

Vincent Van Gogh Felt Deeply; Felt Tenderly

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ABSTRACT

Examining Vincent van Gogh's life and his relationship with self-injury through an existential-phenomenological perspective. This paper uses quotes from the letters sent by Vincent to his brother Theo, along with the concepts given by Dr. R.D Laing like ontological insecurity, engulfment, unembodiment, depersonalization, and petrification, to give a possible insight into Vincent van Gogh's life.

Keywords: *Existential-Phenomenological, Self-Injury, Petrification, Ontological Security, Depersonalisation, False Self.*

This essay aims to paint a picture of Vincent van Gogh's *inner life* using the palette provided by Dr. R.D Laing's approach to existential-phenomenology.

To provide a brief history, Vincent Van Gogh was born in Netherlands on 30 March 1853 and despite being the eldest of the siblings wasn't the first child. His parents' first baby was a stillborn. The Van Gogh family was blessed with three daughters and two more sons. Vincent developed a very affectionate relationship with his brother- Theo, to whom he wrote nearly five hundred letters in his lifetime. There had been no sign of mental disturbance in any of the parents but at least three of their children suffered from severe psychological illnesses. In Arles (France), where Vincent formed the Studio of the South (The Yellow House) for artists at work, he was labeled as "the mad man". He cut his left ear in one incident and shot himself in the stomach in another. His fellow artist- Paul Gauguin, had influenced his life greatly as his "master". After dying at the age of thirty seven, Vincent Van Gogh came to be known as the father of Modern Art.

Being | Becoming | Relatedness

Vincent's *Being* came to be built upon a *unitary whole* constituted by his brother- Theo, and Master- Paul Gauguin, and was cemented together by his commitment to art. The stability of these three aspects maintained his *Being* and *threshold of security*. During his stay at Arles, each of these factors were threatened for various reasons- Theo's affection and attention toward Vincent had to be shared with his new born son, also named Vincent; Gauguin had increasingly become troubled by Vincent's irrational behaviour and decided to abandon him; and finally Vincent's art was not selling. Owing to these conditions, he may have felt extremely *vulnerable* in front of the world. He spent hours just with himself in his room

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finding inspiration for his work, writing letters and painting incessantly. In this way he also protected himself from the accusations, comments and stones hurled at him by the locals in Arles. Gradually, in his attempt to avoid being *exposed* to others, he became *isolated*.

He painted immense fields of wheat under dark and stormy skies, commenting that— “It is not difficult to express here my entire sadness and extreme loneliness”. He was spending so much time in his room that he decided to paint that room full of *emptiness* and fatigue like the state of his own head. The mysteriousness of his condition and the discouragement brought by it left him feeling empty. This emptiness could have encouraged Vincent to ingest yellow oil paint and turpentine. As if, the paint could have filled the vacuum of his inner life with what he felt satisfied him the most. This could have proved lethal but he survived.

At the same time, Vincent was trying too hard to maintain the unity of his Being; preventing it from *splitting* into pieces. But, he was suffering. His relationship with himself had broken because of the recurrent voices of despair that surrounded him in his head and in the neighbourhood. He described in the letters that how he had to struggle to paint. But, his art was the only thing that kept these voices away. That is why he painted every day (70-100 paintings per month) through sickness and health, from eight to five like a regular job.

Vincent was increasingly finding his *identity* of a tender and vulnerable artist at threat. He had dreamt of being revolutionary, unique and successful but his world was falling apart. This may have given shape to his “*ontological insecurity*”. Laing described it as a position in which the person is more occupied with *preserving* rather than gratifying himself . The regular circumstances of living threaten his low threshold of security.

Vincent reacted, like an ontologically insecure person threatened by “*depersonalization*” would, by turning the medusa’s head onto everyone through his paintings including himself. Depersonalization is a technique used by people to become irresponsive to others as if the other lacks feelings. Vincent congealed people by capturing them in his portraits. This “*petrification*” allowed him to take away the subjectivity of all those who threatened his identity. For instance, Vincent sketched a local boy named Rene Secret an who often bullied him. Vincent disabled him from taking away his sensitivity and aliveness by making his portrait. He was adamant on creating exact replicas of the reality that he saw around him, perhaps to convert it into a ‘stone’. Hence, the techniques used by him involved sticking thick blobs of oil paint to create three-dimensional effect on the canvas. Vincent had indulged in a depersonalization act with himself too when he made self-portraits in the later part of his life. This may have protected him from being turned into a ‘stone’ by someone else. He had already ceased interaction with the people around him which he came to realize was not good for his art (refer to text 1). While he might have been anxious about turning into a lifeless object by the other, the worst had already happened.

Text 1.

“As I feel a need to speak out frankly, I cannot hide from you that I am overcome by a feeling of great depression a -je ne sais quoi (I don’t know what) of discouragement and despair more than I can tell. I take it so much to heart that I do not get on better with people in general; it quite worries me because on it depends so much of my success in carrying out my work.” - Drenthe, Autumn 1883, letter 328

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Text 2.

“I am decidedly better now, but hope, the desire to succeed is gone, and I work because I must so as not to suffer too much mentally, so as to distract my mind.”

- Vincent to Theo, letter 513. Summer 1888.

Vincent's mother could never get over her affection for the first child who was stillborn. So, they say that she had left Vincent to be on his own. Further, for another reason his parents had become *indifferent* to him because of the career choice that he had made. Vincent was reduced to nothing by his parents too. Additionally, Paul Gauguin was known to be a “terribly apathetic” person. He left Vincent feeling insignificant; like nothing. All this, when Vincent desperately wanted Gauguin's companionship to create a revolutionary art society in France. Through these experiences, Vincent was made to question his Being repeatedly.

Laing suggested that “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”. This system is called the *false self*. Vincent may have used religion to create a system that allowed him to deal with others without putting his inner vulnerable and secret self at the risk of *implosion and engulfment*. Implosion is understood as the anxiety related to the impingement of the person's identity by exposure to reality. The position and aura of a preacher is powerful; he ought to be always right; he is next to God; he speaks to the people in an *impersonal and distant* manner by using biblical quotes and the most ideal ways of being, but he never reveals himself. He helps the needy but never uncovers his own needs. Thus, to protect his true identity of a vulnerable artist, Vincent *claimed* to have worked as if he was “only serving the God”.

In another postulation of Vincent's false self, Theo described Vincent in a letter to their younger sister as follows: “It seems as if he were two persons: one, marvellously gifted, tender and refined, the other, egotistic and hard hearted. They present themselves in turns, so that one hears him talk first in one way, then in the other, and always with arguments on both sides. It is a pity that he is his own enemy, for he makes life hard not only for others but also for himself”. He formed a false self that acted violently to safeguard the vulnerable hidden self against the harm inflicted in the form of accusations. This sabotaged his relationships and created a world that was unreal, meaningless and futile.

According to Laing, “in the *schizoid* individual, the self may remain hungry and starved in a most primitive sense while the false self may be apparently genitally adapted. The actions of the false self do not, however, 'gratify' the 'inner self’”. For instance, Vincent's *true self* craved to be understood- “I want to touch people with my art. I want them to say: *he feels deeply; he feels tenderly*”.

Laing also suggests that, in the case of a schizoid person, psychosis is sometimes simply the removal of the veil of the false self which had been dealing with other people. But, since no account describes the quality of hallucinations experienced by Van Gogh, I choose not to pathologize him immediately.

Even as he feared being turned into nothingness by others, he derived *constant confirmation* for his existence as a *person* from them. Like, he approached prostitutes in Arles who indulged in accomplishing Vincent's sexual phantasies and were physically closest to him. Rachel is known to be his favourite prostitute who may have offered him the

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companionship and affection that he deeply craved. Interestingly, the existential meaning in prostitution is its furnishing of a "collusive identity" (Laing *Self and Others*, 104). To collude is to play together at self-deception and delusion. The character of Rachel seems similar to the false self that Vincent had created. She was always available at his convenience to soothe him. Vincent's brief interactions with her signify that he could have realized the danger of being *engulfed* by her affection. Engulfment is described as "extreme distress of the person who finds himself under a compulsion to take on the characteristics of a personality . . . alien to his own" (Laing, 1960/1990, p. 58). So, he would quickly withdraw into his lonely circle of hopelessness, suspicion and shame. Further, he constantly wrote letters to Theo to update him about his health and worries, and Theo wrote back to console him emotionally and even financially. Then, Paul Gauguin's collaboration may have ensured the accomplishment of the motives of his true self; to be recognized, empathized with and celebrated through his art. So, he had begged off Gauguin to stay with him at the Yellow House. He gave him the best facilities available to make him feel comfortable. But, Vincent slowly realized how he was getting *engulfed* by Gauguin's personality. He took to his false self and started hurling things at Gauguin; abusing him. Finally, when Gauguin decided to abandon Vincent, he could not take the loss. His hidden vulnerable self was hurt. This displays the contradictory existence within self in Vincent van Gogh.

Laing stated that it is different with creative personalities. Hence, his theory cannot fully describe the Self of Vincent van Gogh and alike. "Many schizoid writers and artists who are relatively isolated from the other succeed in establishing a creative relationship with things in the world, which are made to embody the figures of their phantasy" (Laing, 1985). For instance, Vincent became sensitive towards daily unnoticed happenings and painted them. They were important to him and might have even determined his being and non-being. The decaying sunflowers series and paintings of worn out pairs of shoes could have been representations of his phantasies of *death* and *decay*. His phantasy and reality had found a common point in his art work.

His most acclaimed painting has been- The Starry Night (1889). It could be an apt representation of his state of mind because he committed *suicide* year later. He had been dealing with acute *sleeplessness* because of his conditions, so he managed to catch the sky right before it hit the dawn. He captured the engulfing quality of the clouds by giving them a whirlpool-like- turbulent character. The split quality of the brush strokes may represent his fragmented inner world. They come together to create motion in the painting.

The piercing eyes evident in his self-portraits have an absorbing quality too for the viewers. Facts provide that Vincent painted this portrait soon after *mutilating* his left ear. Just how it appears in this painting- left ear. So, it would not be wrong to assume that he spent significant amount of time looking at himself in the mirror while painting his own portraits. What would the mirror may have reflected? Piercing eyes; self-pity; desperation of a painter for inspiration; loneliness; Japanese influence in his life; warmth of woolen clothes; safe space of his room. It appears to me as an attempt to say, "look what I have done to myself". Drawing from his letters to his brother Theo, it is established that Vincent was aware that art buyers were not interested in his gloomy, dull and emotional paintings. But, he continued to stay true to what appealed to him the most. He seemed to be at a constant struggle with the society and its laws. A recurrent theme in all of his later life paintings was loneliness. This loneliness points at the existential dilemma that may have covered Van Gogh; be it staring at the mirror to paint his portrait or to stay up late or wake up early to catch the sky before sunrise in Starry Night. Each of his brush stroke screamed out isolation and individual existence. All of them

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come together to build a bigger picture. The parallel lines of his brush strokes are similar to the tally marks counting something bigger than themselves. Just how Vincent had always wished for his true self. But, Minkowski suggests that the person who does not act in reality and only acts in phantasy *becomes himself unreal*.

Laing posited through a case example that the schizoid person feels so alienated from his body that he feels that others may be controlling his actions. Then, he further elaborated that the person may try to overcome physical deadness by *self-mutilation*. So, Vincent might have been angry at Gauguin for his narcissistic and controlling behaviour as his 'master'. The intended petrification from Gauguin's end might have triggered Vincent to cut off his left ear, so as to protect his own subjectivity. Here, the real self takes a back seat and the violent false self takes control of the body bringing its own annihilation, framed with despair, terror and sense of dissolution. Here, the self develops a sado-masochistic relationship with itself. And, "in the eyes of the world then the individual has moved from good to bad to mad" (Collier, 1977). Vincent had also been a heavy smoker and drinker. He stated that, "if the storm within gets too loud, I take a glass more to stun myself". I see it as a sign of self-destruction initiated by false self.

An *embodied* self feels worried about any sabotage to his/her flesh and bones as their existence begins from the birth of the body and ends with its annihilation. But, an *unembodied* self may not determine his/her existence in terms of the physical body. Laing suggested that when there is a split between the mind and the body, the unembodied individual most closely identifies with the mind. Their real self withdraws from the body and it becomes unable to experience real relationships with and confirmation through others so it loses what risky sense of realness it has. The unembodied self becomes an *onlooker* to whatever happens to the body. In another instance, Vincent's love interest and also his cousin- Kee, refused to see him, so he put his hand on the flame of the lamp and said, "Let me see her for as long as I can keep my hand in the flame" (Tralbaut, 1969, p. 79). Here, the indifferent and 'petrifying' nature of Kee triggered Vincent to cause harm to the body that does not determine his existence. The isolation of the self is a corollary therefore of the need to be in *control*. He had to be in control of who or what comes into him, and of who or what leaves him.

Interestingly, upon being abandoned by Gauguin, Vincent cut off his left ear and went to the red light district and gifted it to Rachel with an instruction to "keep it like a treasure". Later, he quietly went back to his room (all covered in blood) and spent the night weeping on his bed. Like Laing would have reasoned, a schizoid person "prefers to give, rather than have anything, as he feels, stolen from him". The shock and disgust generated in Rachel though his 'precious' gift might have been a function of the false self to gain control of the situation. He was fearless because he, essentially, had nothing to lose that belonged to him.

Given that, Vincent wrote in his letter to Theo: "And without your friendship I would be driven to suicide without pangs of conscience— and as cowardly as I am, I would finally do it". And, he finally did it. "I couldn't stick it any longer, so I shot myself," he told a friend. This is how he ended his relatedness with others. As he narrated it to Dr. Gatchet, Vincent felt that his death would be good for everybody. The unity of his Being was already shattered. He could not retain the friendship of his brother, companionship of his master and remained an unsuccessful artist throughout his life. Existentially, he had already descended into a non-being through disembodiment, to protect his Being. He had ended the meaningless and purposeless world created by his false self vis-a-vis others.

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Apart from the letters written by Vincent, there is no available account of his own struggle with 'psychosis' or even the quality of voices that he may have heard. Also, because the whole incident is based in the 1880s, there could have been limited interest in hearing out the patient. We can only make speculations about his sufferings. Hence, one's experience with supposed psychosis will always be a stranger to others.

Popularly, the insanity of an individual is determined by those around him/her with a mutual consensus about their own sanity. Even if an insane person tries to reason with others, how often can we understand them? Evidently not in the lonely artist Vincent's case.

The father of modern art- Vincent Van Gogh, whose nearly 800 art pieces are today curated by the most celebrated art museums of the world, managed to sell only ONE painting in his entire lifetime. Clearly, we care so much about his death, what do we even know about his life?

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Conflict of Interest

The authors carefully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

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