Bion's paper on arrogance. Reading his personal disaster
Robert D. Hinshelwood

Abstract
Bion's paper 'On arrogance', written in 1957, came at a cross-roads in his life. Evidence from his various writings is used to demonstrate a change at this time in Bion's attitudes to himself and to others. In consequence, Bion's paper could be read as an insightful exposition of what underlay his own contempt and arrogance.

Key words: Bion, arrogance, curiosity, stupidity, trauma

Wilfred Bion lived for two decades in a kind of doldrums. From the end of World War 1, in 1918, until 1938 when he finally grasped the nettle and entered a serious psychoanalysis - with John Rickman. Bion suffered a series of catastrophes in the first half of his life. It was not just the disaster of WW1 (see Roper, 2012, Szykierski 2010), but he had already at the age of 8 been wrenched from his family in India to an English boarding School never seeing India again, not his parents for 2 years. Then in 1944, he lost his wife three days after the birth of their first child, whilst Bion was away on duty in northern France.

It cannot be that these experiences did not scar his life, or his attitudes to others. In fact the recent publication of Wilfred Bion's letters to John Rickman (Vonofakos and Hinshelwood, 2011), allow us some insight into a crucial period of his life when he appeared to be 'finding himself'. The 29 letters range from the end of his analysis (with Rickman) in 1939 to 1951 when Rickman died. They record some of Bion's most jaundiced attitudes to officers in the army in WW2 as he re-lived no doubt the horrific dependence on their competence (or as he believed their incompetence) in WW1.

I propose to briefly extract some of Bion's views recorded during the period of his letters in the 1940s, where he expressed the depth of his bitterness. I shall then consider the autobiographical writing of the 1970s (Bion, 1985; 1982; 1997), where there is a striking change. The caustic attitudes to almost anyone in authority expressed in the 1940s, turned by the 1970s to the expression of the deepest self-contempt. That reversal of attitude from others towards himself, betrays nevertheless a continuing problem. The early arrogant contempt for others became, towards the end of his life, a grovelling contempt towards himself. Right in between these two periods, in 1957, Bion wrote his paper 'On arrogance' (published 1958). This position located between two sets of personal writings suggests possible speculations one could make about the paper as a self-conscious reference to his own psychodynamic constitution.

Bion's attitudes in the 1940s – the letters
During the period of the letters, Bion's experience of himself progressed from a rather dull pedestrian quality visible in the style of his 1940 paper ('War of nerves') to his characteristic brilliance of expression at his peak (Vonofakos and Hinshelwood,
2011). Overall, there emerged a pervading sense of cynical despair about those around him, and their lack of grasp of the truth of the matters that he and Rickman discussed. It is clear who the baddies are

...the fate of genuine psychiatry and psychotherapy seems to me to be wrapped up very closely with the fate of practically every free mental or cultural activity. If “we” win this war then the position of the Maudsley-minded will not I think be very important. But if the fascist-Nazi-outfit wins then the Maudsley wins and it will be goodbye to any real hope of human advance for many a long year (14.XII.41).

There is a very clearly expressed view of a battle within psychiatry - Bion and Rickman versus the Maudsley psychiatrists. It was modelled on the national fight for survival against the Nazis. And,

...the fate of genuine psychiatry and psychotherapy seems to me to be wrapped up very closely with the fate of practically every free mental or cultural activity. If “we” win this war then the position of the Maudsley-minded will not I think be very important. But if the fascist-Nazi-outfit wins then the Maudsley wins and it will be goodbye to any real hope of human advance for many a long year (14.XII.41).

There is a very clearly expressed view of a battle within psychiatry - Bion and Rickman versus the Maudsley psychiatrists. It was modelled on the national fight for survival against the Nazis. And,

...some very serious look needs to be done along analytical and field theory lines to elucidate the problems underlying the promotion of leaders and governors and the present system by which those people are recruited from the “self-selected minorities” (7.III.43)

The lofty attitude picked out others' incompetence especially of those in authority. It became gradually interspersed with indications of an increasing confidence in the work he and Rickman were doing. For instance he could not describe the work in Officer Selection more highly.

...the work undertaken there is of “utmost” and “immeasurable” importance as well as “the spear head of an advance”. (12.VII.42)

One could say there was a transition in his prevailing mood from an attitude that tended to denigrate others, towards a high evaluation of himself and Rickman. About the Officer Selection work, he reported,

...the work undertaken there is of “utmost” and “immeasurable” importance as well as “the spear head of an advance”. (12.VII.42)

One could say there was a transition in his prevailing mood from an attitude that tended to denigrate others, towards a high evaluation of himself and Rickman. About the Officer Selection work, he reported,

...the responsibility for the quality of officers would now no longer rest on a few shoulders at the top of the military hierarchy but would be broadly based in the body of the army itself. There have been many difficulties in pushing this to the present point and I have learned the power of the mediocre mind as a really obstructive force. But I am hoping that now, though we can be still further delayed, we cannot be stopped (12.VII.42).

There is I think little doubt that Bion's jaundiced attitude to the officer class, evident in WW2, had gelled during WW1 when he suffered from being a guinea-pig in the experiments with tanks. The 'Maudsley-minded' and the officer class were much of a muchness in his view in being sadly, even maliciously, incompetent. It is as if the world is populated by incompetents, and only he and Rickman had the capacity for appropriate and original thought (1).

**The Bion of the autobiographies**

When we come to Bion's later recollections of those times, we get a very different picture. In the 1970s, he was burdened with a considerable sense of inferiority, for instance, that 'the acquisition of a fund of failure seemed to be inexhaustible (Bion, 1985, p. 34). It was, it seemed, made worse by his wartime honours, 'DSO, Mention in Dispatches, Legion of Honour – all very fast-fading reassurances, which at best
had failed dismally to convince me' (Bion, 1985, p. 12). His memory of the fallow period from 1918-1938, contrasted strikingly with the haughty arrogance of the letters of the 1940s, demonstrated above.

Then in the 1970s, there is a determined attempt to make humour of it all. In his interview to enter medical school he described himself as 'the unprepossessing mass of ineptitude.... thanks to Oxford University, I had begun to learn that I was uneducated' (Bion, 1985, p. 19). The humour is thin, however, leaving the pain of his sense of being both an experienced war hero, and at the same time, and because of the war, inexperienced and clumsy in his dealings with girls and other social occasions, to come through. The pain of the war remained, and obtrusively so,

I did not see that peacetime was no time for me. I did know, however many pretty ribbons I put on a wartime uniform, that wartime was also no time for me. I was twenty-four; no good for war, no good for peace, and too old to change. It was truly terrifying. Sometimes it burst out in sleep. Terrified. What about? Nothing, nothing. Oh well, yes. I had a dream. I dug my nails into the steep and slippery Walls of mud that fell sheer into the waters of a raging and foaming Steenbeck. Ridiculous! That dirty little trickle. If blood is thicker than water, what price the thickness of dreams? Suppose broad daylight was not thick enough to keep out the terror. Suppose I was so terrified I ran away when it was really a battle. I woke up. Was I going crazy? Perhaps I was crazy (Bion 1985, p. 16).

The terror is more convincing than the humour, even when writing some 60 years after the war.

The point is that the contempt for contemporaries and superiors that comes through in the 1940s, turns to self contempt in the 1970s. What happened? Contempt remained, it seemed, but changed direction. A number of things occurred in his actual life - his analysis between 1946 and 1953, his achievement of a soaring eminence in his chosen profession, and a successful marriage in 1951, with his beloved second wife and mother of two more children (see Sayers, 2002). However, the trauma of survival remained all through. We can speculate that the coating applied to distract him from the terror when dealing with it in his writing, had changed from a triumphal bitterness to a mocking demolition of himself.

Between those two periods displaying two contrasting methods of coping, there is an interesting paper, 'On arrogance'. He presented it in 1957 to the Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association in Paris, and it was published in 1958. Given the persisting issue of contempt, its associated opposite pole, arrogance, must draw our attention to this paper.

**On arrogance**

Bion approached his subject in a particularly medical manner, isolating a set of symptoms to identify a group of patients he could regard as a pathological category. This is unusual for Bion. The preferred approach in his clinical papers (mostly in the 1950s) is to describe a much more general function of mind (like thinking, or attacks
on the links between people, or between mental objects) rather than diagnostic classes.

In this paper he decided to deal with a particular group of patients, those who exhibited a specific constellation of characteristics - curiosity, arrogance and stupidity. The conjoining of these three, 'should be taken by the analyst as evidence that he is dealing with a psychological disaster' (p.144). And he states this is a modified approach to the Oedipus complex - 'I shall rehearse the Oedipus myth from a point of view which makes the sexual crime a peripheral element of a story in which the central crime is the arrogance of Oedipus in vowing to lay bare the truth at no matter what cost' (p.144). Bion came to a more general conclusion about the patients with the arrogance syndrome;

the analyst who is treating an apparently neurotic patient must regard a negative therapeutic response together with the appearance of scattered, unrelated references to curiosity, arrogance and stupidity as evidence that he is in the presence of a psychological catastrophe with which he will have to deal (Bion, 1958, p. 144).

He recommended, 'It is important that reference to any of these three qualities should be treated by the analyst as a significant event demanding investigation and provoking more than usually stubborn resistances' (p.144). Oedipus' arrogant stupidity is to become curious about a disaster which would have been best left alone. There is an obvious resonance with the strategy of many war neurosis victims to avoid revisiting their memories of the disasters in war. So, the reason for the unusual difficulties is that underlying the syndrome there is an incipient psychosis, the disaster to the ego called a breakdown. He advised it involves detailed interpretation of events that are taking place in the session. These events are active displays of the mechanisms of splitting, projective identification, and the related subsidiary phenomena of confusional states, depersonalization and hallucination, which have been described by Melanie Klein, Segal, and Rosenfeld as part of the analysis of psychotic patients (p.144).

This paper read to the IPA Congress in 1957 was in the same year as publication his paper on 'Differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic parts of the personality' (Bion, 1957). In the latter paper, he distinguished, much as Freud did in his paper on fetishism in 1927, a part of the personality which breaks with reality, and a part that respects reality. Bion implies that such an element that withdraws from reality exists in everyone. Dreams attest to that. However in psychosis, and even in the psychotic part of normal personalities, the break with reality is not simply a cathexis into a solipsistic dream world, but a catastrophic disruption, like the disintegration of the Schreber case into multiply split objects, and a kaleidoscopically split ego (2). The fragmentation is the psychological disaster that Schreber called the 'world catastrophe' (Freud, 1911) typical of psychotic patients. Later, such a 'normal' disaster to the ego was elaborated as his concept of 'catastrophic change', as implicit in transformations (Bion, 1965). And later again this theme crops up in 1979, 'Making the best of a bad job', with the description of emotional storms.
This speculation of a normal psychotic part of the person raises a number of questions, only implicitly touched on in the arrogance paper. If there is a psychotic part of the personality in ordinary, what structure does it have? Does it have the same structure as in a psychotic person? Is the 'normal' psychological disaster covered over and compensated for by more normal seeming attitudes? The paper appears to be an investigation of a more normal, or neurotic, means of coping with a psychotic disaster.

The particular class of arrogant patients that Bion categorised, have an aetiology, or causation, that results from a particular set of dynamics. These revolve around the foregoing of the normal link and communication with other minds, and instead a resort to projective identification. This entails a set of beliefs - the most significant according to Bion, or rather, according to one of his patients, was a belief about the analyst's ability to take in the projected elements from the patient. Someone is arrogantly claiming to tolerate the intolerable, to be curious about it and so on. Should the analyst be capable in fact of taking in and understanding, then there may be a response an obstructive force in the patient called envy. Here Bion is touching on two important points he will develop later. First is the issue of competent containing to be developed in his next paper 'Attacks on linking' (Bion, 1959), where he described the particular break with reality. And the second is the obstructive internal force, or object he later called the 'ego-destructive super-ego' (Bion, 1962).

**Dynamics of arrogance**

The questions that might be raised by the arrogance paper arise from the possibility of the conjunction of those three states of mind (arrogance, curiosity and stupidity). Did he believe it was stupid to confront his own wartime psychic disaster? And did he think it arrogant to develop a curiosity about it and believe he could survive? Was he confiding a distant and highly worked-up account of the resistances he had found in himself to face his own disaster? That is to say, was the arrogance he was really interested in, his own? And is this the point where his early contempt for others tipped over to his self-contempt. And did he prefer to normalise it as the traces of the 'psychotic' part in everyone? This points us to reflect on the nature and degree of success/resistance in his own analyses.

He first presented the paper 'On arrogance' some 3 years after the end of his analysis with Melanie Klein. Given his assertion above that a reference to any of the three qualities (arrogance, curiosity, and stupidity) demands investigation. This prompts us to the possibility that his paper is itself such a reference demanding to be investigated. His autobiographical writings are not short of references to stupidity either. In fact, whilst probably idolising Rickman and the unfinished analysis Bion had with him, he was later ambiguous about his analysis with Klein (see Pines and Hinshelwood, 2013). And the possibility remains that he was himself doing his best at making the necessary investigation later by writing the paper. A kind of indirect self-analysis. If that is so, it would suggest that Bion was knowingly homing in on his own psychological disaster, and understanding that there was a debate about whether it could ever be felt, investigated and survived.
Elsewhere, we have described Bion's journey through the conceptual highlands that were his many writings (Hinshelwood and Torres, 2013). It seems a restless nomadic journey, where no stopping place was ever satisfactory, and each might have earned a description of 'uncontained'. This restless search for ideas has resulted in the various phases that Bion's thinking traversed (Bléandonu, 1994). If that is truly the case it tends to confirm the sense of intolerableness of experiences for which there is never enough mental equipment to encompass and understand it. This leads to the conclusion that Bion like other sufferers of post-traumatic disorder (PTSD) retained a sense of having been overwhelmed disastrously.

These are speculations which despite Bion's loyalty even idealisation of both his analysts - Rickman and Klein - suggest he was never 'cured' of his trauma. And indeed perhaps 'cure' is the wrong word. What clearly happened was a change from the stultified state that he endured from 1917, when he was 20, to the age of 40-45, when a very brilliant original thinker emerged from the chrysalis. This makes an interesting hypotheses about the disaster of psychosis and the most unconscious functioning of the mind, as well as someone searching for some sort of key to himself, which even at a conscious level he may have adopted as the purpose of the second half of his life. Part of this dramatic lift off from the work he did in WW2, was a change that gradually took place from arrogance to self-contempt. His many brilliant theoretical sorties against the problems of psychoanalysis convey a series of assaults he never finally thought successful. We might have to account for the fact that his final paper was titled 'Making the best of a bad job'. And so it may be he never concluded that his job was properly finished. He might have sought comfort in the sentiment of a contemporary, Leonard Woolf, that what matters is the journey, not the arrival.

Conclusions
All this raises the question how much weight should we place on the ideas of someone who had to struggle so endlessly with his own demons. And yet perhaps Bion is not alone as an analyst whose thinking is part a contribution to psychoanalytic thinking and partly a working through of his own unconscious issues. Freud we know was born to a family in which he was a child of a second marriage in which his elder half-brothers were much the same age as his own mother; and Freud gave us the Oedipus complex, a tale of generational confusion. Melanie Klein is known to have had repeated depressions (especially during the post-natal period after the births of her three children); and she has given us the depressive position. Heinz Kohut's theories of narcissism cannot surely be taken without at least some regard for his key case history of the anonymous Dr Z, who turns out in fact to have been Kohut himself, and his self-analysis (Giovacchini, 2000) – not much more narcissistic than that!

We could take two possible views of these eminent analyst's influential contributions. Either their ideas are hopelessly entangled with their own personal and unconscious issues, and cannot after all be taken seriously. Or alternatively we can claim, as I would myself, that these analysts were understanding of certain aspects of the human
mind precisely because they knew them intimately. Their ideas have therefore been worked on both consciously and unconsciously to produce some particularly profound insight into that aspect of human personality in general with which they were particularly familiar. We have two alternative attitudes to take to Bion's formulations of psychoanalytic curiosity - was he in reality so traumatised that his ideas are worthless meanderings based on stupidity and arrogance, or are they profoundly insightful into the fragmentary mind of certain kinds of patients (which might have included himself)?

References


Notes
1) There was one other, Wilfred Trotter a teacher at Medical School, who Bion expressed respect for, and whose ideas fertilised Bion's early conceptions of groups.
2) No doubt this draws on the appendix to the 1955 version of Klein's “Notes on some schizoid mechanisms” where she deals with her understanding of Freud's account of the Schreber memoirs.

Robert D. Hinshelwood is a Professor at the Center for Psychoanalytic Studies, Essex University. Member of the British Psychoanalytical Society and Member of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. He is author of several books on the Kleinian Psychoanalysis (see the Dictionary of Kleinian Psychoanalysis) and about psychoanalytical methodology (the most recent, Research on the Couch. It.Tr. Ricerca nel setting, FrancoAngeli). He recently edited with N.Torres the book on Bion’s Sources, that Borla is editing in Italian.

Email: bob@hinsh.freeserve.co.uk