

## **Bion's concept of time**

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### **Abstract**

If we are capable of conceiving of mental time in Bion's terms we will be able to reach 'O', Psychic Reality – a state as absent sensory experience as possible. This paper examines Bion's *scientific psychoanalysis* in which *scientific* refers to an act of Faith, i.e., deliberate suspension of memory and desire, both of which result from sense impressions. That act of Faith may only be approached by *being* in the present reality, the here and now, beginning sessions with our minds as close as possible to a *tabula rasa* – which, in fact, cannot be achieved, as Bion reminds us, because so much has taken place between our birth and the present.

**Key- words:** Thinking the time, a memory of the future, dream, 'O', scientific psychoanalysis.

If we are capable of conceiving of mental time in Bion's terms we will be able to reach 'O', Psychic Reality -- a state as absent sensory experience as possible. This paper examines Bion's *scientific psychoanalysis* in which *scientific* refers to an act of Faith, i.e., deliberate suspension of memory and desire, both of which result from sense impressions. We can achieve this by anchoring ourselves to present reality, the here and now, beginning sessions with our minds as close as possible to a *tabula rasa* – which cannot be totally achieved, as Bion reminds us, since so much has taken place between our birth and the present.

The hope is that by doing this the psychoanalyst can unleash thoughts, actions and feelings the analysand is unaware of and therefore cannot control. If the analysand is aware, he/she can decide – unconsciously – whether or not to change (W.Bion, "A Memoir of the Future, II"). *Bion's visionary drama is peopled by the unexpressed, time paradoxes, archaic, retarded, embryonic and senile, pre-natal and post-natal voices -- biographical fragments from infancy or adulthood which come into conflict with each other in unexpressed dialogue: impersonal symbols of time* (Furio Di Paola, 1995).

I believe that we can share Di Paola's definition of Bion's trilogy "A Memoir of the Future: Dreams, Presenting the Past and The Dawn of Oblivion" as being *the sum of the fundamental principles* of Bion's thought and a cross-section of what can take place in a session as he intends it.

*In our present culture's predilection for the rational aspects of the psyche, extraordinary states of consciousness are often looked upon with a certain amount of diffidence, suspicion and at times outright fear, since they allow for the surfacing of*

*irrational and therefore uncontrollable aspects of human nature* (Virginia Salles, 2003). The emergence of these states can be caused by a wide variety of stimuli, such as drumming, tribal dances, whirling (as in whirling dervishes), hallucinatory plants, different kinds of breathing exercises (pranayama) and LSD. It is not difficult to see why Bion's idea of a state free from memory, desire or comprehension was considered and/or feared in the 1970's as an *extraordinary state of consciousness* and became *one of the biggest 'scandals' suggested by him* (Dino Riccio and colleagues, 1997). Among all of Bion's contributions, the technical recommendation of *without memory* was the most discussed and controversial within the psychoanalytic establishment (D. Zimerman 2004).

Neuro-physiological research has demonstrated that partial or total sensory deprivation and repetition can take people outside of psychological time, releasing infinite personal and/or collective emotional memories thus rendering the person unaware of surrounding space. According to Sonia Neves Langlands (2003), Bion can also be considered a *complexity thinker*, characterized by *non-reductionism, non-determinism, non-equilibrium and non-linearity*. There are numerous factors that explain the difficulty in understanding his work: *the circular or spiralling* nature of his concepts, the idea that the understanding of the one can only be achieved through the understanding of the others. Bion speaks of *construction* in psychoanalysis, not as *reconstruction of the analysand's history*, but of *costruction* in terms of *creative interaction*; Bion's psychoanalysis is about *transfert*, but not in the sense of the repetition of something that already exists, as in Freud, but in the sense of *transience* – of something that is transient and through which no one had ever passed before; i.e., something that is experienced for the first time (Sonia Neves Langlands 2003).

*Time* – in the sense of *mental time*, appears in all of Bion's theorizing starting from *dream-like memory* (memory of Psychic Reality, the ability to forget and suspend desire and understanding) - is essential to the analyst in order to stimulate those aspects of the psyche unrelated to sensual experience, thus allowing to *Become 'O'*. Bion may trace *mental time* back to our *fish-like origins*. Could becoming 'O' also be some sort of listening to the echoes of messages sent by our gills to our consciousness? ("The Dawn of Oblivion" Bion, 1979).

The above mentioned statements make clear that Bion understood *Scientific Psychoanalysis* as a kind of psychoanalytic work that depends on an advanced psychoanalytic methodology ("Cogitations".....); i.e., a technique that is suitable for the interpretation of subjective reality and consciousness. Bion was highly sceptical about the value of a logical theory that represents the achievements of psychoanalysis. He believed that 'logical theories' and 'illogical aspects of the psychoanalytic experience' should be allowed to co-exist until the observed *dissonance* will be resolved through evolution ("Cogitations"). The starting point of Bion's theoresis – his imperative - is that truth-seeking has to be the psychoanalyst's core aim; but, this truth is stimulated, thought, created and linked to a Psychic Reality, whose internal time differs from external time. This internal time must always be kept in mind during a session. We can thus better understand Bion's paradoxical propositions, as when for example, he writes that the events of an

analysis – events that the analyst perceives as being scattered over several years – are, for the patient, nothing but fragments of a split second dispersed in space. Or, as for example, when Bion maintains that the temporal distance separating one proposition from another can be taken as the measure of the distance between one element and the other in a space within which all elements coexist simultaneously. Or finally, as when Bion asserts that analysis is like *one moment in time stretched out so that it becomes a line or surface spread out over a period of years – an extremely thin membrane of a moment* (1970 p.14).

Bion believed that the psychoanalyst is in touch with a non-sensual experience (Bion, 1970) and that non-sensual phenomena make up the totality of what is commonly thought of as mental or spiritual experience. As a consequence, the psychoanalyst must be able to ignore sensual experience when it is formalized in memory (Bion, 1970) because patients communicate information they consider to be important on the basis of their own criteria, and psychoanalysts must limit themselves to interpretations that take into consideration K (an almost mathematical symbol signifying knowledge) and not of L(Love) or H (Hate) (Bion 1963).

*Time* in Bion's terms means experiencing irrational time, an act of Faith that enables us to attain dream-like memory (without memory or desire or understanding, constant conjunction, the selected fact, in unison with 'O') i.e., a state in which god, the Mother, and its evolution is recreated (without form, 'the infinite, the ineffable, the non-existent') in order to reach 'ultimate reality, absolute truth, the thing in itself'. But, we must first practice eliminating the *lie* that precludes unison with 'O'. In order for this to happen the psychoanalyst must be outside rational, linear time and experience what is taking place at that moment, without remembering the past or imagining the future. Per Bion, this is to live in the present, the moment, absent the flow of time, and only in this way can one feel oneself in unison with the ultimate reality. Only if we live in the present can we find ourselves in touch with the pure innate emotionality of the unconscious life. This emotionality is separated from superior elaboration systems that are present in thought, reasoning and consciousness. In this way, we may come into contact with our emotions at birth.

In order to experience 'O', one must eliminate or diminish the alpha function factors of the personality, i.e., attention, notation, conservation of the results of attention, and the development of verbal thought. Must we first therefore re-see or re-view the fragmentary imagery or ideograms generated at birth and the early postnatal period? And, by annulling conscious thought, memory and desire, can we be taken back to the moment of our first breath? Is this disconnecting of ourselves from social and cultural interaction, from convention, from logic and metaphor the equivalent of unnamed fear, of psychic breakdown? Consequently, in 'O', each individual becomes a source of unique semantic interpretations! And, in 'O', one can draw only from unconscious drives and impulses, from emotions not governed by logical thought(?). The question mark refers not so much to the thoughts expressed by the rational mind but is used here as a signal; beyond this sign there may be, according to Bion, modalities of thinking that have not yet been recognized as such. (W. Bion, "The Dawn of Oblivion", Introduction).

Claudio Neri emphasizes the importance of an act of Faith in order to reach 'O'. He considers F (Faith) a factor of the psychic function of the analyst who must sustain, through their own Faith, an analysand who is desperate and lacks resources, until such time as the desire of the analysand to live is re-expressed. Neri reminds us that Faith is accompanied by two particular *manners of feeling*, addressed by Freud in "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921) and "The Future of an Illusion" (1928). The first is idealization: in Faith something higher is at stake, something noble and extraordinary. The second is illusion: a mental state that preserves Faith, distancing oneself from the testing of reality. In my opinion distancing oneself from reality testing means perceiving the passage of time as faster or slower than it actually is, i.e., the duration of time perceived could be inferior or superior to that of reality.

We know that time perception is closely related to the functioning and physiology of the brain. We also know that Bion hypothesized that mind and personality have their physical counterpart in the central nervous system (Bion, "Memory of the Future – Dreams", chap. 38) and deemed it necessary to study the relationship between body and mind (either personality or psyche). Edelman, Penrose and Searle take it for granted that there is an exact and univocal correlation between one individual's mental and cerebral states. I believe that there is a connection between the *act of Faith* – as proposed by Bion – and behaviours exhibited by Brahmans and ascetics when – to reach the Brahman state – they fix their thought between two words or on a precise point in space. Expressed in the language of Bion, could the former behaviour be equated to fixing on a 'selected fact' i.e., to the concepts of container/contained, temporal/a-temporal, symmetry/a-symmetry and the latter to the ideogram?

Brahman is reality, awareness. In Sanskrit it is defined as *sat, cit, ananda*, i.e., *essence, pure thought or consciousness, bliss*. 'O' may correspond to the *Fourth State of Consciousness* – that which follows deep sleep, as defined by Sankara, a Hindu master who lived around the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD. This is a stage in which there is memory of the void of the mental scene being experienced at the moment. It could be defined as *lucid deep sleep* – i.e., absence of representations.

Entering into this state presupposes, in fact, that the finite consciousness, the opposite of infinite consciousness 'O', is stripped of any intentionality, will, volition; i.e, finite consciousness has abandoned its original extroversion that drives it to seek for its 'good' and fear its 'evil' in the external world (M. Hulin, 1996).

I hypothesize that dream-like memory is what Sankara defines as *inner experiential awareness*. Bion postulates a multi-dimensional mental space – the extension and characteristics of which are not *not-thought-of* or *un-thinkable* (Bion, "Cogitations") – and, that 'dream-like' memory is situated in this space, and is the consequent experience of *being in 'O'*.

Bion further proposes *exercising of the mind* to remain in the present moment. That, will in turn, lead to the annulment of memory, desire – even comprehension and healing – in order to experience whatever the encounter has in store, delving into the deepest recesses of ourselves and the other, the *at-one-ment* that is 'O' (L. Caldiroli and M. Giampà, 2000). All this is connected with the stimulation of primitive

feelings within the analyst as well as the analysand. Emotional events such as love, hatred, and terror are sharpened to the limits of bearability in both participants.

For Bion the mental construct of space and time derives from the capacity to tolerate absence of the mother's breast. As mentioned above, during a therapeutic session, a psychoanalytic space-time dimension exists that is characterized by mental phenomena that are not limited to bodily physicality but allow a communication from unconscious to unconscious (analyst to analysand), that goes beyond or transcends the corporal and temporal experience that are shared during the session. This way of *living in the present* has to be differentiated from a *present* that is frozen by sadistic and envious attacks that destroy past and future.

The *present* in a session is characterized by moments of synthesis and *constant conjunction of the selected fact* that allow an integration of hitherto dispersed elements. In this way a spontaneous memory may appear, a memory that for Bion is psychic non-sensorial reality.

For Olga Belmonte Lara de Nieves and Elsa del Valle Echegaray (2004), spontaneous memory is a conjunction observed in the oscillation between the schizo-paranoid and the depressive positions and in the flow of *content* toward *container*. Furthermore, they consider Bion's space-time concept to be somewhat ambiguous because, in spite of the fact that he insists on its mental-emotional origins, at times he argues that there is a difference between mental time and space and objective time and space.

Paulo Cesar Sandler (2002) maintains that one's *sense of reality* is attained when a person can tolerate the known object and the unknown object being 'one and the same'. The person no longer denies truth, as idealists do, nor do they parse the truth, as realists do. The sense of truth renders possible the achievement of what I believe to be Bion's fundamental psychoanalytic position: the ability to tolerate paradox without immediacy for resolution. Analogous to Einstein's concept of *space-time continuum* - in that the spatial and chronological dimensions are inseparably linked in the physical sense - Bion considered that psychoanalytic interpretation demands some regard for the *dimensions* that characterize psychoanalytic space-time during a session.

The word *time* (*Zeit* in German, *tempo* in Italian) basically means *an irreversible succession of instants, minutes, hours, days, and so forth*. The psychic life of an individual unfolds over time. Each mental act and behaviour - from the simplest to the most organized and complex - is located at a point on the chronological path of an individual's life. The concept of time that we hold in the West derives from Greek philosophy; for example, in the "Timaeus" Plato considered time to be *the moving image of eternity that proceeds according to numbers*.

Aristotle considered time to be *the number of movement in respect of before and after*, and as in the nature of things, only the soul or the intellect that is contained therein have the capacity to enumerate, the existence of time without time of the soul appears impossible. Thus, Aristotle's connection between time and psyche is rendered explicit (U. Galimberti, 2006). Parmenides argues that the true essence of reality is eternal: where past, present, and future co-exist. Is this Bion's 'O'?

I would like to stress that when Bion speaks of *knowledge*, this word in Hindu corresponds to the Western word or concept of *metaphysics*, or *that which is beyond nature*. According to Eastern metaphysics/knowledge, the pure *being* is not the first or most universal principle because it is determined: one therefore has to go beyond the *being*; and, this is the most important thing. For this reason, for every really metaphysical/intellectual conception, one must always allow space for that which cannot be expressed. Analogous to the finite where the sum of all things in every dimension is nothing as compared to the infinite, everything that *can* be expressed is absolutely nothing as compared to what *cannot* be expressed or that which goes beyond expression (Renè Guénon).

Could 'scientific psychoanalysis' be the equivalent of metaphysics in Eastern philosophy?

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