

Core Concepts of Bion

From a course given in Wuhan, September 2019

PART ONE

How the mind grows through processing thoughts

Bion's view is that the personality develops by thinking about its emotional experiences. As already suggested, he considered this a very difficult process – natural, but far from automatic, and liable to a multitude of impediments at every stage of evolution. One of the major adjustments he made to the Kleinian view of personality development was this one regarding the difficulty of mental growth, by contrast with physical growth which was programmed to take place in a satisfactory way, provided environmental conditions were good enough. Mental growth is more mysterious as well as being less evidently observable.

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. 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.

Container-contained and reverie

For Bion, the way a thought grows within the mind is modelled on the mother-baby relationship, which he calls container–contained. More specifically, in terms of part-object relationships, it is the relation between the baby's mouth (the seeker of knowledge) and the knowledge or food contained within the breast, which is negotiated via a relationship with the nipple. This feeding process in Bion is mental as well as physical: milk has the significance of knowledge (ultimately it is the link with 'O' as he terms total or absolute knowledge). The feeding relationship is more than an analogy; as in Klein, it is the actual, external origin of a process that becomes internalised and then increasingly complex as the mind develops. It is an object-relations model, even when Bion's language takes on its most abstract or mathematical forms.

Just as Klein sees the mother-baby relationship as the basis for the adult creative sexual relationship, Bion denotes container and contained by means of the accepted symbols for female and male, and this too is more than an analogy, as he regards the acquisition of true knowledge (thoughts) as something that happens via an internal male-female conjunction that is similar to the generation of an embryo via the encounter between sperm and ovum. He also employs other ways of describing it - such as the mathematical one about points that are 'conjugate complex', which is different from two points simply being imposed over one another – it is an organic, interpenetrating relationship, even if this cannot be detected from the outside.

The mysterious complex or sexual conjunction between different 'sexes' or 'vertices' (as he also calls them) enables the germ of a thought to be caught and to start growing, through a process which he calls 'reverie'. Reverie is a state of mind in which alpha-function or symbol-

formation can take place. It is a special kind of meditation which involves the processing of emotional disturbance (and all emotions are disturbing), such that the disturbance is converted into an idea which expands the structure of the mind. The destructive elements within the idea, such as fear of death, are detoxified, but not erased or ignored; rather, they are accepted and understood. As the poet Coleridge said, 'An idea can only be contained in a symbol'. Container-contained applies not just to the literal mother-baby relationship but to the way the idea itself is held and given meaning within the container-symbol.

In this way, gradually, the mind, whether of baby or adult, not only acquires new ideas, but also enhances its capacities, its ability to convert feelings into ideas. On the basis of this 'learning from experience', the next time a disturbing thought or emotion comes along, the mind will be better equipped to process it.

This is what Bion means by 'thinking' – a special and precise use of the term that we use continually every day in a way that is so vague and commonplace it is almost meaningless.

The caesura – prenatal and postnatal

Bion's 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'. This verbal articulacy, and pre-verbal non-articulacy, need to learn one other's language.

It is important that we recognise that the pre-verbal and non-verbal continue to play a vital part in the thinking process; they are never *superseded* by articulate verbal thought (as demonstrated for example by the many languages of different art forms).

Bion's 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. Again it is more than analogy, since he views the dialogue as literally becoming first established at the moment of birth when the diaphragm becomes functional in its new gaseous medium, whilst still retaining some memory of the original watery one.

Turbulence

This contact barrier therefore is the place where thinking originates. It receives and registers psychic turbulence. Turbulence occurs when two psychic elements come within noticing dif-

ference of one another. These psychic elements may be two minds, such as the analyst and the analysand, or two parts of a mind, or two states of mind. Thus the presence of **psychic turbulence** is the key to mental growth, as it indicates the place where a potential idea is trying to enter the mind. In order to become 'known', it first makes its existence felt through 'feelings' – not sensuous feelings but suprasensuous, psychic feelings that Bion often indicates by spelling the word 'feel-ings', separating its two elements. Or he talks about 'the facts of feeling', to stress that this is the nearest we can come scientifically to a 'fact' in this area of investigation.

We cannot know a thought unless we have made contact with its root feeling or feelings – which Bion also calls 'happenings', 'vestiges' of our 'fishy selves', our psychic ancestry that mirrors the evolution of the human species. Indeed, the real task of the psychoanalyst is to learn to observe hidden feelings, to notice their indications. Such feelings are hidden between the lines of ordinary discourse – in slight movements, gestures, idiosyncratic uses of language, tones of voice.

This is of course different from the common philosophical view that feeling and thinking are in opposition to one another and the personality has to make a choice between following either rational thought or irrational feeling. Bion's view – like that of many poets – is that valuable thinking derives from the recognition and exploration of a feeling that has its primitive roots in prenatal existence, the life of the Id.

Bion's famous Grid represented an attempt to map the stages of growth of a thought, inside or outside the psychoanalytic session, from its inchoate origins in feeling and dream, to its ultimate most abstract expression. He decided it had been unsuccessful but he continued to believe it was a useful venture, and that others could follow his idea and create a grid of their own, that seemed to correspond to their own experience of how thinking progressed in a session.

Catastrophic change

Bion often emphasises that we do not know what the mind is – what are its boundaries, whether it exists only within an individual or within a group. We have to imagine it, with difficulty, by trying to use it. But, he says, he is convinced that 'there is such a thing as the mind', and he says it with the kind of emphasis that suggests not everybody does believe the mind is a real thing – despite its not having sensuous reality. Even psychoanalysts do not necessarily believe that there really is a mind. They use an 'as if' language of jargon that simply fills in the gaps of our ignorance that Freud called 'paramnesias'. But according to Bion we do have evidence of the mind's existence, through its functioning. Occasionally, somehow, it seems to work, astonishing as it may seem – and perhaps we should be astonished.

How can we tell there really is a mind? An idea that is approaching the outer reaches of the mind (whatever that may be) is sensed by the personality with advance shockwaves, like indications of an earthquake. Before this 'feeling' occurs there is no reaction between the thought and the thinker. The thought exists quite independently but has not been discovered by the thinker. Bion calls this state of quiet non-communication 'commensal'. It is important that, in this Platonic system, the thought does not depend on any particular thinker for its existence; it belongs to the world of ideas, of ultimate reality, and may indeed never find a place in an earthly mind. But if the idea is felt or sensed in advance by a person, then it means that person is required to 'think' it – their mind has reached that stage in development. That impinging thought is relevant to them, at that moment in time, and needs to find containment or 'psyche-lodgement' as Bion also calls it. Their personality structure is ready to receive it and be expanded by it.

A catastrophic change is on the horizon – will this be catastrophic in the sense of disas-

trous (that is, will it destroy the mind or the group), or could it be catastrophic in the sense of ‘death to the existing state of mind’ in which the mind is reborn into a new and higher (more complex) state of knowledge. Alpha-function has transformed its destructive potential.

Whether it is absorbed 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.

Bion describes as ‘commensal’ a state in which two things co-exist without really noticing or disturbing one another; as ‘symbiotic’ a state in which they are beginning to link and react with one another in potentially a creative way; and as ‘parasitic’ a state in which the two (or more) things become hostile and try to destroy one another. These two or more things can be people, or emotions, or what he calls ‘vertices’, such as those of art, science, and religion: different ways of looking at the same thing – the truth. Sometimes to demonstrate this he would hold up his hand and look at it from each side – ‘binocular vision’.

The symbiotic conjunction is thus a manifestation of a depressive value system, as opposed to a paranoid-schizoid one (which would lead to a parasitic conjunction, if it was persisted in). Such a symbiotic conjunction between an idea and its container creates shockwaves in the external group as well, promoting the possibility of ‘killing it or finding out about it’ in others. For the idea is merely hosted by an individual mind, it is not its personal possession. It goes wherever it can find a lodging. ‘Who created or owns the idea?’ he asks (in *A Memoir of the Future*), implying that there is no answer.

Bion’s idea of catastrophic change contains a warning as well as a celebration: namely, that psychoanalysis can be dangerous, and new ideas can indeed be destructive if their containing mind or society cannot find a symbiotic relationship, or a partially symbiotic one within a largely commensal one – which also was Socrates’ message when he drunk the hemlock; he preferred the idea of his life to continue, rather than his life itself. One of Bion’s favourite metaphors is that of the sacred classical River Alpheus which runs underground (as it were, hiding its turbulent waters of inspiration from the organisation on the surface), and then re-emerges at another point in time and another place where it can again become part of the culture, at least for the time being. Plato’s ideas followed just such a course as they travelled between ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy.

‘Becoming’ and ‘alignment with O’

Ideas, therefore, track within cultures, between cultures, between people in a group, and within an individual mind, which in Bion’s picture is also a kind of group comprised of many different parts of the self and its objects.

When an idea is truly ‘had’, this means it has become incorporated into the personality, group or culture, through a process of catastrophic change, and this changes the status quo irrevocably. It can never be the same again: the structure has expanded, even if at some point the idea is attacked or hidden, covered over. It goes underground and comes up somewhere else, or in another individual. From the realms of the infinite and ineffable, the Platonic world of ideas, it has tracked down into earthly society.

In relation to the individual mind, Bion calls this ‘psyche-lodgement’. He also suggests that there are not that many ideas floating around, and says that ‘it is very unlikely any of us will discover a new idea’. The idea of psychoanalysis for example, is both new and ancient at the same time, having taken different forms before Freud rediscovered it in the form of the psychoanalytic method. What is important is not so much the idea as the manner and the context of its earthly lodging.

Bion calls this ‘intersection’ or ‘alignment’ with ‘O’ – O being the noumenal world of the unknown and unknowable, but nonetheless the source of all knowledge that can get into our consciousness as living beings. 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. 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).

We can say that O must also refer to object, in the object-relations sense, though Bion tends to avoid this jargon – he tries to avoid all the technical jargon and to choose ‘unsaturated’ formulations whose meaning is still open – but finds that this is not really possible. Traditional philosophical, and psychoanalytic, formulations always creep in with some of their existing meaning. Indeed another of his phrases is ‘at-one-ment’, meaning becoming one with O (another way of describing alignment – not becoming O); it is a religious phrase which has close connections with the Kleinian concept of reparation and the depressive position.

O can never be known of course and it does not make sense to talk about ‘becoming’ O (though sometimes that concept is used, I think mistakenly). What is certain is that we are in a process of continual becoming (at least, if our minds are still alive) - but we are becoming ourselves, not becoming O. It is important to recognise that at every stage of development or of thinking, we are strangers to ourselves; there are parts we have never known, either because they have never been born, or because they have instantly been split off and need to be reintegrated. Bion often refers to the process of ‘meeting oneself’ and says that this is the function of psychoanalysis – to ‘introduce the patient to himself’ for ‘that is a marriage that will last as long as he lives’. We need to meet other parts of ourselves across whatever caesura divides and focuses them, as that is the way in which psyche-lodgement can take place, and an idea can germinate that develops us, helping us in the activity of becoming.

Becoming oneself, or aligning with O, is exactly the same as Bion’s concept of ‘learning from experience’ – they are two ways of expressing the same thing, namely, having and digesting thoughts that bring us in touch with reality, both internal and external: a process that occurs through the operation of alpha-function in the context of internal object relations.

‘Learning from experience’ is thus a very complicated concept; as is typical of Bion, he uses a commonplace phrase that, like ‘feeling’ or ‘thinking’, has very deep reverberations.

I would like to say more this afternoon about learning from experience, in relation to O and the idea of ‘passionate love’ and contrary emotions, and also about the negative or defensive reactions that they evoke. But just now I would like to finish by bringing in Bion’s emphasis on another aspect of O, namely, observation.

Observation and O

We could say that another of O’s references is observation. In Bion all these things are intimately connected. There can be no alignment with O, no contact with reality, without true and accurate observation: one leads to the other. What is being observed? Undoubtedly, the hidden turbulence which indicates the presence of a potential idea. Bion repeatedly emphasises the difficulty of this kind of observation, and in his later talks he insists that this is really what psy-

choanalysis is all about: we can forget the theories, it's all about learning how to look.

For it is very difficult even to see the place of conflict, never mind trying to interpret or understand what is happening there. Bion regarded the detection of psychic turbulence as a major problem in psychoanalysis and in other fields that aim to investigate the growing mind. He used many examples from myth and other fields to illustrate this presence of hidden turbulence: one of his favourites was the classical story of Palinurus, Aeneas' helmsman, who came to a catastrophic end because he failed to detect the storm that was brewing beneath the smooth waters of the Mediterranean. He refers to this myth as an example of the latency state of mind, and says that latency is 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.

The patient, he says, is 'usually in a state of turmoil' but may often say he has nothing interesting to talk about, like a latency child repeating patterns or activities in a deceptively boring way which disguises the questioning quality of the repetition. The latency state of mind, in other words, contains a question but tries to keep it hidden and we need to learn to look for the hidden question.

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'). He often quoted Freud's quotation of Charcot on the importance of observation; but he extended it to include the use of imagination.

He 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.

Some of Bion's favourite metaphors for internal 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.

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.

For him, one of the greatest interferences to psychoanalytic observation is the 'noise' of psychoanalytic theories. The analyst, when tired, is liable to get a 'rush of theories to the head' which blocks off the still small voice of prenatal or non-verbal reality which is trying to get through the barrier and attract post-natal attention. He calls this hidden reality the 'sleeping beauty of truth'. Seeing this hidden beauty (about which we shall say more this afternoon) is what enables alignment with O.

PART TWO

LHK and the aesthetic perspective

Bion says that the nearest way of describing what he means by alignment or intersection with O is 'passionate love':

These fundamental characteristics, love, hate, dread, are sharpened to a point where the participating pair may feel them to be almost unbearable: it is the price that has to be paid for the transformation of an activity that is *about* psychoanalysis into an activity that is psychoanalysis. (*Attention and Interpretation*)

In order for psychoanalysis to be psychoanalysis, not just a veneer or lookalike, its defining moments – the moments of growth or catastrophic change – must be founded on this tension between the primal emotions of attraction and repulsion. The situation in an analysis is just the same as that for an individual in everyday life. This is the aesthetic 'transformation' - it is what is meant by 'becoming' oneself – and Bion stresses its difficulty: 'How can we stand it?' Fear, he says, is essential part of every psychoanalytic session; and the analyst who is not afraid of what he might encounter in the consulting room the next day is not doing psychoanalysis. There should be two frightened people in the room: otherwise, 'why are they bothering to find out what everyone knows?' It is a quest for knowledge, which means, a venture into the unknown. The sense of danger and fear, in particular, he associates with the prenatal mind and its instinct to 'smell' qualities in the object under observation (such as, the emotional storm in the consulting room).

This is in line with the aesthetic philosophy of someone like Susanne Langer, one of those in a long tradition, who says that mental life is governed by the two primal emotions of fear, and love of beauty: 'aesthetic attraction, mysterious fear' are the origins of man's innate 'tendency to see reality symbolically'; this is what results in his 'power of conception'. Fear is essentially of the unknown, which may lead to death.

The contradictory emotions of love and hate generate the curiosity that leads to further knowledge and contact with reality: LHK in Bion's formula (later used by Meltzer as the basis for his theory of the 'aesthetic conflict').

In this way Bion brings to psychoanalysis a readjusted perspective on the fundamental emotions or instincts of love and hate and the curiosity they arouse. He restores the positive nature of curiosity as a necessary feature of man's quest to know himself. Mrs Klein had also recognised the importance of the 'epistemophilic instinct' (as she called it) but she was suspicious that it could be sometimes a manifestation of the child's intrusiveness and possessiveness towards the mother. Later, Meltzer clarified the distinction (implicit in Bion's theory of thinking) between intrusive and communicative projective identification.

'Have you ever seen an artist paint a picture about or of something ugly which is nevertheless beautiful?' asks Bion. He means that the beauty lies not just in the immediate sensuous picture but in the process of understanding its meaning.

This is the way in which psychoanalysis, like other humanistic endeavours, relies on a sense of beauty: however ugly or violent may be the emotions and states of mind that are being analysed, the process of understanding is beautiful and actually transforms the ugliness through symbolising it. The destructiveness is taken out by the thinking process which acknowledges and integrates bad feelings within the self, rather than denying or projecting them into others.

A work group of two or more

There is a special sense in which the psychoanalytic encounter is aesthetic. It is a work group of two – the opposite of a basic assumption group. A work group is focused on its specific task; a basic assumption group represents an abnegation of responsibility and submission to a herd instinct of being the same as everyone else, apart from whoever is selected to be the enemy and therefore expelled from the group.

In a work group, container-contained operates as it does in its archetypal model of the mother-baby relationship. But it is not quite so simple as the analyst being the mother and the patient the baby. The analyst has no favoured access to omniscience; if he is lucky there may be a ‘fringe benefit’ of increased self-knowledge.

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 the idea is ‘born’ of the *relationship*, he says emphatically.

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: 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’. 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. It is the psychoanalytic setting that is the aesthetic object. Bion said:

We have a difficult job; even the impromptus in the analysis, the interpretations that we give, would be all the better if they stood up to aesthetic criticism.

However when asked if this meant analysts should speak more poetically, he said that was not what he meant; that an authentic language would evolve out of the practice of psychoanalytic observation and communication, in a particular relationship – the ‘language of achievement’ not the ‘language of substitution’ (which is based on theories alone).

Ps↔D: the oscillation of positions

The quest for understanding is never straightforward.

Bion takes a 'field' rather than a 'phase' view of the two core Kleinian positions 'paranoid-schizoid' and 'depressive', seeing them in a condition of continuous oscillation that he denotes by the formula **Ps↔D**, the letters linked by two-directional arrows to indicate a back and forth movement between one position and the other. This is not necessarily the kind of intensive turbulence that is generated at a growth-point of catastrophic change, although it is the foundation for it. It is simply the condition of our existence.

He writes about this in *Attention and Interpretation*, stating that what he means is not exactly the same as Mrs Klein's positions but it is similar. The oscillation he is talking about is not a pathological one but rather, it refers to the psychoanalyst's (or thinker's) sense of equilibrium between degrees of understanding and not-understanding, which are continually rising and falling (perhaps like an electrocardiograph). He says that he is using the term 'patience' to represent one pole of the oscillation, to distinguish it from paranoid-schizoid in the pathological sense originally intended by Mrs Klein. (In practice however, people always refer to it as paranoid-schizoid.) But he likes 'patience' because of its etymological roots in 'passion' meaning 'suffering'. He distinguishes this from simply feeling pain, which is purely sensuous and has no meaning attached to it, and is basically not much different from pleasure, another meaningless sensation unless it has been 'transformed' (that is, symbolised).

So one pole of the **Ps↔D** oscillation is associated with a feeling of insecurity, anxiety, the trials of not-knowing and not-understanding; the other pole is associated with a feeling of security, harmony and understanding – a feeling which is followed 'almost immediately by a sense of depression'. Because every small step forward in understanding, every bit of illumination, serves to open up the next problem, the next question; and the paranoid-schizoid state sets in again with its requirement to suffer patiently and wait for a pattern to emerge. Hence the oscillation is never static: it is all part of the process of 'becoming', of mental growth and expansion. He concludes: 'I consider the experience of oscillation between patience and security to be an indication that valuable work is being achieved.'

There is a 'feeling of confidence in seeing the truth'; the 'vision unites with one's own mind'. But, he says, this contact with reality (the D position) may well be accompanied by a certain bleakness, or sadness: 'Where does that sadness, reality, originate?'

Intelligence and wisdom

Will psychoanalysis study the living mind?' Bion asks at the end of 'Making the best of a bad job' - or is the authority of Freud to be used as a deterrent, a barrier to studying people?

Bion describes an exoskeletal type of knowledge that is 'too thick for wisdom' to penetrate, or too smooth for 'psyche-lodgement' to occur. It has no gap or crevice in the complacent substantial surface of its body of the already-known. Its voice cannot be heard through the 'noise' of psychoanalytic theories, for example. In the psychoanalytic consulting room, the analyst who has become tired or confused by the emotional disturbance may feel reprimanded by an 'outraged moral system' and hastily interpose some respectable interpretation to bring the conversation to a close. In Bion's view morality is a type of stupidity, even though it is practised by intelligent people. In a lecture in Sao Paulo he says:

Why is a person, who is apparently highly intelligent, lacking in wisdom? ... Have you ever come across people who you felt must be extremely intelligent in order to be so stupid ... Why is it that so many highly intelligent people seem to be incapable of being wise? What has happened to the intelligence? Is it, like trees that hide the wood, too thick to perceive the wisdom that lies beyond the intelligence? (*Bion in NYSP*, 115)

He insists he is not trying to make a 'clever paradox' but that there really is a distinction - as of course there is, when we consider the context in which he uses the word 'intelligence' to refer to an innate quality or talent of humanity, but 'wisdom' to refer to the use that man has made (or not made) of his intelligence, by virtue of learning (or not learning) from experience. The poet Keats (a favourite of Bion's) makes a very similar distinction when he describes his 'system of soulmaking':

There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions -- but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.

People gradually acquire identities by means of experiencing life in the world with all its turbulent emotions and 'suffering' in the constructive sense:

Bion's view of learning from experience - of intimate knowing, rather than simply knowing about - is in effect the same as Keats's view of soulmaking, rather than learning via morality and fixed systems of salvation that 'affront our reason and humanity'. In fact it is the same as that of many poets and philosophers, and indeed theologians; but Bion regards his specific task as trying to rephrase and reawaken the vision of the psychoanalyst so that this new science does not become just another type of morality.

The foetus may take a wrong turning in development, become incapable of having 'feelings' or 'ideas' and so be born lacking important elements of its equipment. However, the post-natal creature still retains its potential for intelligent activity. Amongst these activities which are retained is a capacity for imitation, mimesis, so that the 'intelligent' (as distinct from 'wise') baby or child is able to imitate fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters; it is 'well-adjusted'. (*SP5*)

PART THREE

Problems in thinking

Problems in thinking, and therefore in self-knowledge, derive from our failure to observe and pay attention to our real feelings. We erect all kinds of ingenious defences to block off our capacity to make observations, whether we are awake or asleep - for if we consider consciousness to be an organ of attention for psychic qualities, then it applies to both sleeping and waking states, where psychic events are always taking place.

Bion's view is that psychic feelings make us uncomfortable, as distinct from purely sensuous feelings which have a comforting familiarity and do not require imagination to experience them. 'Need there be any feelings if you can see, imagination if you can touch, music if you can hear...?' asks one of his characters in the *Memoir* whom he calls the Devil - meaning that we have a tendency to substitute pure sensation for the kind of feelings that involve mental activity of some kind. It is a version of what he calls the 'language of substitution'. It involves anything from pain to pleasure but has no meaning attached.

This is different from the kind of feeling that the prenatal part of the mind is trying to communicate and that does not ‘get through’ the barrier, the caesura. ‘The meaning does not get through – from you to me or from me to you’ says another of his imaginary, foetal characters.

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 – as when the analyst gets a ‘rush of theories to the head’ when tired or perhaps pushed by the patient. 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.

This is what Bion calls ‘learning about’ or ‘talking about’ psychoanalysis rather than actually *doing* psychoanalysis. He also calls it relying on a protective ‘exoskeleton’ rather than on an internally developing ‘endoskeleton’. We envelop our minds in theories, assumptions, lies, rules and regulations, in the hope that these offer us some kind of protection from the tiring and confusing business of trying to think for ourselves.

Basic assumption mentality

Basic assumptions are probably the most common non-thinking mode that we fall into. Bion developed his thinking here from his early group work, and then realised that it applied also to social groupings and to internal groupings within the individual mind. The three main groups, described in *Attention and Interpretation*, are: fight-flight, dependency, and messianic or pairing – self-explanatory from their names. They are all states of mind, or rather of substitute-mind, which relieve us from the pressure of struggling to think creatively.

Yet we probably spend most of our lifetime in a ‘basic assumption’ condition. We can only spend a very limited time in intense intimate relationships, whether with other people, or in work situations, or in personal meditation. ‘How can we stand it?’ Bion asks of the psychoanalytic pair – meaning, how can the pair stand the emotional turbulence, and this applies to all our emotional engagements. Most of our life is spent in casual or contractual relationships and situations which depend on our ‘fitting in’ to what is socially acceptable in order for smooth, efficient or productive existence to function. But psychoanalysis is (or should be) different, despite the validity of the criticism that it may sometimes just train people to look respectable or ‘just like’ their analyst, as Bion puts it. In that case it is a failed analysis, whether or not the analyst recognises it. Bion’s point is that this is what we need to be on the lookout, to guard against – ‘looking like’ a well-analysed person, imitating the customs or features of whoever is our role-model, without actually developing organically from within in an authentic manner –and becoming ourselves.

Bion also refers to basic assumption mentality as ‘protomental’, that is, not yet truly mental; and Donald Meltzer finds this distinction between ‘levels’ of the mind one of his most useful contributions, that can help also with the understanding of psychosomatic states. It is quite different from the old distinction between conscious and unconscious which does not have a very significant place in Bion’s model. Almost everything is unconscious, whether it is basic assumption attitudes, or the opposite – strenuous intuitive efforts to symbolise an emotional experience. But unconscious protomental states, as well as being represented in a ‘normal’ way through social conformity, may also result in psychosomatic symptoms if they are unable to penetrate the prenatal-postnatal barrier.

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.

Lies and morality

In Bion's view there is always an 'inhibitory authority' within the individual, that warns him against trying to know too much, or asking too many questions. It may take the form of the old tyrannical superego type of conscience. In the field of psychoanalysis, even Freud can be used in this way:

'The greed of the super-ego leads to the usurpation of the domain of reality (scientific facts) by the 'moral' outlook, and of 'scientific' laws by 'moral' laws.' (*Attention and Interpretation*).

If analysts do not learn to observe the living mind - the present turbulent emotional situation – they may fall back on preconceived patterns of what they believe is happening or what the person should look like. This is why Bion advocates getting rid of 'memory and desire', that is, of already-known and approved pictures of people or states of mind. Memory and desire are created by the basic assumptions of the person or society and push the person into a preconceived mould. A preconception, he says, can 'mate with a memory to prevent catastrophic change'. This is the opposite of mating with a 'realisation', that is, an aspect of reality, to create a thought.

This is where basic assumptions overlap with morality, which is a more fixed and formal version of a 'just like' personality. Bion writes of 'the close relationship between moral attitudes and action, as contrasted with thought or meditation'. In other words, morality tends toward acting-out *instead* of thinking. It has an action plan and demands a confirmation of its rightness, rather than a continuing process of consideration or meditation in a state of uncertainty.

Morality is thus a particular system of lies derived from the external features of a piece of knowledge that has lost its internal spirit, and become divorced from live thinking. To an unobservant eye, a moral person or state of mind may be hard to distinguish, externally, from an ethical one based on an internal value system or relationship with O. But at times of stress it would become clear which system was dominating the personality.

Bion sees the kind of lies sheltering behind morality as a type of 'usurpation' of the questing, scientific outlook: The lie, he says, is 'a falsity associated with morals'. It inhibits curiosity and scientific discovery of the real world – including the real internal world.

Morality is unscientific because it blocks the observation of the facts, which – as he often explains – means, in the psychic realm, 'the facts of feeling'. It is an unfeeling system, associated with the sado-masochistic dynamics of pleasure and pain, reward and punishment, but not with the experience of 'suffering' in the sense of the Ps--D oscillation that 'yields meaning'.

Will psychoanalysis study the living mind?' Bion asks at the end of 'Making the best of a bad job' – or is the authority of Freud to be used as a deterrent, a barrier to studying people?

Minus LHK and the Negative Grid

According to Meltzer, Bion, had he had time, would have expanded Column 2 of his Grid (the column for Lies) into a complete mirror-image grid echoing the pattern for the development of thoughts, but in a fake or negative picture, 'just like' thinking but with the completely opposite significance.

The evidence for this is implicit throughout Bion's writing, but especially in his formulation of 'minus LHK' – the opposite of the passionate link that represents alignment with O. In Bion's view, all genuine emotions are useful, whether they are nice or nasty. The important thing is to let them confront one another – where is the caesura between them where the partly merge? It is the links that make them constructive and propel the K-link of curiosity.

What is unconstructive is the absence of emotion – the negative links. This is the realm of cynicism and lies, of fake knowledge, or sometimes of 'knowing about' used in its defensive or tyrannical sense.

It has sometimes been said that Bion is pessimistic. All we can hope for is to enter the paranoid-schizoid position and start suffering. On the other hand, he also suggests that ideas are not so readily destroyed. Not only can they follow an underground river pathway, but even in a violent context, there can be interpenetration. The paper 'Emotional turbulence' ends:

The escape from self-knowledge is easy and can be extremely violent – by self-murder. The group or society can, similarly, solve all its problems by killing another group or society or culture. These murderous impulses have so far not been adequate because the murderer is penetrated by the thing he murders, or the society is penetrated by the culture it is trying to destroy; the religion becomes impregnated with the religion whose place it is attempting to take.

Despite all the defensive projections the idea gets in anyway, by virtue of the interest it attracts, and forms a container-contained configuration.

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.'