

BION

An Introduction

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Prologue

Bion's life spanned key events in the twentieth century. Born in India in 1897, he came to boarding school in England aged eight and at the age of eighteen fought in the Royal Tank Regiment in World War I. Training as a doctor between the wars, he would go on to be Samuel Beckett's therapist, and together with Beckett attend a lecture given by Jung. In his World War II work for the army, he was an innovator (and the only person he knew who didn't receive a single promotion). In 1945, Bion returned to a British Psychoanalytical Society that had itself survived a "war" between the newly arrived Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. He became a patient of Klein for the duration of his training, and afterwards became a member of her group of four. He, together with colleagues, would go on to work with more disturbed patients than Freud had thought possible.

In the late 1950s, Bion made a breakthrough. He identified the configuration "container/contained" as being at the heart of human development. This was a breakthrough that would reverberate through the rest of his work and through the world of psychoanalysis to this day. From around this time, Bion made a number of changes. He took the format in which he wrote under his own control (he would now

mostly write books rather than scientific papers). He began to put his own thinking in relation to writings from outside psychoanalysis (philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and latterly theo-mystical thinkers), and he began to write the notes that would later be published as his *Cogitations*. Through the 1960s, he both expanded his thinking and devised “equipment” for self-supervision and the identification of possible self-deceptions. Newly fortified, he would then again embark on a further period of expansion.

There has existed a divide in the world between analysts who attend more to his earlier work and those who attend to his later work. More recently, and facilitated by the publication of the sixteen volumes of his *Complete Works* in 2014, analysts are beginning to trace continuities in his work.

At the age of seventy, when many might have settled to the fruits of their labours and a perhaps more restricted life, Bion emigrated to 1960s California. He was invited largely due to his knowledge of working with psychotic patients. It was the beginning of his travelling internationally and giving lectures and supervisions across three continents. The transcripts of these events have emerged over time and give access to a more conversational Bion. In his seventies, he also wrote two volumes of autobiography and a biographical novel, *A Memoir of the Future*. The autobiographies do not have the quality of a man looking back, but of a man able to bring the past into the present. In the *Memoir* he gives voice to his own “multiple selves and personages within the psyche of the artist” (a comment made by Jung at the lecture he and Beckett attended (Simon, 1988, p. 335)).

This book is intended to be an introduction to Bion, I hope without loss of depth. For readers who know his work well, I hope it will provide the opportunity of looking at all of his work in one go.

The Bion references in the book are to *The Complete Works of W. R. Bion* (2014), as listed in the Bibliography.

About the author

Nicola Abel-Hirsch is a training analyst of the British Psychoanalytical Society, and works in full-time psychoanalytical practice. She has given theoretical and clinical papers on Bion in the UK; Taiwan (annually 2005–2012); the USA; and Europe. From 2013 to 2015, she was the visiting professor at the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex. She is the author of *Bion: 365 Quotes* (2019) and editor of Hanna Segal's last book, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (2007). Under the auspices of Understanding Primitive Mental States NYC, she chairs an ongoing series of seminars on Bion's later lectures, seminars, and supervisions.

Six opening thoughts

These thoughts are pointers to some things to look out for while getting to know Bion's work.

1. "The name givers"

What is originality? It is seeing something that still has no name, that cannot yet be named, even if it is right in front of everyone's eyes. The way people usually are is that something becomes visible to them only once it is named. —People with originality are mostly also the name-givers. (Nietzsche, 1882, p. 261)

Bion is a "name giver": basic assumptions; container/contained (♀♂); alpha function; alpha elements; beta elements; "O". To an extent he is renaming the already known, but to an important extent he is naming what had not been visible before.

Bion also describes the dread felt when the ordinary "mechanism responsible for naming", operating in all of us, is destroyed. This note was written on 28 July 1959:

If the dream-work capacity is destroyed, the patient feels dread which is peculiarly terrifying because it is nameless, and because the namelessness itself springs from the destruction of the patient's capacity for dream-work which is the mechanism responsible for naming. (*Cogitations*, XI, p. 49)

Bion attributes the act of naming to waking “dream-work”. Grasping a pattern, getting a name to it, and then being able to explore it is a capacity that is not the result of linear rational thought. It is something more similar to what occurs in night dreams, but happening when we are awake. If that capacity is damaged or destroyed, the person feels a dread that cannot be named. Bion's capacity to describe this—give it a name—does seem to have come from knowing what it is like to be in a state of dread, both in himself and feeling it with his patients.

2. On the question of languages

Bion uses languages traditionally foreign to psychoanalysis, most notably religious language, mathematical notation, and aesthetic language. Why does he do this? Was it necessary to speak to the British Psychoanalytical Society using terms such as “godhead”? Few can follow his mathematical notations. The language we think in affects what we can think, and Bion is wanting to take further what it is conceivable to think in psychoanalysis. Other analysts doing this may have translated their thoughts back into “psychoanalytic language” before voicing them aloud. Bion doesn't do this and exposes his listener to a somewhat foreign experience. I think he also wanted anybody reading him, on a similar journey to him, to be able to see where he had reached without predetermining what might or might not be useful to them.

3. What is thinking?

Bion is very interested in thinking. He became interested in philosophy at Oxford University after the war, but the roots of what would become a profound interest in the nature of thinking most likely predate this. I suspect that from childhood he was sensitive to incoherences in

“the taken for granted” world around him, and aggressively sensitive to any intrusion or manipulation of his own thinking. Bion also knew about not being able to think (particularly in World War I) and what this is like.

It wasn't until I was writing this book, and read his 1950s papers sequentially, that I realised his particular interest, in his work with psychotic patients, was in their “verbal thinking”. At the end of the fifties/early sixties he then makes extraordinary breakthroughs in the nature of thinking (container/contained; thinking in the absence of the object; alpha function and beta elements; the use of the mind for evacuation rather than thinking). He was also cautious of defensive uses of the mind (including intellectualisation) and in his later work attends to “being” in the present, rather than “knowing about” it.

4. What is psychoanalysis?

Bion maintained a standard psychoanalytic setting throughout his work (session timing and frequency, use of the couch, interventions limited to interpretations (in the broadest sense)). In the 1950s, he, and colleagues, emphasised that, although now working with psychotic rather than neurotic patients, he did not change the setting. In Bion's later working with the “discipline of memory and desire”, the same held. The setting protects and facilitates “the organic process of analysis” as Tustin (one of Bion's patients in the sixties) puts it: “It was Bion's respect for the organic process of analysis, which he allowed to take its course, and which he never tried to manipulate that made me feel so safe” (Tustin, 1981, pp. 175–176).

At the same time, Bion was intent on turning psychoanalysis inside out in his criticism of the hidden defensiveness of analysts and their lack of observational accuracy. He attempted to instigate new discipline on the one hand and a radical openness on the other. Bion also did something fundamental in relation to theory, the effects of which may still be sinking in. He thought one reason for the plethora of psychoanalytic theories was a lack of observation of the underlying patterns. The book contains a number of telling examples of his capacity for diagnosis and his abstraction of the common element in diverse manifestations.

5. How can we get sight of more of what is happening?

Bion restlessly explores from every direction he can. In the chapter on his group-work of the forties, I have detailed some of what we can see about Bion as observer, and he had an unusual capacity for observation. He is also interested in some of the great observers (see the section about Galileo for example). In the early sixties (in *Learning from Experience*) he seems more free to imagine himself inside the experience of a (hypothetical) infant and use his imagination in looking around. As the 1960s go on, he is increasingly interested in how it may be possible to put our idiosyncratic personal selves more to the side, while being more present with a patient, and more in touch with what is happening. The extent to which he wanted to see what things look like from the point of view of the patient is well described also by Tustin (see above) and seen too in his clinical accounts, particularly in *Transformations*. More generally, Bion also attempted to identify broader influences and limits to our thinking, including Western models of cause and effect so egosyntonic we don't realise them not to be facts.

Bion was also inclined to allow more to happen. This can be seen, for example, in his allowing a violent oscillation in a group (see Chapter 3, "What groups do"). Bion also spoke increasingly of the need for analysts to be able to work outside their familiar "spectrum" of experience, in order to be available to more disturbed and primitive communications from patients.

6. Bion's questions

Bion admired a good question. He is struck, for example, by the fact that Galileo noticed there was a lack of coherence in a taken-for-granted phenomenon (the acceleration of falling bodies), the recognition of a lack of coherence being fundamental to identifying what we do not know. While we might endorse the importance of a questioning attitude, we are at the same time often making assumptions that obscure what we don't know.

Chapter 6, "Going back to beginnings" includes one of Bion's childhood questions. He finds problematic a commonplace advertisement for golden syrup. "Is golden syrup really gold?" he keeps asking. Granted he may have taken some pleasure in seeing if he could provoke his parents,

but his question seeded my thoughts about whether he may have had a particular sensitivity to category errors or category misuses (for advertising purposes)—a sensitivity to what ought to strike us as more odd than it does.

Bion's questioning retreated under the onslaught of boarding school and World War I, and was, he said, regained in analysis with John Rickman on the eve of World War II. A second example of his questions is in his work in the army psychiatric services in World War II at the Northfield hospital. Confronted with the complaint that 80 per cent of the men are shirking their work, Bion's questions reconfigure this from being construed as a local annoyance to a chance to investigate a widespread human phenomenon.

In the course of the following fifteen years, Bion's clinical work with groups and then individual patients included observation of states of mind in which people do not ask questions. With groups in the 1940s, he saw this in what he called the "basic assumptions". In his work with psychotic patients in the 1950s, he saw it in the operation of omniscience and patients' attack on their own minds. What, however, did the patients make of the analyst's curiosity? In his formative paper "On Arrogance" (1958), Bion questions the questioners. Through this paper, the authority of the analyst subtly shifts from being primarily "what the analyst knows" to "what he or she can bear to contain".

The 1960s are the powerhouse of Bion's questions, psychoanalysis itself now in the position of the patient. Bion goes outside the boundaries of psychoanalysis to philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and latterly theo-mystical thinkers to augment his psychoanalysis of psychoanalysis.

In the second half of the sixties, he links faith and scientific procedure. Was this an end to his earlier incisive questioning? I look at some of his later clinical work. In his clinical supervisions in Brazil in 1975, the first thing Bion says is mostly a question. What he most often questions are the taken-for-granted assumptions being made by the patient and presenting analyst. He continues to notice incoherence where it is not evident to others. For Bion, "faith" is not so much a set of beliefs, but a capacity of the mind to feel out what cannot be observed by the senses.

In all his questioning, Bion was inclined to see just how far he could go, and what he would see there.