

An introduction to Bion's model of the mind

This is a brief introduction to Bion's picture of the mind, its origins, and how it grows by receiving and developing thoughts, through the turbulent process which he calls 'catastrophic change'.¹ And, in the reverse direction, how it retreats from growth and development. Psychoanalysis offers a distinctive method for engaging in this process, set in motion by the encounter between two minds, in a way which has vital links with art, science, philosophy and religion. Asked if there was a psychoanalytic way to the truth, Bion replied 'None whatever. Psychoanalysis is only a technical instrument, something we can make use of for any purpose we want ... to mislead or deceive people, and so on. It all depends on who is making use of it.'

Bion experimented with many metaphors in his attempt to convey his model of the mind and the way that the mind develops (or fails to develop); and he preferred to use his own terminology as he felt that existing psychoanalytic jargon was too 'saturated' with fixed meanings that could not expand to include new observed phenomena. However, essentially, his picture did not change over the years, even though its expression took various forms, from the mythical to the mathematical.

The mind, the body, and the self

Bion regarded formulations of the mind as inadequate – whether mind, self, personality, soul and supersoul, ego and id, etc. When asked what was the difference between 'mind' and 'personality' he replied, none: the problem was 'what to call the thing'. It is not the naming but the thing itself, the reality behind, that is important. He saw the mind as an apparatus for *receiving* thoughts not for *creating* them, and often asks us to view the personality as if spread out like a map, in a present-tense rather than a linear way.

In his view the mind is of very recent existence in evolutionary terms; he constantly stresses the mysteriousness of the mind and the fact that it is such a new acquisition that we still have hardly any idea what to do with it. We don't know what it is, where it is, whether it is bounded by the body of the individual, or indeed the body of a group of people, or whether it can seep through these boundaries and lodge elsewhere. He does however stress the inextricability of mind and body, whether we see this from a psycho-somatic or a soma-psychotic direction; and says that by 'self' he means the whole person, mind and body. He speculates that in biological terms the mind developed from the adrenal glands, and then attempts to process and digest thoughts on the lines of the digestive system. This supra-sensuous digestion is called 'thinking'.

Thinking is both tiring and frightening, and consequently we are liable to retreat into a mindless state relying on the artificial rules he called 'basic assumptions'. These create what he calls an 'exoskeleton' around the personality, which at first appears a safe protection but after a while results in the death of the mind as there is no room for growth. Instead, the personality should aim to grow outwards from within, on the model of an 'endoskeleton' – a mammal rather than a shellfish.

Origins

Bion inherited from Mrs Klein the conviction of the authenticity of the infant or young child's emotions and internal world before this becomes obscured by social and psychic coverings as the individual learns to fit into the community. (Not because childhood is an ideal or innocent time

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before 'shades of the prison house' impinge – a view no longer plausible after Klein – but because the child's feelings are *real*.) This infant emotionality underlies the phantasy life of adults and governs their mental orientation and its problems. Where Klein's theory was founded on clinical experience with young children, Bion's picture of the newborn or infant mind is primarily imaginative and speculative; but it is derived from experience in the consulting room that validates Klein's discoveries.

His speculations about the mind's origins extend (beyond Klein) into prenatal life and even further into the evolution of the human species, and they form the basis for his theory of thinking – of mental growth – and the negative forces that constrain or prevent growth.

Mental growth, he believes, requires a dialogue between these primitive and sophisticated parts of the mind; it is important that they should be able to hear or sense each other, just as it is important that the body and the mind should remember they are features of a single organism and need to understand each other's language. For the truth of an emotional experience cannot be approached from any one direction, certainly neither by somatic manifestations nor by deductive reasoning.

The growth-point at which two or more directions converge and focus he calls a 'caesura', adopting Freud's term for describing the trauma of birth. This caesura, Freud said, was 'impressive' but not perhaps as impressive as it seems, since if we look more closely we can see signs of continuity in the personality before and after birth, despite the radical change of environment. Bion develops this idea, imagining a dialogue between primitive parts of the personality that were nurtured in a soothing watery medium, and sophisticated parts that have adapted to a harsh gaseous medium and learned to propel this 'gas' out of their mouths in the form of 'articulate speech'. His analogy for the caesura or 'receiving-screen' where the dialogue takes place is the diaphragm, or 'contact barrier'; it both divides and links two areas of the mind, so ideally it should be 'permeable' not impenetrable.

These pre-natal, proto-mental experiences he calls 'happenings' or 'vestiges', like the anatomical vestiges of our 'fishy origins' that are found in our bodies. Bion suggests there may also be mental 'vestiges' that try to seep through the barrier or diaphragm of our post-natal minds. Mental 'happenings' are all unconscious and they go on whether we are conscious of them or not. They are indications of an idea that is trying to get through. In Bion's picture of the mind therefore, the distinction between conscious and unconscious becomes less important than it had been. It is superseded by the distinction between post-natal and pre-natal parts of the self.

Mental vestiges of this primitive level of existence need to be unconsciously contacted, not because they are more valid, but because a linkage needs to be made with the primitive origins of a thought, in order to develop it further – there lies the source of its vitality. Many significant mental events are lost not because they have been repressed (which would mean they were once conscious) but because they have never made contact across the diaphragm with the post-natal personality; there was no way of hearing what the pre-natal self was trying to communicate. This results in stunted, blocked areas of non-growth, or in psychopathology. However this picture also implies that the blockage can be released and the mind can continue to develop; it is not restrained by bodily limitations.

Contact with these vital, archaic sources is especially feasible in dream-states (Klein's 'unconscious phantasy'); sleeping and waking states of mind also need to communicate.

The growth of thoughts and alignment with O

Bion speaks consistently of the germination, birth and growth of ideas. This he says is 'not a metaphor only'; it is a psychological 'fact'. A 'thought' or an 'idea' is an emotional experience that has been captured, linked up with, traced back to its vital origins. Such a thought represents the *truth* of an emotional experience and becomes a fundamental building-block of the mind. This kind of truth is not the same as Absolute Truth, which is of course unknowable, but it is related to it. Bion's denomination for this unknowable, noumenal world of ideas is 'O'. In line with many traditional philosophies, especially the eastern and the neoPlatonic, this idea or piece of truth enters into the

world of the mind in a partial way, falsified for human consumption, at a certain moment and in a certain context.

Thoughts exist whether or not there is a thinker to receive them; they float around in the psychic atmosphere and are only caught when there is some kind of 'intersection' between O and earthly sensuous reality (such as happens in – for example – symbol-formation, or intimate relationships). Articulate speech is only one form of expression of a thought: indeed it is not necessary for a thought to be expressed at all; even if it remains unconscious it can still play its part in structuring the mind, through a process which Bion calls 'psyche-lodgement'.

Bion envisaged the growth of a thought as having many complicated stages, which indeed he attempted to map in a Grid. The Grid was intended to be useful in the consulting-room and he was not confident that it really worked; but the essential picture of the growth of a thought is that it progresses from something very small – a hint or feeling, possibly a wild conjecture – and then links up with something else (perhaps another mind, another perspective, an innate preconception) which enables it to take on sensuous form, to be 'born'.

Bion speaks of 'primordial ideas' or proto-ideas which may appear psychotic or even result in psychosis; indeed he came to some of his formulations about primitive thinking through working with psychotic and hallucinated patients. He then elaborated his picture of thought processes in the realisation that at first, all ideas appear monstrous or psychotic to the existing personality, because they bring the possibility of psychic change. Psychic change cannot occur without great disruption to the personality which would prefer to remain undisturbed, secure and comfortable in the degree of knowledge which it has already achieved. So an important feature of Bion's picture is this powerful resistance to hosting the thought, which is accompanied by what you might consider a type of pregnancy sickness. He calls the process of reception of the thought 'alignment' or 'at-one-ment' with O, the Platonic or mystical realm of the noumenal world of unknown and unknowable ideas.

Alignment with O is Bion's version of Mrs Klein's 'depressive position' – which entails overcoming infantile egocentricity, integrating split-off feelings and in this way acquiring the strength to have greater contact with reality (internal and external). Real strength is dependent on internal object relations. Where Klein considers the depressive position in terms of love and concern for the object; Bion in a related way but with a slightly different slant compares alignment-with-O to 'passionate love', a state of complex contradictory emotionality; and he emphasises its disturbing, turbulent quality, rather than either gratifying or peaceful qualities. Love, Hate, and the desire for Knowledge become closely linked and a strong tension is set up between them. He calls this 'suffering' and distinguishes it from 'pain' (which is associated with self-indulgence). This strong tension holds the personality in a 'paranoid-schizoid' state which he also describes as 'patience', until it is resolved into a 'depressive' state of acceptance and dependence on the object, and a pattern emerges. This state, although passive, is also extremely stressful; and Bion's favourite description of it is Keats's formulation of 'negative capability' – the capacity to be 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason', which he said was the most essential quality of a 'man of achievement'.

Alignment with O is accompanied by a feeling almost of helplessness; Bion likes to quote Prince Andrei in *War and Peace* saying 'That is sooth; accept it.' It brings also a sense of aesthetic harmony, of 'confidence in seeing the truth', even though this does not last long: since as soon as one thought has been received, intimations of the next thought can be sensed on the mind's horizon. The sequence of thoughts follows in a logical progression; each one is built on the one before. The pattern is from ugly (confused) to harmonious (ordered): what once seemed monstrous can, when its true shape is visible, appear beautiful.

The apparent paradox in feeling both helpless and confident is owing to the relationship between self and object that is implied in 'seeing the truth' – seeing 'things invisible to mortal sight' (as he quotes from Milton). The personality is not seeing anything by itself, but with the help of its internal object or internal deity – a kind of personal O through which the Absolute O is mediated.

The model for this intimate communication is the mother–baby relationship which he describes as container–contained. He uses the standard male–female symbols to indicate container–contained (it might be said these also have a similarity to the yin–yang combined symbol, with each side containing a part of the ‘other’). On the basis of this primary link maternal ‘reverie’ comes into play, which is the process by which the mother receives the baby’s emotional projections, meditates on them, and returns them to the baby in a meaningful state of order. Bion calls this meditative procedure ‘alpha function’; it is predominantly unconscious as well as being of course pre-verbal (in the sense of articulate speech; though vocal music plays an important part).

Maternal reverie serves as a model for all thinking processes, since there are always ‘mother’ and ‘baby’ objects in the mind, and all thinking is a process of emotional digestion and ordering. The maternal containing object is, like the baby, in a state of learning from experience, not merely a position of authority. What is necessary for the baby’s growth is not just containment, but identification with a growing mind: with the capacities and functions of the object, not just its understanding of the baby’s distress and fear of dying. Bion, especially in his later writings, stresses the evolutionary aspect of O, saying we need both the ‘restoration of god the mother’ and ‘the evolution of god the ineffable’. God the mother is the first object, the conceptual base, the first thinker; god the ineffable is the larger O, the principle of evolution itself, that can extend that first oneness beyond any knowledge contained by the first object alone.

This therefore is the foundation for the religious vertex of ‘becoming’, the type of intimate knowledge associated with deity or internal objects, similar to ‘kyndely knowing’ in the medieval work *Piers Plowman* for example – as distinct from the ‘knowing about’ which characterises the scientific vertex.

In summary: the essential principle of alignment with O is a very ancient one that over the millennia has taken many forms – from the hermit in meditation, through the mother–baby relation, to the artist struggling with symbol-formation in visual, musical or verbal media. It implies that we can tolerate a degree of not-knowing, of not being in control of our sources of knowledge. The process of alignment is continuous and never-ending, and means that the mind is oscillating constantly between paranoid-schizoid and depressive orientations, which Bion denotes by the formula $Ps \leftrightarrow D$. The mind may be almost immediately assaulted by new confusions but meanwhile it has grown, stamped by that momentary feeling of ‘security’ or aesthetic experience. The moment embodies the transcendent; but the mind is chained to its body rather than elevated beyond it; the personality is still ‘itself’, psyche and soma together.

Turbulence, catastrophic change, and becoming

As humans we are engaged in a continuous process of becoming, or trying to become, ourselves. It does not happen automatically but only through ‘learning from experience’ – a phrase which, as often with Bion, means the opposite of its usual conversational sense, and entails a structural alteration in the personality which he calls ‘catastrophic change’.

For Bion’s mind-picture is characterised by his stress on the difficulty of thinking, of learning from experience. This is perhaps a significant difference between alignment with O and the popular view of meditation as a relaxing anxiety-free state. Why is it so difficult? Because, he says, of the turbulence involved. Our default setting is to wish to preserve the status quo; we hate developing because it changes us. ‘How can we stand it?’ he asks, referring not just to the ‘psychoanalytic pair’ (as he calls the psychoanalyst and analysand) but to any thinking person. He is intensely aware that truly focusing on the experience of the present moment will increase stress, not decrease it – whether this is in the analytic consulting-room or outside in everyday life. The mind is in his view such a recent evolutionary feature that as humans, or mammals, we still regard it as an imposition and we would really prefer to go back to being dinosaurs, as evidenced by our constant attempts to destroy one another. Eating and being eaten are two ends of a single spectrum and it appears to be one that we understand. (Though terrorism – which he calls ‘the prerogative of the mentally deficient’ – is outside that spectrum, outside the survival instinct.)

Death by dinosaur mentality is one type of catastrophe – the catastrophe of oblivion, mental extinction. It is the opposite of ‘catastrophic change’, which is a necessary feature of the developing mind, and which Bion also calls ‘transformations in O’, because it indicates a transformation from learning *about* the mind to being or becoming oneself. The term ‘catastrophic’ is a kind of pun, with two alternative meanings: one being disaster, the other suggesting the moment of revelation in an ancient Greek play, the point at which all the misunderstandings and ambiguities become clarified and the hero finally accepts his death, a fate synonymous with self-knowledge. For in such situations, death is a metaphor for ‘death to the existing state of mind’ which in fact heralds a kind of ‘rebirth’ into the next state of mind, the next phase of coming to know ourselves.

So the first sign of an idea trying to emerge is a point of disturbance, of turbulence. It occurs at the caesura or diaphragm between primitive and sophisticated states of mind. Bion calls it a ‘fact of feeling’ because feelings are the nearest we can come to mental facts, and it is very difficult to observe them. An idea that is approaching some kind of intersection with O may be sensed by the personality with advance shockwaves, like indications of an earthquake. Whether it is caught or not, this new idea is liable to cause disturbance in the depths. In response to this disturbance, we have a choice: ‘Kill it or investigate it.’ Inhibiting the new idea, trying to prevent its birth, is in effect a type of murder; yet it happens all the time, owing to the exhausting and stressful nature of thinking.

The dynamic for the growth of thoughts is curiosity. Curiosity, by nature, disturbs the status quo; it can only operate in a state of not-knowing; it implies the mind is open to new possibilities, otherwise it cannot intersect with the floating idea and provide the soil for it to germinate. Bion believes it begins *in utero*, with propulsions in the amniotic fluid, creating primitive prototypes of splitting and projection. He expands the psychoanalytic concept of ‘projective identification’ to include the idea of primitive communication; there are different types of curiosity – not merely intrusive or controlling of the object, but also a vital link with it, without which thinking cannot progress. This communicative projective identification is what sets container–contained in operation between mother and baby. So curiosity may be dangerous; but so is lack of curiosity. The ‘poor mammal’ is caught between a rock and a hard place. Curiosity therefore is not just entertained but also suffered, in so far as it can lead to the turbulence associated with a potential step forward in development.

Metaphors and vertices

An idea is always caught in the link between two or more things – whether these be people, or emotions, or ‘vertices’ such as the traditional ones of science, art and religion: they are all different ways of looking at the same thing – the truth.

In line with this, for Bion, the process of locating and encapsulating an emotional situation so that it can be observed is made easier through the use of metaphors or analogies. He sometimes calls these ‘transformations’ or ‘myths’ because there is a central core that (following a mathematical metaphor) he calls the ‘invariant’ part – the basic feature that remains the same even when other aspects are different. These different aspects then throw light on each other. Extending this (with a chemical metaphor) he proposes that it is useful if a state of mind can be ‘polyvalent’, that is, open to making links with a number of other states, perspectives, or ‘vertices’. It is easier if these different states can be imagined set out on a flat plane like a map, so they can be viewed simultaneously. Just as the mind is a group, so a group of people can catch between them an idea that is floating around in the atmosphere and its progress becomes evident as it tracks its way through the group. Thus a constructive or ‘work group’ can be an aid to observation. For this process of how an idea tracks or travels, whether or not it is visible, Bion uses the metaphor of Alpheus, the sacred river that runs underground (unseen) and then re-emerges in unexpected places: it is suddenly ‘seen’, but it has always existed.

Some of Bion’s favourite metaphors for vision or observation are: the type of everyday blindness that reveals ‘things invisible to mortal sight’ (a quotation from Milton, but an idea that is traditional

in religion and poetry); the sculpture whose impact lies in the spaces between, that trap light, so we have to look at the space surrounding the object as well as the solid object, in order to understand its meaning; the diamond-cutter who cuts the stone in such a way that it reveals a two-directional passage of light, a communication benefiting both ends of the spectrum, revealing inner beauty. He also uses astronomical metaphors, such as the giant radio telescope which scans the sky for minute specks of insight that might be lost in depths of preconceived knowledge. A mathematical metaphor is that of points which are 'conjugate complex', that is, they appear to be a single point but structurally they are in fact composed of separate points which have come together; this represents a meeting of vertices in harmony, aligning with the 'O' of a situation.

To represent the type of 'O' that is Absolute Beauty, he refers to the story of how Homer describes Helen of Troy, or rather, doesn't describe her: her presence is simply indicated by a movement on the city walls and we have to imagine her through a type of absence; again, it is a traditional way of indicating that which is indescribable or ineffable, such as godhead or ultimate reality. What the poet shows us is not a particular woman but a principle of beauty beyond – pointing to the source of our awe and knowledge of beauty. In his *Memoir of the Future*, he speculates about a 'blush on the walls of the uterus' – again, the movement on the walls that marks invisibly the moment of genesis of a baby or an idea, of 'things invisible to mortal sight'. Bion says: 'These are verbal transformations of visual images. To some extent one can say one hears or sees the source of the stimulation; but I don't think it is true. I think you are always up against this problem of what *is* the source, what is the O, the origin. One can say "O" or one can cite the Buddhist prayer I suppose, or make these mathematical signs.' (He also refers to the Tao, the principle of the universe which is known by a sense of direction).

To represent the turbulent emotions which underlie the smooth surface of the latency or latency-type mental state, he uses the story of Palinurus, who failed to see the turbulent storm that was brewing beneath the smooth latency surface of the Mediterranean, and was hurled into the sea with his broken rudder. Bion finds latency a better metaphor than adolescence, since in adolescence the turbulence is 'too obvious' and what we need to do is to sharpen our perceptions to be able to notice the hidden and unacknowledged conflicts that lie beneath an apparently smooth surface life, and may dangerously erupt without warning.

Bion also uses metaphors from mankind's evolutionary history to describe our general difficulty in thinking: such as, the dinosaur being superseded by the mammal which finds it is equipped with not just a brain but also a mind; and the pre- and post-natal parts of the self which have such problems in communicating that come to a crisis at the caesura of birth; yet both of which are essential to the vitality of the mind.

Enemies of growth

The type of thinking or meditation described by Bion is, as we have seen, a turbulent, not a peaceful one; and the moments of aesthetic revelation are temporary, although he believes that even a few such moments are all that is needed for the mind to be able to develop. In Kleinian terms there is always an envious, self-destructive part of the personality; with Bion, the forces antagonistic to development are extended to the wish to maintain the status quo in order to avoid turbulence.

To take the concept of envy first. What is the envy of, exactly? Bion says that 'If the envy were to assume an aspect of whole object it could be seen as envy of the personality capable of maturation and of the object stimulating maturation' – that is, the envy is stirred by the growth process itself, and it is directed not simply at the object (or oedipally, at the internal parents), nor at the 'new baby' part of the family or the personality, but at the *link* between these objects. It is not envy of either container or contained, on their own; it is envy of the creative link between them (the 'symbiotic' link as he calls it) – that leads to 'gratitude' at the other end of the spectrum. Hence he says we should worry less about our inhibitions (the classical psychoanalytic formula), and worry more about our 'impulse to inhibit' this creative link.

The contrast to a symbiotic link is a parasitic link: when the two parts of the personality, self and object, get into a hostile or mutually destructive relationship. The hostile object is a pseudo-object; it has been constructed by the omnipotent self, and it is brought into action when the personality begins to move forwards, because it is envious essentially of growth and development. This idea of the personality's hostility to growth is an important part of Bion's vision and differentiates his picture from the Kleinian one (or indeed, from almost all other psychoanalytic models, which generally attribute failures of growth to environmental factors – with an admixture of constitutional). Bion attributes failure of growth to a natural dislike of having our minds developed: because it is always a process in which we are passive, not in control, and we do not know in which direction the mind will go or what shape it may take. Given this, however, some personalities have a stronger constitution than others, and can *tolerate* the growth process better.

So in Bion's vision we can appreciate how the personality is pulled forward almost, in a sense, against its will, by curiosity to know the truth or reality of things, and a sense of beauty. He constantly warns against the impulse to 'kill' curiosity, which is evidenced by sayings such as 'I know, I know' and 'I don't know' (meaning much the same thing: 'don't say any more!'). The death of curiosity occurs when a preconception mates with a memory to prevent catastrophic change: that is, the personality senses a developmental change is on the horizon, and quickly retreats back to some existing comfortable picture from the past (a memory), which will confirm its status quo. It is an example of the personality taking a 'wrong turning' which can happen at any stage in life, pre- or post-natal. This is why he advocates abandoning memory and desire: they are both forms of the same thing, namely, preconceived pictures, whether they are envisaged as occurring in the past or in the future. He doesn't mean abandon desire in the sense of strong emotion, but in the sense of a tyrannical wish to conform (or for somebody else to conform) to a particular image that is essentially narcissistic. It is the opposite of 'remembering' which is the process of making links to get at the meaning that lies beyond differences.

Hostility to growth can also take the form of lies which, Bion explains, are invented by the self, and may often seem to be very clever; they are designed to impress. This is by contrast with truth, which is experienced passively as coming from outside the self, mediated by internal objects. He points out that a lie can only come into existence if the personality has already glimpsed some intimation of the truth; this is because a lie is specifically a perversion of the truth – a covering-over through some kind of substitution. The creation of lies constitutes a Negative Grid opposed to the Grid for thinking. Though Bion did not actually develop the Negative Grid, he does speak of minus values of Love, Hate, and Knowledge (LHK). These negative links are not bad, nasty or painful emotions; they are *non-emotions*, an absence of true emotionality. As a result they may 'yield pleasure or pain but not meaning' or understanding.

When lies become systematised, they constitute 'morality': a fixed authoritarian system with behavioural rules and regulations, a kind of false ethics. All groups and societies have their own moral systems; and because the individual is also a group, he or she also has a personal moral system. He speaks of the 'outraged moral system' that impresses itself on the psychoanalyst who has become tired and confused and so seeks for some reliable explanation for whatever is going on in the consulting room (quite likely in collusion with the patient who may be pushing for some false but respectable interpretation). Some of these lies take the form of what Freud called 'paramnesias' (space-filling facts); some take the form of old theories that worked in the past; some take the form of an 'exoskeleton', a hard casing of established ideas that may once have served a useful protective function but then become so rigid there is no possibility of mental expansion, no 'room for growth'. Knowledge can be 'too thick for wisdom' to penetrate. Too much reliance on knowing-about does not allow for true intimate 'knowing' to take place through psyche-lodgement – when the germ of a new idea lodges in a 'roughness' in the smooth skull of existing knowledge.

Morality is thus the opposite, or rather the negative, of the passionate links of LHK in alignment with O. The idea of knowledge as power is a delusion and can be a manipulation (Bion regarded many forms of education in this light, and thought that true education was hard to come by.)

Morality may have its uses but, for Bion, it is more important to keep an eye on its dangers. In his autobiographical *Memoir of the Future* morality appears in the form of a character called the Devil.

One specific type of morality is termed by Bion a 'basic assumption'. The concept of basic assumptions derived from his early work with groups, where he identified three typical forms of basic assumption: dependence, fight-flight, and pairing (or messianic). Dependence is dominated by a wish to find someone to provide security; fight-flight is the aggressive form of the same; and pairing involves a fantasy of producing a messiah who will save the group. Basic assumption groups employ what Bion calls the 'language of substitution' as opposed to the 'language of achievement'. They all constitute the avoidance of thinking for oneself and they are all sanctioned by society; different societies may give them a different format to suit the prevailing moral system but the essential principle is the same – of demand for conformity. These groups operate in the individual mind as well as in a social context and we spend much of our time under the aegis of these automatic, 'protomental' states, otherwise daily life would be impossible. The main point here is to make a distinction between mental and protomental activity: one type of mindset is for intimate relationships, the other is for social convenience.

An offshoot from this is the concept of 'mindlessness', in which the struggle for object-relatedness is avoided or side-stepped but neither does it fall into an attacking mode. The term 'mindlessness' (implicit in Bion) was later adopted by Donald Meltzer to describe a special, non-aggressive mode of dismantling the dimensionality of the mind that is performed by autistic children.

Bion borrows the terms 'beta-elements' and 'bizarre elements' to indicate fragments of non-thought which have somehow failed to become processed into symbols through alpha function: that is, through relationship with an object. It is not clear whether he regarded these as proto-lies, tiny perversions of truth, or simply as the mind's rubbish – part of the massive amount of sensuous information that is of no immediate use and has to be evacuated. But what is clear is that the personality can attack itself, in order to avoid the turbulence of growth-pains. It is not just a matter of *telling* lies; the personality can also, he says, '*be* a lie'; constant lying-in-the-soul has a negative structural impact on the mind; it is not just a false front presented to public view.

The danger for the human animal is of being 'too intelligent to be wise'; he refers often to man's clever monkey-like tricks and the problem of technological inventions that are far in advance of our capacity to use them wisely.

The psychoanalytic pair

For Bion therefore, resistance is not to psychoanalytic interpretations (which is feels may often be justifiable) but to the growth process itself. Hostility is liable to be aroused by the psychoanalytic process precisely because it is an attempt to liberate or re-start a growth process which has got into difficulties. The aim is 'to introduce the patient to himself, which is a marriage that will last as long as he lives.'

So this introduction to self-knowledge takes the form of working as a pair, a 'work group' of two. Indeed Bion increasingly speaks of the 'psychoanalytic pair' rather than the psychoanalyst alone. The ultimate hope is that the patient will then internalise this work group and it will continue to function and develop within the individual mind. Bion is very much aware that psychoanalysis is simply one (very recent) method for this type of meditation; and says that self-analysis is a 'natural' function.

The work group is the opposite of a basic assumption group: it focuses not on authority and obedience but on the task of personality development. The method is based on the 'reverie' between mother and baby, the natural detoxification of infant fears that absorbs and processes them and presents them transformed to the infant with their meaning and understanding added. The prototypical anxiety (at root, the fear of death) becomes tolerable through being symbolised. Although Bion gives it the strange name of 'alpha function' it is a natural process, and the model for the psychoanalytical relationship. The psychoanalytic pair work on an analogous basis: as the meaning of anxiety takes shape, it loses its destructiveness and becomes absorbed into the structure of the

mind in the form of self-knowledge. As in ordinary personality development, there is a continuous oscillation between Ps (paranoid-schizoid) and D (depressive) positions: anxiety (requiring patience and suffering) and security or harmony (the sense of being understood, of being in line with O).

Something that Bion hints at from early on and makes clearer in his late talks, is that the analysis, rather than the analyst, is the true container for this turbulent oscillation between Ps and D. 'The personality has a container-contained relationship with psychoanalysis.' This applies to both parties and explains how the analyst can 'stand it' – stand the turbulence. The modifying of anxiety is not entirely the responsibility of the analyst but rests on security provided by the psychoanalytic setting (though Bion does not use the word 'setting' much, just as he prefers not to use 'transference'). A mind-scene is created like a play in a theatre, in which the germ of an idea may be noticed and held for observation by the protagonists. And he is emphatic that the idea is 'born' of the *relationship* not either party alone.

But although there are two main protagonists (two bodies in the room), there are actually more 'shadowy' objects in the psychic setting. Bion insists there are always 'at least' three parties in the analytic setup – to include the third one that is observing or analysing the analyst. Prompted by Martha Harris in a seminar at the Tavistock to expand on what was meant by 'at least' three parties, it became clearer that the 'internal objects' operating in the consulting room belong not to one person but rather to the psychoanalytic pair. Later Donald Meltzer was to describe psychoanalysis as a 'conversation between internal objects.' This is slightly different from intersubjectivity: it is a conversation between the most advanced and thoughtful parts of each person, who remain separate, yet communicate across a caesura which displays both their differences and their essential identity, as at the caesura of birth. Thus the sense of at-one-ment or alignment with O (when it happens) represents an intersection not with a single person but with the analytic pair.

That is, when it is a true conversation and not (Bion warns) a false 'imitation' that looks like psychoanalysis but is really a basic assumption group, probably of the dependent or pairing type, whose sense of security is based on 'being good' rather than on the aesthetic harmony of 'That is sooth; accept it.' There is a danger in misconstruing container-contained as this type of comfortable complacent mutual parasitism. Just as the psychoanalysis itself is the container for the encounter, so the patient's attacks will be made on the *link* between the analyst and the analysis. The analyst has no favoured access to omniscience; if he is lucky there may be a 'fringe benefit' of increased self-knowledge.

Observation and O

Bion often spoke about the curious nature of psychoanalysis in studying the mind by using the same instrument that is being studied: the observer-observed. The mind being observed changes through the act of observing. Observation is the key to the psychoanalytic method, as it is to any art or science, and Bion emphasises this increasingly. The psychoanalytic task is to look for evidence of a potential idea that is trying to get through the psychic atmosphere (and that may appear as a 'wild idea'). It is an exhausting struggle since we humans are barely beginning to learn how to receive ideas, which are almost imperceptible to our undeveloped mental apparatus, and we are constantly being obstructed by what he calls the 'noise' of basic assumptions, theories, and other stuff that obscures observation. For example, by way of defence, when tired or perhaps pushed by the patient, the analyst may get a 'rush of theories to the head'. Such theories when new may have represented genuine discoveries, but using them as part of a moral system denudes their language and the original or 'basic' or thing is lost to sight. He was suspicious even of the terms transference and countertransference, feeling that too much falsehood had accrued to them.

Bion often quoted Freud's quotation of Charcot on the importance of observation; but he extended it to include the use of imagination. According to Bion psychoanalytic observation cannot take place without the use of imagination and he encouraged analysts to 'speculate' and 'give your imagination an airing', for the only 'facts' to be met in psychoanalysis are 'the facts of feeling' and

these cannot be apprehended sensuously as the body can be by the physician, so they need to be imagined. Bion also liked Freud's definition of consciousness as 'an organ for the perception of psychic qualities', but added that it could be turned either outward (as in the daytime) or inward (at night, in dreams). This implies that the psychoanalytic session is itself a type of dream being surveyed by the organ of consciousness; for Bion differentiated between the dream that 'happened' last night when the patient was asleep, and that which is told or occurs during the session, which is the only real evidence available to the psychoanalytic pair.

Finally, Bion saw psychoanalysis itself as one of those wild ideas with an 'origin' somewhere in the roots of human history and culture, awaiting Freud's specific genius to catch it and give it earthly form: it is an art-science both modern and ancient: 'Who are our ancestors?' The idea of psychoanalysis aligns itself with the idea of an individual personality that is wondering how to become itself. When in a seminar someone declared that everyone should have 'the right to make up their own mind' Bion replied that it was 'a nice idea' but that unfortunately, we need to come to terms with the fact that 'our minds are made up for us by forces about which we know nothing'. And the matter is put even more succinctly by the heroine of his *Memoir of the Future* when she says: 'I don't make up my mind – I let my mind make *me* up.' The psychoanalytic task is no different from that of everyday life: it is to relinquish illusory omnipotence, and align oneself with reality (O), internal and external. We can only become ourselves through reality-testing, namely, learning from experience the difference between truth and lies.