

196 No, I think it is quite a benign conspiracy. It certainly a
197 very concerted deep plan and it involves eh its much
198 wider than the people who are actually here. Seven
199 thousand people=

200 L: Huh?
201 T: =have flown in and and that’s a minor conspiracy eh in
202 terms of the galaxy but it’s quite a big conspiracy.

Cohesion has been subtly maintained among the ostensibly different topics of their conversation. Leila posited an equivalence between the “universal mind” and “the sum total of the human minds” (85). Laing has equated the conspiracy with the conference (180), and now he has gone so far as to equate both these with collective human activity (“a very concerted deep plan,” 197). Now he equates the conference/conspiracy with the universal mind (206), with “us” (211), and with “Jesus Christ” (213):

206 T: Well, I think it’s eh, ah (2) I think the universal mind is
207 eh has been asleep abit eh as far as this planet goes, I
208 mean in this galaxy eh eh that eh and this uh planet it’s
209 it’s it’s a it’s sorta itching abit. And it’s sorta waking up
210 abit and sorta doin’ something about it now () through
In each case Laing has challenged Leila’s pessimistic and skeptical assessments about reality, and she in turn has stepped to a higher logical level, to talk of her perspective (or of their context). He has cast doubt on the logic of her claim that the universal mind “don’t know anything”; now he has even cast a positive light on a conspiracy—surely a term with negative connotations—by describing it (and the conference) as “quite... benign.” And when he describes the universal mind as “sorta itching abit,” “sorta waking up abit,” although this is not by any means grand praise, it does have the effect of tilting the assessment of this entity towards the positive.

Laing is comfortable, it seems, granting ontological status to the entities Leila has talked of: universal consciousness; the conspiracy. What he is not willing to do is agree with her that these entities are in themselves essentially malevolent or incompetent. In each case he has challenged the cogency of her assertions, or the logic of her actions, in order to raise the issue of her knowledge of these entities, to question her perspective on them, and her attitude towards them. His focus on her inconsistency appears to have the consequence that he attitude begins to change (cf. Haslanger, 1992).

“I wouldn’t admit to being a Christian in most Christian company”

I turn next to the paradoxical formulation Laing offers in reply to Leila’s apparently simple question, “Are you a Christian?” (218).

He dodges, rather as she did in 129 and he has in 192. The implication of his reply is that to answer her question is not to state a simple matter of fact but to make a declaration, an affirmation. That is to say, an answer is an action, not simply a statement or a proposition. To say one is a Christian in “Christian company” would be to be taken as
affirming a shared identity. But Laing wishes to insist on a difference. He implies that one says who one is with care and caution.

Leila too displays reluctance to state unequivocally that she is a Christian:

232 T: Why are you a
233 Christian?
234 L: Hell no!
235 T: Eah eah?
236 L: I don’t think so....

But while Laing locates the source of his reticence in “most Christian company” (221), Leila locates her own reticence elsewhere: “I think God doesn’t know what he’s doing” (236).

And once again Laing won’t let this negative assessment go unchallenged:

239 T Well, I I I maybe maybe he didn’t have time to mature.
240 They got him too young.
241 L Eah?

Laing responds only with a laugh, not taking Leila’s “Eah?” as a request for repair. There is a five-second silence before Leila offers an anecdote about being eaten by god. Laing jokes with her, and then, in response to his question, “Do you think it’s not fair?” (272), Leila lodges a complaint not against a flawed superior being, but against the flawed character of human consciousness and intelligence:

274 L: I think it’s awfully mean that humans (.) are at the
275 consciousness we’re at. We’re just, we’re just half just
276 just half way some place. We’re we’re intelligent, but
277 we’re not intelligent enough. (1) At least I haven’t
278 figured anything out. Have you? You’re older.

The effect of Laing’s challenge has been again to counter Leila’s pessimism about a superior being, and to shift the source of the problem to the earthly realm, to the level of mundane human activity. Just as Watzlawick et al. describe it in the quotation opening this paper, Leila’s sense of meaninglessness and pointlessness is linked to her talk of supreme beings who she claims aren’t what they ought to be: a universal mind who “don’t know anything” (73); doctors who “try” (169); a god who “doesn’t know what he’s doing” (236); many gods who “eat their disciples” (246). But Laing suggests her disillusion is illusory. He has aligned with a second line to her logic, on a higher logical level, summed up in claims like the following: “I see mind as really powerful, and and people subconsciously their minds always interact” (144); “everybody is subconsciously aware of um everybody’s else’s mind” (63). By line 275 Leila’s negative assessment has shifted from these supreme beings to the flawed character of humanity—including herself: “We’re intelligent, but we’re not intelligent enough.” The problem is now cast not as intrinsic to being, but in human knowledge of being. Her attitude is changing.
“I would never think of asking my parents....”

Once more their attention is drawn to the immediate circumstances, this time by the audience’s laughter, and Laing after a pause changes the topic by asking a question about Leila’s family. Leila’s extended response to Laing’s “How do they feel about you?” (307) has been discussed by Bortle (this issue), who notes that it presumes what it denies. She says repeatedly “I don’t know,” but the declaration that she had to ask permission to send a Christmas gift presupposes that her relationship with her parents is problematic.

And Laing points out the contradiction:

325  T: I would never have thought of, uh sending,
326    writing my parents and asking them if it was okay for
327    me to send them a present for Christmas. Eh ah and
328    why wouldn’t it be ok?

This challenge prompts Leila to provide a more cooperative answer:

329  L: Well, ’cause maybe they hate me after all I, after being,
330    an unfaithful daughter.

It is not that she doesn’t know, but that she doesn’t want to know. And it is immediately after Leila expands on her reply that Laing cites the bible. Goldman (this issue) has analyzed this portion of the interaction in detail; I shall focus on the fact that the citation provides an injunction (especially as reformulated by Laing in 343):

343  T: But, eh, I mean he said that didn’t he eh eh unless you
345    hate your father and mother and follow me, you can’t be
346    eh my disciple.

The paradox here is that the religion of ‘love their neighbor’ and ‘family values,’ not to mention ‘honor they father and mother,’ would command the faithful disciple to “hate your father and mother.”

Paradox and ontological work

Both Laing and Watzlawick et al. asserted that there is a connection between pragmatic paradoxes and ontology. Laing saw the schizophrenic’s way of coping with paradoxical family interaction in ontological terms; he described the person caught in a double-bind as placed in an “untenable position” that amounts to “ontological insecurity”:

“In an untenable position, no matter how he feels or how he acts, or what meaning the situation has, his feelings are denuded of validity, his acts are stripped of their motives, intentions, and consequences, the situation is robbed of its meaning.... The person caught up within such a muddle does not know whether he is coming or going. In these circumstances what we call psychosis may be a desperate effort to hold on to something. It is not surprising that the
something may be what we call ‘delusions’” (1961/1969, pp. 143-144, original emphasis).

And Watzlawick asserted that a long-lasting and habitual double-bind, “especially in childhood” (p. 214), has a paralyzing effect; a paradoxical injunction “bankrupts choice itself, nothing is possible, and a self-perpetuating oscillating series is set in motion” (p. 217, original emphasis).

In simple terms, pragmatic paradox leaves the individual unsure who they are, and uncertain what to do. Does this help us to articulate the ontological work accomplished in this therapeutic interaction? I propose that when Laing challenges Leila’s formulations as logically self-contradictory he is pointing out the ways in which she is perpetuating paradox, and facilitates her escape.

Watzlawick, et al. assert that effective psychiatric interventions work by stepping in from outside a double bind to comment upon, challenge, and change the rules of the game. One of the defining features of a pragmatic paradox is the prohibition on all metacommunication. One of the rules of the game, so to speak, is that one cannot talk about the rules of the game, let alone change them. This is in large part due to the highly complementary nature of the relationship between people involved in a pragmatic paradox; one person is always in the one-down position. It follows that intervention that resolves a pragmatic paradox will involve metacommunication: moving to a higher logical level, either by attending to context or by changing perspective. Such an intervention affects change by shifting the balance of power within a complementary relationship.

Laing’s challenges are made from outside the language game Leila has been playing; they amount to metacommunications. In acting thus, he is challenging her to change her ontological commitments. As Haslanger puts it, “In charging my interlocutor with self-defeat, I contend that their proffered position is at odds with the facts of their participation in the debate” (1992, p. 295).

“How can you be unfaithful to your father?”

Let’s explore the ways in which the citation of a bible passage serves as an effective therapeutic intervention. To begin with, I would suggest that we will never be certain of the details of the pragmatic paradox Leila’s parents placed her in. Presumably it involved dual injunctions to “Be a good daughter!” and “Be a good Christian!” such that obeying one involved disobeying the other, although both were made by the same person, her preacher-father. But we can see that Laing’s citation of the bible offers an injunction that addresses both contexts, both identities. It shifts the burden of the paradox so that this ends up resting on her father, who must either accept her or be judged a hypocrite.
The biblical citation provides “metarules”: rules for changing the rules of the language game that Leila has been playing with her parents. One form of intervention is what Watzlawick et al. call “prescribing the symptom” (p. 236). “If a therapist instructs a patient to perform his symptom, he is demanding spontaneous behavior and by this paradoxical injunction imposes on his patient a behavioral change” that amounts to “making him behave as he is already behaving” (p. 237).

When Laing suggests, by means of this citation, that Leila be “happily indifferent,” he is prescribing the symptom, redefining her withdrawal from her family as conduct a good Christian would engage in. The bible passage issues the following injunction: To be a good Christian, be happily indifferent to your parents.

Whereas in all the prior discussions about authority figures Leila had located the problem with them, this time, when the authority is her father, the Christian preacher, she blames herself. While at first she insists she doesn’t know, once Laing has challenged her we have seen that she describes herself as “unfaithful.”

But Laing doesn’t accept this location of the source of the problem. First he cites the bible passage, then suggests that there is “something wrong” with its translation. Is the problem that, as Leila says, “the modern Christian emphasis on families” “is against the teachings of Jesus” (emphasis added)? Or is the problem with her father?—“Call his bluff!” suggests Laing shortly:

A whole analysis of contradiction and hypocrisy is encapsulated in Laing’s “call his bluff” (note that this too is an imperative). Leila has moved far from her parents “to escape the conspiracy.” But the consequence is that she suspects that her parents consider her to be an “unfaithful daughter.” Simply moving far away doesn’t take her out of their sphere on influence, since she knows what their interpretation of her moving away is likely to be. And if she’s a bad daughter, she can’t be a good Christian, since her father is also a preacher.

But now Laing is implying that if her father is a genuine Christian he should recognize and appreciate what she has done, and so he consider her to be a good daughter. If, on the other hand, her father doesn’t appreciate what she has done, that could only mean that he is an insincere Christian, a hypocrite (which we know Leila suspects already). In that case, she can happily ignore his views. Either way, she can be secure about what and who she.

Conclusions
When we look at the logical character of the interchange between Laing and Leila, not only at the level of assertions made but also at the pragmatic level, we find Laing repeatedly challenging Leila. I have suggested that these challenges involve metacommunications; they are made from outside the language game that Leila is still playing, a game full of paradox, a self-defeating game (cf. Haslanger, 1992). Laing’s challenges have the effect of inducing Leila to making metacommunicative moves, commenting on her own perspective and that of others (such as her father). They cause her to change her attitude, to change her ontological commitments. As a consequence she becomes more certain about who she is and the world she lives in. Her “ontological insecurity” is reduced, as is her “existential despair.” And all this is clearly visible in the discourse between the two of them.
References


