

**Bion's Journey**  
**Between Bodies to Minds**  
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**Abstract**

Bion developed many theories in his life, moving from one to another across a number of caesurae. Beginning with a psychological ideas arising during his medical training as a Doctor, and the influence of the surgeon Wilfred Trotter. Then later influenced by the social approach of John Rickman to the psychology of groups, and subsequently his psychoanalytic training with Melanie Klein, when he reviewed his psychosocial ideas in terms of psychoanalytic concepts. And finally his concern with how psychoanalysts communicate their knowledge, ending up with a theory of intuition, which bears on Freud's puzzle of unconscious-to-unconscious communication.

**Key words:** Caesura, Bio-psycho-social approach, Transformation, Epistemology, Intuition

In 1965 when Bion was approaching 70 years of age, he found himself confronted with the mathematical theory of transformation. In this theory, something looked at from different angles and perspectives looks different. However there is something common about what is seen, whatever the perspective. That element which is common is called, mathematically an 'invariant'. So a circle seen from the edge appears as an ellipse which retains *some* of the geometric properties of a circle.

I think this was a sudden revelation for Bion, as he could use it, not only to understand how psychoanalysts view the same thing, a human patient, describe it in so many different ways, but he could hope to understand himself. By this I mean that during his career he had used many different conceptualisations to keep his own ideas in order. From Bergson in the 1920s, to psychosocial medicine in the 1930s, to Freud and Klein in the 1950s, and the philosophy of mathematics and epistemology in the 1960s. All these different perspectives, he must have realised, could be brought together by a common invariant running within each conceptualisation.

I suspect that Bion had been traumatised by his experiences in the First World War (and maybe previously when sent to an English boarding school at the age of 8). It seems likely that he had difficulty in making sense of his own experiences – or containing them, as he might have said later. The idea that a mind can move between different vertices, transforming one's conceptualisations, must have been helpful in accepting his own disjointed development. However catastrophic the transformation, he could at least feel reassured that there was some common thread, an invariant running through all the changes. Meltzer also admirably says,

...the quality that distinguished Wilfred Bion, and which marks his passing from us with such serious consequences for psychoanalysis – perhaps for the

world – was his capacity to tolerate caesura after caesura, to weather what he called 'Catastrophic Change' (Meltzer 1981, p. 13).

If that was indeed the hope that reassured him, I am not sure that it was entirely valid. Did he weather the catastrophic caesurae? Was there always some invariant that survives across the change of perspective? It may be that an invariant did not always survive across one of his caesurae. In this paper, I want to trace briefly his move from a Bergsonian vitalism to a medical physicality of the person as a body and as neuroscience, back to the immateriality of intuition as something beyond ordinary sense perception in a manner almost like Carl Jung.

### **Vitalist philosophy**

When at Oxford in 1919-1920, Bion read History, but he also attended lectures on philosophy, and became a friend of H.J. Paton, later Professor of philosophy at Oxford. In 1922, he was at the University of Poitiers where he probably first encountered Henri Bergson, who in 1927 won the Nobel Prize. Bergson's vitalism was an important interest for intellectuals in Europe at the time. We know from Bion's library that he read Bergson, and also Whitehead who expressed similar ideas and respected Bergson highly (Torres 2013).

The point is that Bion was very likely influenced by the panpsychism of Bergson and Whitehead. That is to say, the material world is not the interaction of inanimate matter, but that matter itself exhibits organic growth. The world is a constant flow; the mind divides up the flow into more static pieces. Before there is a mind, the embryonic awareness is a protomental system, at one with, as it were, the flux of nature.

At the time of Bergson's Nobel Prize, Bion was finishing his medical training in London. Part of his experience then was to work for the surgeon Wilfred Trotter. Trotter had been an early friend of Ernest Jones. They shared a suite of consulting rooms in 1905, when Trotter showed Jones Freud's short summary *On Dreams* (1901). Trotter was subsequently Freud's surgeon for his maxillary cancer, after Freud came to Britain in 1938. Trotter had in 1916 published an interesting treatise on group psychology, *The Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War*, which Freud had critiqued in his own *Group Psychology*, in 1921.

Bion respected very few people, but one he did respect was Trotter, and exposure to Trotter's ideas was probably highly significant. This was a time when Bion must have been at his most materialist, confronted in his medical training with bodies dead and alive. Trotter's thesis was that people gather in 'herds' from inherent causes. It is practically in the genes, and it is this inherited gregariousness from which sensitivity to others arises.

This inherent property of the herd, as a part of the material substance of human beings comes through in Bion's idea of 'group mentality' with which he started his

series of papers on group dynamics.

### **Fields and assumptions**

Bion went to the Tavistock Clinic in 1933 as an associate to train in psychotherapy. He had had some sort of therapy whilst at Oxford, and again later with J. A. Hadfield who probably suggested to Bion to find work at the Tavistock. Hadfield was influential and in charge of training at the Tavistock then. He marked out a specifically eclectic method. This was roughly in line with the idea of the founder of the clinic, Hugh Crichton-Miller who promoted an integrative approach – or a bio-psycho-social one. Bion therefore moved from a more Bergsonian position on vitalist nature towards a more medical integration of mind and body.

Though the Tavistock included a social dimension there, it was not so pronounced until Eric Trist introduced the ideas of Kurt Lewin on social field theory shortly after the Second World War. Bion was clearly interested in the integrative and eclectic position of therapy as the Tavistock was attempting to develop it. He also attended Jung's Tavistock lectures in 1935. However he must have felt some limitations to the integrative Tavistock work, since by 1938 he had decided to train at the Institute of Psychoanalysis in London. The Institute and the Tavistock were highly antagonistic to each other in the 1930s.

He began a full analysis in 1938 with John Rickman, a central figure in British psychoanalysis, a Quaker. Deeply interested in the social application of psychoanalysis, Rickman had already been acquainted with Lewin's field theory. However, Bion's analysis lasted little more than a year, because of the outbreak of World War 2. Despite that Bion and Rickman remained in contact, and Rickman became in effect a mentor for Bion's war work, first at the War Office Selection Board. This was a unit for selecting men suitable to become officers in the army. Bion worked out, with Rickman's collaboration, a field theory approach. They argued that if you want to find the men with most leadership qualities, then put the candidates for selection together in a group, assign them a task, and then observe which emerged as the leaders – both with authority and who could at the same time gain the trust of the others. Bion was highly excited by this application of field theory, and even thought it could be extended to much broader selection procedures, including the selection of Members of Parliament.

Clearly at this point, Bion was moving away from a vitalist set of concepts, to a more conventionalist and behaviourist form of group psychology. He, with Rickman conducted a similar experiment at a military hospital for soldiers who suffered mental breakdown while on active service – this was known as the First Northfield experiment – in 1943 – and written up as a joint paper with Rickman.

On the strength of this 'experiment' when Bion returned to the Tavistock in 1945 he began a series of study groups, where he developed ideas based on what he had

harvested in his career so far. He adopted the protomental idea of 'mind in nature' from Bergson; and in addition 'group mentality' from Trotter; as well as the view of the group as a field coming from Lewin. From 1948 to 1952, Bion published a series of seven papers on the experiences he culled from these study groups. He had three years of these experiences until he left the Tavistock in 1948. Interestingly the first three of his papers, 'Experiences in Groups I, II, and III' were highly idiosyncratic and often ironic descriptions of pieces of dialogue from the groups. These set out to emphasise a paucity of sophistication, simplistic thinking and down-right prejudice posed as knowledge. He demonstrated in line with Trotter that the group life of humans is not rational. However, this is a rather limited conclusion, and by the third of his papers he began to unpack the idea of group mentality. He substituted three irrational assumptions, each of which could be the basis for a specific group culture. It is as if the nature of the human mind is inherently programmed in its material base, its protomental origins, to link up with similar assumptions with others in the group. The group was pervaded by one or other of the assumptions adhered to be all individuals in the group – we know these assumptions as dependency, fight-fright and pairing. In his role running these study groups he preferred to remain above the assumptions, and believed he had that ability, unlike the other members. He felt he could stand for something different, more rational. And he differentiated another modality of group culture not so enslaved to the three assumptions. This he called the work group.

This contrast of group emotionality and individual reason came from Trotter, but was also pretty much a part of the wider intellectual culture – at least in Britain. Or to put it another way, the individual is capable of being emotionally active and irrational in a group but as an individual he is capable of rationality. Being in a group therefore an individual is in conflict between himself as a rational individual, and himself as a group member; as Bion put it, 'the human being is a group animal at war with his groupishness.'

However, Bion is here trying to say that these basic assumptions and irrationality appear in the field of the group dynamics because they are a part of the flux of matter itself, and one can see, distantly, the influence of Bergsonian vitalism, applied to the field theory. This was a major accomplishment, and Bion enthusiastically used this amalgamation in his later group papers to develop beyond the study groups to explore the manifestations of this protomental union of mind and matter in various intellectual disciplines including economics and history. Interestingly he also touched on medicine and the impact of the protomental on what he called 'social diseases'. He took as an example the work of Wittkower who compared the culture in sanatoriums for people with tuberculosis. His intention is that there is a correlation between the specific disease, tuberculosis, and the specific culture in terms of the basic assumptions.

### **Sensitivity and rationality**

Already Bion has traversed a lengthy journey. However in 1952, the culmination of his own integrative project is set aside as he conducts a full-scale revision of everything he has been working on. It is true that Rickman, his mentor died in 1951. But more than this, in 1945, having returned from the war, started his psychoanalytic training. Now he had his analysis with Melanie Klein.

Klein's own development had not been an intellectual one; hers was entirely a clinical development for observing children to creating a form of child analysis, and subsequently to tackle the psychoanalytically difficult problem to understand psychosis. Her journey is important but I won't consider it here. What is important is that Klein's views seemed to impact powerfully on Bion's.

The anecdotal story is that Klein told Bion bluntly to stop bothering about groups and to concentrate on psychoanalysis proper. Whether that is true or not we will never know. But it seems that for whatever reason, he did turn from groups, and recast his group theories into psychoanalytic ones. His re-view – that is a new view, not a review – is to say that when an individual engages in a group he regresses to primitive levels of functioning, so that we can understand the emotionality, sensitivity and irrationality of groups in terms of the primitive levels of mental functioning to which the individual is reduced by entering a group. That then allows him to re-interpret the basic assumptions, and group dynamics in general in terms of the primitive mechanisms which Klein had discovered and described.

In effect he was dropping his idea of a field. Or at least modifying it enormously, a group at this level, the primitive level, is no longer a social field. The group is believed by the members to exist, and to be more than the aggregate of the individuals. Now the group is believed, he says, to be the parts of a mind. Each member plays a part which is a single and rather isolated aspect of a mind. They come together to try to replace the coherence of mental activity – reversing the regression.

### **The pre-eminence of primitive mechanisms**

Bion has here begun to use his learning from Klein and his application of it to psychosis. Bion was active in a small group of Kleinians in the 1950s who were researching the psychoanalysis of schizophrenics. Here he is conceiving a group as a regressed schizophrenic mind split up into its different parts.

It will be seen from this description that the basic assumptions now emerge as formations secondary to an extremely early primal scene worked out on a level of part objects, and associated with psychotic anxiety and mechanisms of splitting and projective identification (Bion, 1961).

These intra-group mechanisms render the individuals anonymous, and the group indifferent to them as individuals. He goes on to say,

the basic assumptions appear to be the source of emotional drives to aims far different either from the overt task of the group or even from the tasks that

would appear to be appropriate to Freud's view of the group as based on the family group. But approached from the angle of psychotic anxiety associated with phantasies of primitive part-object relationships, described by Melanie Klein and her co-workers, the basic-assumption phenomena appear far more to have the characteristics of defensive reactions to psychotic anxiety, and to be not so much at variance with Freud's views as supplementary to them. In my view, it is necessary to work through both the stresses that appertain to family patterns and the still more primitive anxieties of part-object relationships. In fact I consider the latter to contain the ultimate sources of all group behaviour (Bion, 1961, p. 189).

Individuals are in effect part-objects, mere isolated functions in the group. This is now a long way from the conception of the group as a social field.

This is not to say that Bion was becoming conventional and conformist. He was always brilliantly original even in his conformity. With his work with the schizophrenic's dispersal of the mind in bits, and his extension of that to the dispersal of functions in a social group, he was interested, for the rest of his life in linking, and especially in the extremely creative and fruitful concept of containing. He exploited Klein's understanding of projective identification, and its varieties and vicissitudes. And the notion of containing brought together the primitive levels of the mind with the more Oedipal ones by postulating that linking was not just coming together, but had the distinct characteristic of one thing *going inside* another.

But he used these ideas very broadly, studying the problems of linking in a more general sense. He was President of the British Psychoanalytical Society from 1962-1965, when he no doubt had close acquaintance with the political problems of the three-group system of the Society. Kleinians, Independents and Orthodox Freudians hardly connected or debated together. He was confronted with the non-linking of groups with each other. Minus-linking therefore became important, and he set himself the task of understanding how the non-communication between psychoanalytic groups could be overcome. To this end he turned to conventional science and mathematics to develop a form of notation. This was intended to be a non-partisan method of classifying experiences, expressions and many forms of mental events and contents to move away from the various ways in which the psychoanalytic groups extended their technical vocabularies. However to my knowledge the 'Grid' he produced was never given much of a trial outside the Klein group.

In the 1960s, Bion entered a period in which he studied more deeply the philosophy of science, and the epistemology of psychoanalysis. That is to say he wanted to understand how we know psychoanalytic knowledge, and how we express our knowing to each other. He was I think impressed that psychoanalysis is not just a body of knowledge but is a study of how we know things. Psychoanalysis is a reflexive discipline.

This was a period in which Bion went back to his Oxford philosophy days, and his ideas have a Kantian slant which may well derive from his association with H.J. Paton now the foremost Kantian scholar of the time. He had moved from Bergsonian metaphysics, via medicine and psychoanalysis back to a philosophy, with a more Oxford analytic character. So the story I am telling up to this point in the mid-1960s is a journey from a vitalist notion of the material world, to one in which matter, even the matter of a human body is seen in terms of scientific and medical causalities.

### **Full-circle**

Bion's romance with conventional science and his attempts to construct psychoanalysis as such a science did not survive, and once again Bion moved on. Perhaps his re-discovery of his own early philosophical interest help him to reformulate once again. The abstract notation fell from use, though he never entirely gave it up, and hoped perhaps that here was something that could still be rescued from it.

From the mid-1960s changes happened for Bion. His children went off to school, he was therefore freer. We can suppose that his period as President of the Psychoanalytical Society had disheartened him. Perhaps the lack of success of his notational experiment, the Grid, as an inter-group language made him feel defeated. He decided to move geographically and he and his wife relocated to California with a couple of other British psychoanalysts. All this may have been external expression of a deeper change going on within his own conceptual development. Meg Harris Williams (2010) speculates that one of his patients, Roland Harris, who was an amateur poet influenced Bion to consider the differences between scientific approaches to the body and brain, compared with the approach of the humanities to the human mind and spirit. Whatever, the reasons, he set off on a new exploration. This is most explicitly described early on in his 1970 book, *Attention and Interpretation*,

The point that demonstrates the divergence most clearly is that the physician is dependent on realization of sensuous experience in contrast with the psychoanalyst whose dependence is on experience that is not sensuous. The physician can see and touch and smell. The realizations with which a psychoanalyst deals cannot be seen or touched; anxiety has no shape or colour, smell or sound. For convenience, I propose to use the term 'intuit' as a parallel in the psychoanalyst's domain to the physician's use of 'see', 'touch', 'smell', and 'hear' (Bion 1970, p. 7).

This is a radical distinction between medical science, and psychoanalytic 'science'. As he says later the psychoanalysis intuition is about being 'able to "see" the meaning' (Bion, 1970, p. 223). It is the basis for the kind of understanding that is involved in the humanities.

Having found Bion's return to his philosophical interest, it will not be a surprise that Bergson claimed 'intuition' as his method of knowledge. It is not analytic in the

philosophical sense. It is almost as platonic kind of knowledge, one which knows the thing-in-itself as Bergson put it. Bion signified this kind of 'direct' knowledge as 'O'. It is not knowledge through the senses which is indirect and partial, and which Bion called 'K', and which other psychologies as well as medicine rely on. Psychoanalysis relies on O. This he had been struggling with since his book on *Transformations* in 1965, where he had begun his rediscovery of intuition.

This redefinition of psychoanalysis as distinct from the medical approach to the body, and from the science of the material world, points to a very different attitude to symptoms that patients ask us to deal with; as Bion says,

Suppose the patient complained not of physical but of mental pain; no one doubts the existence of anxiety or sees any incongruity in seeking help to cure it. We find it necessary to differentiate between the pain of a broken leg and the pain, say, of bereavement; sometimes we prefer not to, but exchange mental for physical pain and vice versa. Physician and psycho-analyst are alike in considering that the disease should be recognized by the physician; in psycho-analysis recognition must be by the sufferer too (Bion, 1970, p. 6-7).

This could not be a clearer statement of the contrasting conceptions of medical science and psychoanalysis.

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