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WILFRED R. BION'S PSYCHOANALYSIS: A STROKE OF GENIUS?

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Abstract: The author investigates whether it is appropriate to bestow the epithet “genius” on Bion, as Grotstein and others have done. He finds that Bion’s conceptualization of psychoanalysis as a process of mutual projective identifications is untenable and that Bion’s own epistemological perspective would regard his claims to be lies and falsehoods. The author argues that the term “genius” is not supported by the intellectual quality of Bion’s work but seems to be due to his authoritarian-dogmatic style, which precludes critical assessment and presumes that his conceptualizations are indisputable. Since Bion’s often cryptic statements are difficult to understand, they appear similar to ‘messages from the gods’ (Thompson) and produce the impression that the breadth and depth of an earth-shaking work have yet to be fully grasped. Therefore, the author finds support for the claim that Bion is a “genius” to be lacking; rather, this assertion appears to be the product of a socio-psychological phenomenon.

Since Grotstein (1981: 502) first bestowed the epithet ‘genius’ on Bion more than thirty years ago, similar statements have been made by others both in the literature (e.g., Hedges, 2002: 447; Ferro, 2002: 981; Lawrence et al., 1996: 30; Mason, 2000: 985) and informally in the course of collegial discussions. Bion’s writings, like those of other geniuses, are regarded as difficult to understand but impressive and inspiring nevertheless.

It is difficult to achieve a consensus on the qualities that define a genius. However, if Bion were to fit this mould, his ideas should be able to initiate a kind of Kuhn’s (1962) paradigm shift in providing a new intellectual framework that extends our knowledge in the same way as Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* or Einstein’s theory of relativity. In Aron’s (1991) view, Bion’s conceptualization of the psychoanalytic process, which Symington and Symington (1996: 2) have identified as Bion’s primary focus, provides such a new framework. Bion describes the analyst as a container into which the patient consigns his unconscious wishes by means of projections understood as communicative acts (Bion, 1958:

146; 1962b: 37; 1963: 27). The analyst then identifies with these wishes and returns them to the patient 'detoxicated' (ibid.). Aron (1991: 46) emphasizes that Bion's understanding of the analyst as a 'container' and 'metabolizer' of the unconscious wishes of the patient creates a useful new perspective that directs the analyst's attention to these 'primitive communications'.

However, even a cursory glance at the concepts of 'container/contained' (Bion, 1962b: 90) and detoxification casts doubt on whether Bion's metaphorical characterization of the psychoanalytic process improves upon Freud's conceptualizations. To address this issue and to determine what projective identifications communicate, I first briefly review the development of the concept of projective identification and then discuss Bion's understanding of projective identification as a communicative act and his thesis that there is 'thought without a thinker' (Bion, 1970: 104).

Projective identification

Melanie Klein first used the term 'projective identification' to refer to the unconscious mechanism by which infants in what she termed the 'paranoid position' (Klein, 1946: 99; later termed 'paranoid-schizoid position') attempt to overcome anxieties. In this process, 'together with ... harmful excrements, expelled in hatred, split off parts of the ego [are] projected onto the mother or, as I would rather call it, into the mother' (ibid., 102). Melanie Klein notes that this process entails an 'identification of an object with the hated parts of the self' (ibid.) and that good parts of the self can also be projected into the object.

This concept has been subsequently extended and modified. Although it continues to be regarded as an unconscious defence mechanism (Cohen, 1997; Feldman, 1993; Mason, 1994; Sandler, 1993), normal projective identification has been distinguished from pathological projective identification, and Klein's purely intrapsychic concept was transformed into both an intrapsychic and interpersonal phenomenon (Mitchell, 1995).

As a result, the originally transitive nature of the concept described by Melanie Klein (1946: 102) as an 'identification of an object with the hated parts of the self', has acquired a reflexive character. The term 'identification' refers to a process in which the projecting individual leads the object of the projection to unconsciously identify with the projected contents and the projecting individual re-identifies with the contents modified by the object.

After Money-Kyrle (1955: 132) described the normal process of projective

identification in psychoanalytic treatments, stating that, 'in a "normal" or perhaps "ideal" analytic relationship, a particular kind of interplay between introjective and projective identification would seem to occur', Bion distinguished between pathological and normal projective identification and regarded the mother-child relationship as the first manifestation of a normal projective identification. His example of this normal or '*realistic activity*' (Bion, 1962a: 308; italics in the original) describes a child who is overwhelmed by intolerable fear and projects this feeling onto his mother to obtain relief. When the mother is able to identify with her child's emotion and tolerate it within herself, she contains her child's feeling. Her ability to reflect on this feeling and her desire to help her child allows her to respond 'in a manner that makes the infant feel it is receiving its frightened personality back again, but in a form that it can tolerate—the fears are manageable by the infant personality' (ibid.).

In Bion's view this 'normal' form of projective identification (Bion, 1958: 146; 1959a: 312; 1962a: 308) is a communicative process that typically occurs in psychoanalytic treatment.

Projective identification and communication

Communication is usually understood to be the 'exchange of information between individuals' (Klaus and Buhr, 1970: 585; translated). Speech is certainly the primary form of communication for human beings and consists of the purposeful exchange of meaningful linguistic signs. The semantic aspect of linguistic signs is the information embedded in mentally represented concepts that provide the meaning of the signs (e.g., de Saussure, 1915: 98; Klaus, 1962; Ogden and Richards, 1923: 18; Zepf, 2011). The pragmatic aspect of linguistic signs is the specific behaviour induced in the receiver following the receiver's understanding of the sign's embedded information.

Since Bion (1959a: 312) does not define 'the limits within which normality [of projective identification] lies', Ogden's (1979: 362) summary of projective identification provides a point of departure for discussion in addition to the outline of the communicative process provided above. The essential features of his summary are transcribed for psychoanalytic treatments using Bion's example of projective identification in childhood as a guideline.

Projective identification refers to psychic activity in which the patient unconsciously projects parts of his self-representation onto his/her representation of the analyst such that the

analyst will engage in 'introjective activity' (Bion, 1962b: 32) and identify with the projected contents. In other words, the analyst incorporates the projected contents into his self-representation. As part of the therapeutic process, the analyst modifies the contents and re-projects them onto the patient, who also engages in the 'introjective activity' (ibid.) of re-identifying with these 'metabolized projections' (Ogden, 1979: 362).

From a semiotic point of view, if projective identification were a communicative activity like language, it would communicate a message on two different semantic levels. Through projection, the analyst simultaneously learns of the patient's unconscious contents and that s/he should contain these contents by identifying with them.

Semiotically, the projected contents correspond to the semantic level of the message, and the attempt to make the analyst identify with these projections corresponds to the pragmatic level. As the pragmatic aspect of the message informs the analyst of how the projected contents should be treated, it exhibits a higher semantic level compared to the projection of the unconscious content.

A language system may serve both as an object language and as a meta-language in which the linguistic messages refer to statements in the object language. A meta-statement about a message is possible if the communicative system is similar to language. However, in the projective identification process, neither the information nor its intended effect on the analyst take the form of concepts that are conveyed to the recipient in the manner of linguistic signs.

When compared to communication through language, projective identification fails to meet the criteria for a communicative process. One might object that in Bion's (1970: 45) view projective identification occurs unconsciously such that his description of projective identification as a communicative act cannot be criticized on the basis that it does not share the formal characteristics of human language. As Aron (1991), Fisher (2006), Miltrani (1999), and Steiner (1996) argue, it is thought to be a primitive form of communication that conforms to only the most general definition of communication, as any kind of exchange of any kind of information.

However, if one holds on to the idea that the patient not only projects unconscious experiences but also unconsciously conveys that s/he wants the analyst to understand his/her projected unconscious experiences (Bion, 1959a; 1962a; 1962b), adopting a broader definition of communication does not eliminate the problem of finding an explanation of how one of the two messages unconsciously conveyed to the analyst is a meta-statement

informing the analyst he has to “contain” the projected information in the other message. In Freud’s understanding of unconscious processes, such a sophisticated meta-statement is not possible.

In Freud’s (1940: 168-169) view, unconscious processes are dominated by the primary process in which the ‘governing rules of logic carry no weight’, and objective differences and ‘contraries are not kept apart but treated as though they were identical’ so that ‘everything belongs with everything that shares an attribute of it’ (Rapaport, 1951: 708). Thus, it is open to question on how such a meta-statement about communication can be formulated unconsciously and conveyed to the analyst.

Seen in this light, projective identification is neither a communicative act nor a concept that deepens our understanding of the psychoanalytic process. This is not surprising given the nature of projective identification as generally understood by other psychoanalysts (e.g., Sandler, 1993). First, projective identification is a defence mechanism that operates to avoid experiences that the patient finds painful; rather than informing the analyst about what is warded off, it is part of the defence that the analyst acts in accordance with the projected contents and misunderstands the projections as authorized by him/herself. An essential feature of projective identification is ‘that what is projected is simultaneously identified with and is experienced as part of the self’ (Meissner, 1980: 55). Projective identifications acquire the character of messages only after the analyst is able to interpret what was projected and to identify the patient as its source.

Bion’s thesis of ‘thought without a thinker’

It is also unclear how projected contents can be modified by their container that stores only ‘thought without a thinker’ (Bion, 1970: 104). Bion (1965: 141) states that the ‘container ... will detoxicate’ what it contains. ‘Container’ however, is a metaphor and a metaphor is unable to do anything. Thoughts do not modify themselves but can only be changed by a thinking person. It is impossible to alter the projected contents in this account unless the analyst-as-thinker is included. Yet, it seems that the analyst’s changes can only produce lies. Bion states that his thesis of ‘thought without a thinker’ is valid only for true thought and that in ‘any situation where a thinker is present the thoughts when formulated are expressions of falsities and lies’ (1970: 117). It follows that the analyst does not contain ‘thought without a thinker’ but rather projected lies because the unconscious thoughts of the patient conveyed to the analyst-container were originally produced by a thinker. Moreover, since the analyst is

also a thinker, Bion's logic requires that the patient's lies will be transformed into other lies.

In re-identifying with the transformed aspects of him/herself, the patient modifies his/her self-representation based on this new understanding. However, Bion's conceptual framework does not explain how the unconscious lies of the patient are transferred back to the patient after being 'detoxicated' into conscious lies. Bion speaks only of 'an introjective activity' as being responsible for this transfer (1962b: 32) and did not emphasize the analyst's projective identification. Implicitly referring to Bion's statement that 'projective identification cannot exist without its reciprocal, namely an introjective activity' (ibid.), understood as an unconscious activity (e.g., Garfinkle, 2005: 217), Hamilton (1990: 446) elaborated on Bion's conception by stating 'that just as what the therapist introjects from the patient is the patient's projective identification, what the patient introjects from the analyst is the analyst's projective identification'. However, neither Bion nor Hamilton did reveal why the patient engages in the introjective activity of re-identifying with the analyst's modifications of his/her projections and how these conscious lies enter into the patient's consciousness through this unconscious activity.

Basically, Bion's usage of projective identification is characterized by the same 'confusion of fantasy and process, of metaphor and mechanism' Meissner (1980: 66) has generally criticized in the usage of this concept. In the view adopted in this paper, Bion's conception of the psychoanalytic process in terms of projective identification does not fully replace Freud's account of the process as the development and resolution of a transference neurosis (e.g., Zepf, 2010). At best, Bion's characterisation might provide a 'pseudo-explanation' of the psychoanalytic process, which in denying the subjectivity of knowledge allows us 'to see all feelings, phantasies and reactions of the analyst to his patient as being an outcome of what the patient has "put into" the analyst by means of projective identification' (Sandler, 1987: 48).

Bion's epistemological claims that 'True thought requires neither formulation nor thinker' (Bion, 1970: 104), that 'thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies' (ibid., 103) and that 'true thought ... awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought' (ibid.) all sharply contrast with Freud's view. Freud's statements that truth is the 'correspondence' of scientific thinking 'with the real external world ... that is to say, with what exists outside us and independently of us ... we call "truth"' (Freud, 1933: 170) commits him to an Aristotelian definition of truth that regards truth as a quality of statements (see also Cavell, 1998). 'For it is not on account of a true

supposition, on our parts, of your being white', Aristotle (1991: 195) said, 'that you are in reality white, but, on account of your being white we who make this assertion as to your whiteness can verify our assertion'. In defining truth as ontologically inherent in existing objects, Bion subscribes to a thomistic understanding of truth.

Of course, the discrepancy between the two epistemological approaches does not vitiate Bion's view. However, Bion's view that truth is unrecognizable in principal also conflicts with a thomistic understanding of truth, in which the truth of knowledge can be achieved through the correspondence of the intellect with ontological truth. From Bion's psychoanalytic statements, it seems that he would claim that before these statements were formulated, they existed unformulated somewhere in the universe and were waiting to be discovered by an individual like Bion. In consequence of Bion's epistemological understanding, his account of psychoanalysis proves to be a mere edifice of lies because, at the moment Bion began to consider and communicate his previously unformulated thoughts, these thoughts became false and untrue. Bion's (1970: 117) epistemology does not permit any other conclusion: 'In any situation where a thinker is present the thoughts when formulated are expressions of falsities and lies. The only true thought is one that has never found an individual to "contain" it'.

It is not clear whether Bion's (*ibid.*, 34) proposal that the analyst must maintain an 'avoidance of memory and desire' in psychoanalytic treatment improves upon Freud's (1912: 111) dictum that the analyst display an "evenly-suspended attention". It also remains a secret what gain in knowledge justifies Bion's rejection of Freud's concepts of primary and secondary process (see Symington and Symington, 1996: 9), which Jones (1953: 427) has described as 'perhaps his [Freud's] most fundamental contribution to psychology', or Bion's renaming of conscious psychic elements subjected to the secondary process and unconscious psychic elements subjected to the primary process as A- and B-elements, respectively. Bion (1963: 22) defines these 'B-elements' as follows: 'This term represents the earliest matrix from which thoughts can be supposed to arise. It partakes of the quality of inanimate object and psychic object without any form of distinction between the two. Thoughts are things, things are thoughts; and they have personality'. If we remind ourselves that 'the primary processes are the earlier in time; at the beginning of mental life there are no others' (Freud, 1920: 63) and there is a 'replacement of external by psychical reality' in the primary process (1915: 187), it seems that the guise of his B-elements Bion describes are, to a great extent, the products of the primary process he rejected.

Clearly, if Bion's B-elements are understood as products of the primary process and as part of the representational world, they cannot be said to have a personality of their own. The term 'personality' refers to persons and representations can only represent individuals' personalities.

One might argue that these B-elements are not to be regarded as part of the representational world and in attributing personality to these B-elements, Bion is perhaps reviving Melanie Klein's concept of internal objects in new clothing. For, although he insisted that in spite of undergoing analysis with Klein he would remain himself when it came to thinking (Grosskurth, 1985: 427), Bion incorporated 'Melanie Klein's theories of internal objects ... with the precision necessary for use' (Bion, 1965: 44), which favours this assumption.¹ As there are various understandings of Melanie Klein's definition of internal objects, there is a need to define where these B-elements exist in psychic life. In Caper's (1994: 911) view, for example, Klein used the term 'internal object' as a shorthand way of describing her observation that children have fantasies of swallowing their objects, which then survive inside them like Jonah in the whale. Grotstein (1982: 57) maintains that Klein means internal objects to be 'objects in phantasy which have phenomenological structure in the infant's psyche'. Ogden (1985: 363) believes that Klein refers to internal objects as 'inherited preconceptions associated with the instincts'. Shahar et al. (2004: 204) are of the opinion that Klein's internal objects 'were equivalent to objects of perception, fantasy images, enduring mental representations, or more superordinate mental structures, such as the ego and super-ego'. Spillius (2002: 299) argues that by internal objects Klein was not thinking of mental representations but of an 'intense and deeply unconscious subjective experience', and Hinshelwood (1998: 423) holds the view that Klein's internal objects were thought of as concrete objects which 'were felt bodily before progress from a body-ego to a mind-ego occurred.'

If one assumes that Bion shares Spillius' understanding of Klein's internal objects and localises his B-elements outside the representational world, one must ask how non-represented 'objects compounded of things-in-themselves' can be recognised as giving 'feelings of depression-persecution and guilt' (Bion, 1963: 40). It is not sufficient to define B-elements as 'objects compounded of things-in-themselves' (ibid.) or as 'the earliest matrix from which thoughts can be supposed to arise' (ibid., 22). Bion would have done better to answer Marjorie Brierley's (1942) questioning of Klein's internal objects, that is to state the exact nature of the mental entities called 'B-elements' and where they are localized in

psychic life. As long as their essential nature and locality cannot be defined, the term can be filled to suit one's fancy, thus neither allowing theoretical assessment nor clinical examination (ibid.). Without any reference to Freud's primary process, Bion's notion that in B-elements 'Thoughts are things, things are thoughts; and they have personality' is nothing more than a confusion between the psychic representation and what it represents.

Bion's claims that 'True thought requires neither formulation nor thinker' (1970: 104) and that 'true thought ... awaits the advent of the thinker' (ibid., 103) also appear to equate thought and reality. As Ogden (2003) notes, from Bion's perspective, Copernicus did not discover or conceptualize that the earth and other planets revolve round the sun; rather, before Copernicus, the heliocentric solar system was 'a thought without a thinker' (Bion, 1970: 104), that is, a true set of thoughts waiting for a thinker to think them. Just as he would hold that Copernicus discovered the pre-existent thought of the heliocentric solar system, according to Bion, Freud did not invent psychoanalysis but detected the thought of psychoanalysis that existed long before him (Ogden, 2004: 1355). This indicates that Bion not only reduces knowledge to an edifice of lies but also confuses thoughts about reality with reality itself.

Concluding remarks

Bion develops his ideas in a manner that can scarcely be termed scientific. Except for Melanie Klein's ideas, without discussing the knowledge others have put forward, he speaks *ex cathedra* giving the impression that he alone has possession of the truth. His epistemological perspective, however, permits only falsities. He discards Freud's concepts of primary and secondary process, psychic structure (e.g., Bion, 1970: 21, 115, 127; Symington and Symington, 1996: 9), and dreams (e.g., Bion, 1959b: 43; Symington and Symington, 1996: 7) without providing effective arguments to discredit these concepts. Similarly, there is no reference to the discussion of Klein's concept of internal objects (Hinshelwood, 1997) in the period between 1934 and 1943, probably the forerunner of Bion's B-elements. In disregarding the ideas of other analysts, Bion presents no argument justifying the rejection of Freud's (1916-17: 17) view that 'Nothing takes place in a psychoanalytic treatment but an interchange of words between the patient and the analyst' and the need of projective identification as a means of communication. Freud's (1915) notion that the unconscious exists in the language being used as hidden meanings of linguistic signs, thus enabling the

individuals to talk about the unconscious, is rejected without any clear conceptual definition of the substantial difference between normal and pathological projective identification. In its stead, Bion's work gives nothing but affirmative references to projective identification.

Thus, it is difficult to believe that the view of Bion as a genius is based on the logic of his scientific reasoning. Rather, this appraisal of Bion seems more likely to have originated through a different rationale. This appraisal might have come about because Bion was analysed by Melanie Klein; because he was called a genius by Grotstein, the well-known Kleinian authority who himself was analysed by Bion (Grotstein, 2006: 577); and because Bion himself had analysed the genius, Samuel Beckett. Moreover, as before mentioned, Bion's cryptic statements are not usually accompanied by any arguments for rejecting other views, giving the impression that they are indisputable. Bion's authoritarian-dogmatic style reminds Thompson (2000: 51; see also Mills, 2005) of 'messages from the gods' in which 'he is the Prophet who was assigned to divine their meaning'. His devotees do not seem to question these messages from a 'demigod' but receive them with an 'unrelentingly adulatory' attitude (Meissner, 1985: 281-282), whereby some might fail to understand these messages to their full extent. Twemlow (1998: 1281), for example, states that some analysts remain 'in a state of suspended idealization, thinking that his work indeed has a breadth and depth that may shake the foundations of human existence, but not yet quite grasping his concepts'. If so, the act of regarding Bion as a "genius" may be the result of a socio-psychological phenomenon.

Overall, the resulting opinion of Bion's work reminds me of Samuel Johnson, who informed the author of a manuscript: 'Your work, Sir, is both new and good. But what's new is not good and what's good is not new' (cited in Will et al., 2005: 846). Bestowing the epithet of "genius" on Bion also brings to mind the fairy tale, *The Emperor's New Clothes*. As in the story, the adults say that they see the non-existent new clothes because they believe they would appear to be stupid otherwise. Perhaps many assert that Bion's conceptualizations are inspired by genius to hide their lack of comprehension. Since the works of a genius are not easy to understand, we can admit our failure to understand a genius without being suspected of possessing limited intellectual prowess.

However, this is probably only half the truth. The other half is also embedded in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale. Just as it is the emperor who is the actual simpleton taken in by the two deceitful tailors, difficulty in understanding Bion's work is not due to the reader's lack of intellect but to the theoretical vagueness, inconsistencies and contradictions that lurk

in Bion's writing cryptic style. Whereas the fairy tale tells us that things may not be what the authorities wish us to believe, reading Bion's work illustrates that failing to understand a work does not mean that it is a work of genius.

Notes

¹ That Melanie Klein's thinking underlies Bion's is also substantiated by his statement: 'I must make it clear for the better understanding of what I say that, even where I do not make specific acknowledgement of the fact, Melanie Klein's work occupies a central position in my view of the psycho-analytic theory of schizophrenia' (Bion, 1954: 113).

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