

## Our eternal home: Bion's idea of the Self

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‘The truth. What does it look like? Who wants to be confronted with a *trompe l’oeil* representation of Paradise? Such confections are pardonable to an agent selling us our earthly home, but not for our eternal home – our Self.’ (*Bion in New York and Sao Paulo*)

### Location of the Self

Bion's picture of the self – its evolution, its trials and struggles with the internal ‘enemy’ of hostility to development, never essentially changed, although he 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.

He 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.

Where the first talk in his New York series begins with a personal address (‘Newbury House, Hadham Road... The World... the Universe’), the last talk in his Sao Paulo series ends with another universal definition of personal address: ‘our eternal home – our Self’. How does one fit inside the other – the heavenly home within the earthly home? This is the task of psychoanalysis – ‘to introduce the patient to himself, for whether he likes it or not, that is a marriage which is going to last as long as he lives’ (p. 40).

All his talks and papers of the 1970s are concerned with the nature of links, tensions, communication between different poles of experience: psyche and soma, patient and analyst, love and hate, sleep and waking, unconscious and conscious, pre- and post-natal, primordial and sophisticated, oneself and oneself. The locus for catching the idea is the point at which the tension between opposites is most intense or noticeable: it is the emotional ‘storm centre’, a caesura, diaphragm or contact barrier – which may indeed be a blocking barrier, or else, permeable so that feelings can seep through from either side and in both directions. These are the growth-points of catastrophic change, of ‘break-down’ or perhaps ‘break-through’ (as he puts it in the *Memoir of the Future*), when the endoskeletal mind has a chance of expanding the boundaries of its knowledge in the direction of wisdom through a type of death-and-rebirth. That is, unless it is strangled by the limits of an exoskeleton (of lies or basic assumptions), or drowned by the ‘noise’ of psychoanalytic theories and other jargon – the brambles imprisoning the ‘sleeping beauty’ of truth. Behind and beyond the confrontation at the caesura is O, the ‘basic thing’, the source or origin of the turbulence.

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 what he means by 'thinking'.

But 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 an 'exo-skeleton' 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 in, on the model of an 'endoskeleton', a mammal rather than a shellfish.

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. Freud said this caesura 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. He suggests there may also be mental 'vestiges' that try to seep through the barrier or diaphragm of our post-natal minds. These 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.

### **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. It begins with something very small, unobservable – a hint or feeling or 'wild conjecture' – and then links up with some-

thing else (perhaps another mind, another perspective, an innate pre-conception) which enables it to take on sensuous form, to be 'born'. 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 – which he calls 'psyche-lodgement'. 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 (equivalent to the Kleinian depressive position).

Since psychic change cannot occur without great disruption to the personality which would prefer to remain undisturbed, an important feature of Bion's picture is the powerful resistance to hosting the thought, which is accompanied by what you might consider a type of pregnancy sickness.

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. This state, although passive, is also extremely stressful; and Bion's favourite description of it is Keats's formulation of 'negative capability'.

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 also 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' and is modelled on the mother–baby relationship which he describes as container–contained. 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.

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.

This marks 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. 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.

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.

### **Metaphors and vertices**

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 ‘poly-valent’, 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. 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. 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

It is impossible to get a complete picture of growth without its opposite, anti-growth, whether from destruction or stagnation.

To take first the concept of envy – related in Kleinian terms to the envious, self-destructive part of the personality. But 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.

For with Bion, the forces antagonistic to development are extended to the wish to maintain the status quo in order to avoid turbulence. It is a different perspective from envy. 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 picture we are made to 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 different vertices.

Hostility to growth can also take the form of lies which are always 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 the Negative Grid (minus LHK) – clearly implied in Bion though Meltzer says he didn't actually develop 'Column 2' into full Grid format. 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 systematized, 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 indeed, 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.