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**Nature Loves to Hide: Reflections on the Value of Not Knowing[[1]](#footnote-2)**

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*Know thyself*

*Delphic epigraph*

*Ignore thyself   
 J. Marion[[2]](#footnote-3)*  
This seemingly insoluble, yet highly generative tug-of-war alluded to by the epigrams above, has traditionally been recognized as the Athens versus Jerusalem conundrum, first formulated by the Roman writer Tertullian, himself a Christian. In his seminal work on the subject, the Russian philosopher Leon Shestov writes the following:

In pursuing knowledge and always aspiring to the principles of ‘universality’ and ‘necessity’, the philosophers have lost….freedom…..Within the ‘limits of reason’ one can create a science, sublime ethic, and even a religion, but to find the Ultimate Truth, one must tear oneself away from the seductions of reason with all its physical and moral constraints and go to another source. This other source bears the enigmatic name ‘faith . . . It is here, that there begins for fallen man, the region – forever condemned by reason – of the miraculous and of the fantastic i.e. the fortuitous. (Shestov, 1966 pp.66-68)

Years later, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, comparing these same two fundamental attitudes to human existence, expounds how philosophy as a specifically Greek way of articulating and thinking has, as its most distinguishing feature, the equation of Truth with the ‘intelligibility of Presence’. ‘Being’ in philosophy, he claims, is essentially Presence. He then goes on to contrast that, to man’s ethical, not philosophical stance, which, according to him, skews the above mentioned equation, and places the ‘Relation to the Other’ at a position preceding the ontological relation to oneself. The Presence of the Other would henceforth, stand forever beyond and before the Presence of the Self – and would be irreducible to the synchrony of the Same.

Ethics thus ends up defining subjectivity as a heteronomous responsibility towards the Other, preceding any autonomous freedom, that can only come after it. From the very beginning therefore, this ethical stance, views the Self or the Being-in-the-World as defined through an essential incompletion, a lack, that only the Other can complement. Levinas writes: “It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the Other that makes me a subjective ‘I’. I become a [subject] to the extent that I agree to depose myself or dethrone myself – to abdicate my position of centrality – in favour of the vulnerable Other.[[3]](#footnote-4)” (Cohen, 1986 pp. 26-7)

These complex reflections address a number of profound almost nuclear, human riddles:

I – **Man’s relation to sameness (narcissism - unity) vs. man’s relation to an   
 irreducible alterity.**   
  
 The former promises the eventual achievement of a conquering unity of ultimate   
 satisfaction, and it is usually referred to as the neo-platonic Oneness, or the   
 “return to the womb” fantasy[[4]](#footnote-5). Both philosophically and psychoanalytically   
 controversial, this concept nevertheless maintains its attractiveness as an illusory   
 source of comfort, linked as it might be, to the imagined “Drive for Mastery”   
 [Bemächtigungstrieb]. If I become one with the Other (be it the Almighty or my   
 significant Other), I am no longer helpless and in a state of unsatisfaction. The   
 Other’s might, is also my might – so the argument goes.  
   
 The latter i.e. the relation to Alterity, represents an ongoing ‘becoming’ that   
 involves the tension of the dynamics of difference. The philosopher Husserl has   
 asserted that consciousness inherently deploys an intentionality directed towards   
 an object, i.e. a relationship with an object outside itself – other than itself.   
 Consciousness, he proposes, is not some self-transparent substance, sufficient in   
 and of itself, or a pure ‘cogito’, but a constant ‘intending’ or ‘tending towards an   
 object’ in the world. Equally relational, is the view of the theologian J. L. Marion,   
 who proposes that since the Godhead is thought of as love, the love-relationship   
 (the loving as His offering) that the Godhead is engaged in with man[[5]](#footnote-6), must needs   
 precede His being. (Marion, 1995) Such Fairbairnian-sounding worldviews of the   
 human experience, where what is highlighted is not a static state of Being per se,   
 but a never ending process of Becoming, dependent on a differential-producing   
 interactions, end up drawing attention to a highly unexpected confluence of   
 reflections coming from very divergent starting points. It is after all,   
 psychoanalysis’s adherence to this very tradition that gives credence to its   
 foundational proposition, that “….the capacity to know depends on the *capacity to   
 love,* in the therapeutic relationship…” (Civitarese, 2016 p. 451)

II – **Man’s relation to Knowledge i.e. the need for, and the need against knowledge,   
 as a second network of riddles.** Can knowledge be thought of as a present stationary state or should knowledge be   
 thought of as a forever unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire? Can knowledge be   
 thought of, as power and a source of security against the ever encroaching fear and   
 awe, emanating from the unknown? Can knowledge can be seen as veritable   
 autonomy or should knowledge be seen as a defence against the heteronomous   
 (a.k.a. dependence) relationship with the Other, be it the *Nebenmensch* or the   
 Wholly Other (God) hence necessitating faith? And what does one do with   
 Nietzsche’s admonition that one no longer believes in Truth, once the veil that had   
 been covering it, is gone? (Nietzsche, 1887 p. XI)

III **Man’s relation to the terror and hence to the utter helplessness and insecurity   
 produced by the unknown, the dark, the lacking-in-structure, and the   
 incomprehensible.**  
 This, not at all uncommon experience (irrespective of its intensity or duration),   
 necessitates a reliance on the Other (primordially the maternal figure) and on the   
 burgeoning of a relationship that goes by a number of names i.e. basic trust,   
 dependence, ethical responsibility, or indeed religious faith (in cases where the   
 (m)Other is conceived of as the Wholly Other). As is to be expected, it is the   
 prospect of the return of the object that gives any sort of meaning to the loss that   
 would inevitably be experienced as part of this relationship. Equally, it is not to be   
 underestimated that the undeniably structural necessity of loss, lies in the fact   
 that it is this loss that formulates a fundamental differentiation in the experience of   
 presence, thereby enriching its content. Without the element of absence, there   
 would be no development, instead only the maintenance *ad infinitum* of an   
 initial, undifferentiated and un-differentiable, unity. Hence a primordial rhythm of   
 alternating un-engagement – engagement, gets established through loss, and that   
 assures growth. To the extent that this experiential condition is psychically   
 invested, it can be linked to the controversial concept of *jouissance in tension,   
 rather than discharge* or to the so called ‘primary erotogenic masochism’ which   
 permits for the cathexis (and hence frustration tolerance) of the agonizing   
 waiting / patience / hope for the satisfaction to come. (Aisenstein, 2015 p.66)   
  
 This expectation of the satisfaction to come, is structurally grounded on   
 imagination, filled with current hallucinatory (desirous) satisfaction. The   
 anticipatory pleasure, which in its very nature cannot but be bittersweet,   
 (perceptual discomfort together with fantasy contentment) will subsequently   
 disappear, together with the self-produced hallucination, the moment actual   
 perceptual saturation comes to offer tension discharge. Investment in desire is   
 investment in a very charged affect of expectation produced by lack. Religious   
 faith is after all, quintessentially founded on an ongoing promise and thus   
 constant delay of satisfaction (The Promised Land). Even if one were to,   
 equanimously and logically accept, that “it is in obscurity and confusion that   
 thought progresses” (Le Doeuf, 1989 p. 29) recognition of the absence, the lack,  
 the precarious and the fortuitous that constantly surround us, forces one to   
 inevitably mobilize into action, defensive maneuvers of imagined Presence.   
 Kierkegaard’s famous “*the never ending longing for God* ***is*** *the sublime   
 happiness*” is very clear in its defensive function (surely masochistically invested),   
 as is the reassuring medieval concept of “Docta Ignorantia” (Learned Ignorance).   
 By this token, we rest secure in knowing that we cannot know – someone   
 supremely benign who does know (in their omniscience), has wished it so! The   
 20th centuryversion of this, would be: “There is indeed the inexpressible. This   
 shows itself; it is the mystical (6.522) . . . Not how the world is, is the mystical;   
 but that it is. (6.44)” (Wittgenstein, 1981)

Plato too, in his Symposium has addressed this very issue. Aristophanes’ argument presents Eros as the seeking for union, of the two previously separated parts of a unified Self. The goal seems to be the achievement of Unity and Sameness through the eventual binding of the two other-halves. This refers to a fantasy point in time, where a static Being of Identity (sameness) has in the past, and will in future exist. Diotima’s argument on the other hand, stresses that humanness implies imperfection and that such imperfection requires a never ending striving. For her, Eros is being someone’s object of love (*το ερώμενον*) not the loving agent (*το ερών*) i.e. Eros is a human relating – in other words, an inter-human process, not a final static state of being. And of course Diotima ends her presentation by saying that Eros is a conceiving, gestating and a delivering, within the context of the ‘Kalon [the Beautiful] ’ (Symposium # 206e) – a process that is, of Becoming, hence dependent on difference. One is reminded at this juncture, of a stanza from a poem by Wallace Stevens that goes:

*To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone*

*As if the paradise of meaning ceased*

*To be paradise it is this to be destitute*

*This is the sky divested of its fountains*

Wallace Stevens   
 *Esthétique du Mal* (IX)

**Echoes in the Psychoanalytic Realm**

These controversies and dilemmas lie at the very heart of psychoanalytic theory as much as at the heart of psychoanalytic practice. If what is called the transference represents the dominance of the Same, the occasional and partial resolution of the transference in the sense of the upsetting of the familiar unconscious phantasy scenario, signifies the encounter with Alterity. Knowledge is inevitably the *sine qua non* vehicle for this. Knowledge forever sought, knowledge possessed, knowledge avoided, knowledge acquired and by who, knowledge created *ex* nihilo, knowledge unthought yet known, knowledge usurped or pretended, knowledge used for untoward purposes, its lack denied or defended against etc., are all themes and vicissitudes that pervade the analytic process on a daily basis.

One could begin this investigation, by being reminded of Winnicott’s insight, that “the basis of all knowledge – just as with eating – is emptiness.” (Winnicott, 1974 p.107) Next, one would have to go to Bion who defines the notion ‘K’ as an endless pursuit of knowledge. As a paradigm of Becoming, and hence not a state of Being, K is consequently deployed as being dependent, on a constant dialectic with a creative lack. Further on, by making use of rather provocative and dramatic expressions, Bion tries to draw especial attention to the transfer into the analytic space of this very issue. He writes: “Anyone who is not afraid when he is engaged on psycho-analysis is either not doing his job, or is unfitted for it…..There is an inherent fear of giving an interpretation. If a psychoanalyst is doing proper analysis, then he is engaged on an activity that is indistinguishable from that of an animal that investigates what he is afraid of: it smells danger. An analyst is not doing his job if he investigates something because it is pleasurable or profitable.” (Bion, 1979b p.83)

Subsequent analysts may have been more circumspect in their use of language, but the message is predictably similar: i.e. “The analyst must be involved in ways his or her understanding only partially grasps” (Wilson, 2006 p. 418), or “The analyst surrenders himself into something that surpasses his knowledge” (Denis, 2006 p. 340) All this, whilst being particularly wary of “*…the risks of idealising the putative unknowability of certain kinds of clinical phenomena*” (Taylor, 2011 p.1101), that derive from appealing to the non-cognizability of the Kantian Thing-in-itself, that is the *O* in the analytic situation.

It is this deep rooted interaction with a multi-signified and ambivalently invested notion of knowledge (or to put it more precisely, the lack thereof) that engenders the feelings of profound insecurity, experienced when one is confronted with the analytic process. As Bion has repeatedly reminded us, analyst and analysand share “*the smell of danger*”. The original rather naive conviction, that analysis is a kind of conquistadorial search for a repressed historical personal experience, upon the discovery of which, (by bringing this knowledge out into consciousness), processes of ‘clemency’ and ‘apprehension’ would bring about ‘catharsis’[[6]](#footnote-7), are long gone. Our current working hypotheses, based as they are on unconscious psychic mutuality, envisage the analytic process as the search for a truth that is experienced, rather than cognitively discovered, in the here and now of the enacted psychic intercourse. Consequently both analyst and analysand (albeit in an asymmetrical relationship between them) are expected to each encounter, their so called *Otherness Within*. (Wilson, 1998) Both participants are conceptualized as embarking on a journey that will bring them face to face with incoherence, irrationality, lack, as well as incomprehensibility and absence of knowledge. This eventuality emerging both from within and from without.

What is to be encountered from within, and presumably not particularly welcome, is of course, the untamable that resides there: the pre-conscious, and more often than not, unconscious instinctual needs, desires, terrors and terrifying urges, unknown or not wanted to be known. Such encounters regularly happen après coup, and only as a result of an inherent inability to include the specific experiential event into a conscious, coherent narrative structure of optimal rationality.

What is to be encountered from without on the other hand, is a derivative of the recognition that, as per Kohon,: “The subject of psychoanalysis defies definition because it is not directly knowable . . . it is a form of conjectural knowledge, an indirect, presumptive, intuitive knowledge based on the study of individual cases.” (Kohon, 2017 p.101) Such imprecision, and lack of succinctness in purpose, such dearth of fixed points of reference (hence the invaluable notion of ‘the analytic frame’) predictably brings forth, the necessity for a dependable (back-)ground that is particularly fertile for just such processes. Such a solid ground[[7]](#footnote-8) is both required, promoted and theoretically validated, while at the same time dreaded, undermined and heavily defended against. Because of the natural tendency in both analysand and analyst to avoid anything new, incomprehensible and incoherent that would induce anxiety, the frequency of collusion into staying with what is already known, or of engaging in so called “narrative smoothing” (i.e. whatever resists narratability and thus coherence and comprehension is inadvertently ignored and summarily forgotten) is strikingly high. (Spence, 1982)

Constant fighting against this defensive maneuver every single time one is faced with insecurity, would require the demanding exigency that Edmund Husserl has called *Epoché* (εποχή)[[8]](#footnote-9) and Bion called a state of “no memory or desire”.   
Husserl defines ‘epoché’ as a procedure which entails a suspension of our natural, realistic inclinations or presuppositions, or in fact, any attitudes of certainty towards reality, in order to be able to focus more narrowly and directly on the phenomenology of objects as they appear. (Zahavi, 2002 p.45) Bion on the other hand, who advocates the suspension of all memory, desire, understanding and sense perception, for the purpose of achieving ‘*contact with psychic reality, i.e. the evolved characteristics of O*’, writes that: “… if the psychoanalyst has allowed himself the unfettered play of memory, desire and understanding, his preconceptions will be habitually saturated and his habits will lead him to resort to instantaneous and well-practised saturation from ‘meaning’ rather than from ‘O’.

When the psychoanalyst . . . thinks he has good reasons for anxiety, his tendency is to resort to memory and understanding to satisfy his desire for security (or to resort to saturation to avoid unsaturation) [thus] . . . proceeding in a direction calculated to preclude any possibility of union with O . . . The capacity to forget, the ability to eschew desire and understanding, must be regarded as essential discipline for the psychoanalyst . . . Such belief [in desire, memory and understanding] is suspect as a sign of a collusive relationship intended to prevent emergence of an unknown, incoherent formless void and an associated sense of persecution by the elements of an evolving O. Desire, memory, and understanding thus have the column 2 function of keeping F at bay and preventing the transformation in K from becoming transformation in O. ” (Bion, 1970 p.51-2)

We may need Hölderlin to remind us that “where there is danger, there too salvation grows.” (Hölderlin, 2015 p.88) However convincing, a proposition like this, can easily be countered by the argument that propounds ‘turning a blind eye’ as the much needed safety – albeit temporary. Under such circumstances of sustained resistance, defensive ignorance, misunderstanding and reliance on impulsivity tend to promise survival at least, whereas understanding and thoughtfulness tend to be mistrusted as harbingers of disintegration and death. It is no coincidence that, in psychoanalytic parlance, the proposition that “acting out is the guardian of ignorance” (Kohon, 1999 p. 75) is considered unquestionable.

Returning for a moment to Levinas’ view, regarding the essence of inter-human relating, one is reminded that whereas the ethical may precede the ontological, and one’s relationship with an Other, may be far more foundational than one’s relationship with oneself that will only follow, this latter is no doubt inundated with processes of introjection and a plethora of identifications, that consequently give very little leeway for undervaluing the ubiquity of concurrent reverse processes. The philosopher Judith Butler has described these dynamics in ways that even object-relations analysts would envy. She writes: “it is not as if an ‘I’ exists independently over here, and then simply loses a ‘You’ over there, especially if the attachment to ‘You’ is part of what composes who I am . . . When we lose some of the ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are, and what we do, any more . . . You are, what I gain through this disorientation and loss that results from trying to translate the ways in which I am tied to you” (Keller, 2014 pp. 224-229)

Reverse dynamics would entail the inevitable vicissitudes implied in the universally accepted Binding / Unbinding principle, i.e. (in the words of Levinas, once again) “…once consciousness is tied to the object of its experience, it is, at the same time, free to detach itself from the object and return upon itself, focusing this time on its own intentionality” (Cohen, 1986 p.20) This withdrawal from the Other and the focusing on the ‘I’, that will serve as the formative step for subjectivity, is a recognisable part of the rhythm of life. Fairbairn has expounded the unconscious dynamics of the schizoid position extensively, and Winnicott has highlighted the need to remain ‘incommunicado’, which according to him, is much more than playfully being hidden and waiting to be found. Aulagnier on the other hand, has vigorously defended the ‘right to have secrets’ (i.e. refuse revealing knowledge – leave the other in a state of not-knowing) as a condition necessary for the capacity to engage in independent thinking. (Castoriadis-Aulagnier, 1976)

In other words, for subjectivity to emerge, separation which implies alterity, is vital. Alterity in its turn, can emerge only through the enforcement of ‘the non-sharing’, i.e. of the element of not ever knowing – hence the oft repeated paradox inherent in the notion of empathy towards an Other. Alterity depends on irreversible limits, limits of being, limits of potency, limits of knowledge. Is it not deeply ironic therefore, that the cornerstone of psychoanalytic practice, the privileged area of shared analytic exploration, i.e. the interpretation of the dream, has quite convincingly been described as: “Nothing is more personal than a dream, nothing else so imprisons a person in irremediable solitude, nothing else is as stubbornly resistant to the possibility of being shared. The dream … is an adventure that only the dreamer himself has experienced and which only he can remember : it is a water-tight, impenetrable world which precludes the least chance of cross-checking”? (Caillois, 1963 p. XIV) It is to Freud’s great credit that he does not eschew from acknowledging this limitation, even if it is in passing, when he writes: “There is at least one spot in every dream at which the dream remains unplumbable – a navel as it were, which is the dream’s point of contact with the unknown.” (Freud, 1900 p.111 f.1)

**Alterity as Demolition and Alterity as Engenderment**

Hence psychoanalysis, just like all natural relationships, balances between sharing/relating/uniting-with-the-Other, on the one hand, and recognizing the Other as essentially Not-me, and therefore existing forever beyond the boundaries of my full knowledge, on the other. The forever Unknown is part and parcel of the Progressively Being Known, so that human experience can maintain its dynamic. André Green proclaims it boldly, when he writes that: “psychoanalysis is about nothing more than accepting our limits which involve the Other, our neighbour, who is inevitably different.” (Green, 1994 p. 128)

Psychoanalysis has often been portrayed as being enshrined within the context of the worldview of the Enlightenment. It has been propounded as a methodology that would bring light, clarity and understanding to areas that would otherwise remain dark, hidden, or in fact unknown for various reasons. Psychoanalysis has been proclaimed – by a not so negligible minority of hyper-enthusiasts – as an almost militant harbinger of the triumph of rationality that would eventually wipe out the incomprehensible and the irrational. The motto “*to understand is to eliminate . . .* ” has often been used as a benchmark for its theoretical legitimacy and for the validation of its therapeutic efficacy. (Changeux, 1979 p. 286) And yet, a century on from its inception, psychoanalysis nowadays unhesitatingly accedes to the simple truth that Athens cannot exist without Jerusalem standing nearby.[[9]](#footnote-10) Ron Britton has described the contrast between these polarities as the conflict between *Word Worship* (fundamentalism), where ideas, the law, and the power of Reason seem to have the upper hand, and *Thing Worship* (idolatry), where sanctified objects and places, rituals and live participation, i.e. sense experiences not bound to Reason, seem to have the upper hand. He goes on to link this split, to repeated failures in the relationship with the primary object, where (under optimal conditions) a healthy interlocking takes place between a) relating to mother as a sense object (source of bodily satisfaction) and b) relating to mother as a psychic object (source of meaning).

Later this second element, he adds, will be transformed into the ‘father object’. (Britton, 1992) As Shestov has repeatedly warned us, the Truth cannot be confined to the ‘limits of reason and understanding’, however reassuring that may fleetingly be. There exists an equally valid truth, in what lies beyond – “the truth lies there, where science sees ‘the nothing’, in that single, uncontrollable, incomprehensible thing, which is always at war with explanation . . . ” (Shestov, 1966 p.38ff) One is here struck by the eerie resonance with Bion’s assertion, that “Reason is an obstruction to transformations both in Knowledge and in O . . . [w]hen getting rid of all our usual grips, it is only Faith that remains.” (Vermote, 2011 p. 1114) This needsto be sharply contrasted with the clinically often encountered prioritization of ignorance over knowledge, i.e. repression over insight. Whether this phenomenon is to be understood as an explicit manifestation of the Death Drive (i.e. a dis-objectalising process) or a desperate short-sighted defence in libido-infused pursuit of narcissistic (omnipotent) pleasure, or indeed a leaning on (anaclisis) of the former onto the latter – remains a theoretical moot point.

Regardless of whether one gives this ‘anti-’ state a name like ‘the negative’, or one describes it as ‘blinding oneself to everything you may call Symbolic, in order to avoid the danger of disturbing the matter under investigation’ (Freud, 1916) or calls it ‘the piercing shaft of darkness’ or even ‘the lack’, this determined negation of the possibility for a clean cut resolution, or for the finality of a saturated rational explanation, is inherent in our current conceptualization of the analytic process, as it mirrors and reenacts, the day to day human experience. How could it be otherwise? The idealization of the *le sujet supposé savoir* fantasy, so tempting to both analysand and analyst as they face the insecurities of what has been called ‘the emotional of their encounter, can easily be recognized as no more than a reassuring, defensive move storm (Bion, 1979a p.321-331).

The quintessentially ‘depriving’ stance assumed by the analyst in psychoanalysis, does render him a ‘*guardian of an enigma*’ – a term used by Jean Laplanche, not because the analyst knows and does not reveal, but because the analyst (in a state of personal ignorance), whilst carrying an enigmatic message (just like the archaic mother to her baby), ends up triggering the transference. The analyst is uncontrollably driven to an inevitable involvement in the recreation of the infantile encounter with the primary mysterious alterity. Laplanche writes: “It is maintaining [on the part of the analyst] the dimension of interior alterity which allows alterity to be set up in the transference – interior relation, relation to the enigma, ‘relation to the unknown . . . ”[[10]](#footnote-11)’(Laplanche, 1999 pp.228-9) When Bion refers to ‘a piercing ray of darkness’ and Lacan to ‘the lack’ that is coexistent with, and defines desire, they both point to the consciously Unilluminated or consciously Unknown, and for all intents and purposes, that which is unconsciously residing in the area of *The Real*, hence unreachable to the Symbolic that might otherwise, have rendered it into language.

Adorno wagers ironically through a memorable paradox, when he imagines that it would be a veritable ‘Utopia of Knowledge’ indeed, if one could illuminate the Inconceivable (hence also ineffable) via the Conceivable (hence effable), without however, making it the Same (forcing it to lose its *otherness*.) (Adorno, 2003 p. 21) The irrefutable fact remains, that we cannot think what we cannot think, and what we cannot think we cannot render effable. Nevertheless the presence of the inconceivable and the ineffable, will be overlooked only at one’s peril. Ogden suggests a very elegant compromise, when he writes: “That which is absent is always present in the lack which it presents.” (Ogden, 1992p.520)

Staying with this realization in analysis, is not easy. The tendency, in both participants in the analytic endeavour, would be to reach for a causality-conforming order of the elements, i.e. for the sensible and hence the manageable. It requires extra discipline and constant reminding, to be able to maintain what the poet John Keats has called the *capacity for being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reason.* (Bate, 2012) And yet eminent analysts like Bion and J-B Pontalis, attest, that it is precisely this element alone, that happens to be, what is psychoanalytically meaningful. The age old truth, found in the New Testament that *I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me* (Romans, X:20), is rendered by J-B Pontalis as: “An interpretation that comes from what I know and not from what strikes me, is not an interpretation. [It is] a deafness, a blindness, brought about by knowledge.” (Pontalis, 2000 p. 96)

Given that Bion in his book *Transformations* has defined *O,* as having attributes formally reserved for the Godhead, (Civitarese, 2014) it is worth making a brief detour – at this point – through the long, and well respected theological tradition that has elaborated in depth, this dimension of the human experience. This body of work known as Negative (apophatic) Theology, could be potentially summarized in the words of the medieval mystic Nikolaus of Küs, who writes: “*the precise Truth shines forth incomprehensibly in the darkness of our ignorance . . .* ” (Keller, 2014 p.92) Originating in neo-platonic and Gnostic speculations, this so called Negative (apophatic) theology which has consistently valorized ignorance, has reached its early apogee in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who developed the notion of the Godhead in other words, of the ‘Ultimate Truth’ as *a most dazzling darkness covering a secret-mysterious silence*. (Dionysius, 1984)[[11]](#footnote-12) Creating a special space for absence, giving value and meaning to the Incomprehensible and the Unnamable, thus establishes a rather controversial devotion to Negative (apophatic) Reason (Logos). This worldview makes itself known throughout the medieval and early modern times, through its permeation within well known texts of mystical literature[[12]](#footnote-13) and can be seen to culminate, as the praise of Negative Love[[13]](#footnote-14) in the poetry of John Donne, who writes:

*If that be simply perfectest,*

*Which can by no way be express'd*

*But negatives, my love is so.*

*If any who deciphers best,*

*What we know not –ourselves – can know,*

*Let him teach me that nothing.*

John Donne (Negative Love)

Or more recently, in the prose of Fyodor Dostoevsky who has Satan himself masterfully convey the following: “….even before Time commenced, I was pre-destined to *negate*….. Affirmation alone is not enough for life . . . .If everything in the universe were sensible, nothing would happen, there would be no events. I (Satan) serve to produce events, and introduce what is irrational, because there would be nothing without me. . . . .Pain and suffering is life, without suffering what would be the pleasure of it?” (Dostoevsky, 1963 Bk 11 ch9 pp. 726-7)

The view of the scientific community of that century, was aptly expressed by the biologist Thomas Huxley who coined the term agnosticism. In his attempt to delineate the limitations of human knowledge, Huxley translates the epigraph St. Paul found on an altar in Athens (*Agnōstō Theō*) not as ‘to the Unknown God’ (which would be the traditional interpretation), but as ‘to the Unknowable God’. Correspondingly, the 20th century secular / atheistic version of this existential worldview, comes from the mouth of a highly respected theoretical physicist like John Wheeler who writes: “…we live on an island surrounded by a sea of ignorance. As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance.” (Horgan, 1992 p. 125)

**The Life-Promoting Aspects of Deprivation**

Freud, in his essay on Negation, suggests that thinking can be understood as being an exigent consequence of the loss, hence of the absence of an object, by way of the capacity of the mind for hallucinatory wish fulfilment. Bion on his part, has studied extensively the ways through which a ‘*no-thing*’ is being turned into thinking and thereby forms the basis of all subsequent cognitive development. Thinking processes transform the immediacy of reality into symbolisation, and thus create space for a backwards-and-forward movement in time, that is indispensable for any psychic maturation. (Birksted-Breen, 2009 p.39)

“*If we succeed, we succeed through our failures*”, by way of the illusory activity of the transitional space, claims Winnicott (1963), and last but not least, André Green (Green 1993), sheds light on the differences between a) temporary withdrawal of investment (i.e. unbinding processes) that promotes mourning, symbolization and meaning and hence liberates forces for possible re-binding and re-investment eventually, all in the service of Eros, and b) withdrawal of investment so that no subsequent investment is possible, where dis-objectalising processes ensue, and where this attack on, and destruction of links, of meaning and of thought, results in the domination of the Death Drive.

Here the void is no longer the limit-setting Beyond, the feared Alterity that would be formative of subjectivity, but annihilation itself. It is worth noting at this juncture, the numerous similarities that seem to exist between the condition described above, and the so called ‘*essential depression*’ that is so often detected in psychic organisations prone to the use of somatic digressions for the management of mental conflicts.

The so-called state of presence or of possession of being, knowledge, might etc. (i.e. varieties of narcissistic plenitude), is often referred to as ‘phallic’. Yet this *phallus* concept, as a central psychic organising principle, inevitably contains within it, its very opposite – a signifier of lack. As R. Perelberg puts it, “[w]hat there is in contrast with the phallus is a lack, an impossibility, an absence, a gap . . . a fundamental renunciation which is at the basis of the human order”. (Perelberg 1997, p.221) If thinking / reflection, springing forth from absence as it is, is to be considered constitutive of subjectivity, one can equally conceive of desire too – implicitly a “conceptual apparatus” (Opatow, 1997 p.884) – as being unequivocally a cognate notion, after all. The creative tension existing between presence and absence, identity and alterity, subjectivity and objectivity, desire leading to psychic movement and saturation leading to inertia, appears to be one of the fundamental building blocks of a dialectic process such as analysis. After all, as Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno has pointed out, dialectical thinking necessitates a process whereby something positive can only be achieved by means of negation – it being a kind of *negation of negation*. (T. Adorno,1966, p.7)  
  
 As has been pointed out by a number of theoreticians, the Object-Relations orientation in psychoanalytic thinking, tends to identify itself with a preferential viewpoint towards the continuous presence of the object in the Unconscious. The supporting theoretical axiom is that, since mental life would be inconceivable without a process of unconscious phantasy (by definition object-relational) in operation, the ‘related to object’ – irrespective of its attributes – can never be non-existent. As Marjory Brierley has put it in 1937, “….[however inchoate, any] feeling and sensation state [may be, it] is [automatically] linked to objects, and the infant tries to master these feelings by manipulating their object-carriers” (Brierley, 1937 p.51) Bion on his part, would emphasize that the experience of nothing i.e. absence, is ipso facto translated by the unconscious phantasy within the psychic apparatus, into a ‘*no – thing*’, i.e. a present object which happens to have negative / pain-producing attributes.

At the other end of this theoretical continuum, Lacan, as a sui generis proponent of the classical technique, tends to prioritize absence, the lack, and the generative power of autonomy. But he is not alone in this viewpoint. Winnicott too, comments in one of his essays, that “emptiness is a prerequisite for [the] eagerness to *gather in* . . . only out of non-existence can existence start.” (Winnicott, 1974, p.107) Both positions when pushed to excess through rationalizations, can of course, be equally deadly. Overpowering presence akin to symbiosis, (where an object by never being absent, cannot ever be hallucinated and hence thought about) can be just as much a sign of the Death Drive, as can destitution due to non-relatedness. The prevailing theoretical position nowadays, would accept an optimum combination of presence and absence as *sine qua non* constituent elements of the transference-countertransference vicissitudes within the analytic situation. “Hope in analysis is founded on the notion of a potential meaning which will allow the present meaning and the absent meaning to meet in the analytic object,” interjects the psychoanalyst André Green. (Green, 1990, p.48)  
  
 Evolving understanding of the countertransference has, for some time now, pushed the concepts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in analysis, onto centre stage. If the Holy Grail in the past had been the pursuit of a hidden objective trauma, or a verifiable psychic constitution characterized by permanence and hence by eventual recognisability in the analysand, our current understanding of the human condition and of the analytic encounter, has substantially complicated matters. As Heinrich Racker has presciently put it: “…. analysis is an interaction between two personalities .....each having internal and external dependencies, anxieties and pathological defences, each [still being] a child with internal parents, responding [impulsively] to the analytic situation[[14]](#footnote-15)” (Racker, 1957 p.308) The only remnant of the so called ‘objectivity’ being, perforce, only attainable, by “a form of internal division that enables the analyst to make himself [in tandem with his analysand] the object of his continuous observation and analysis” (p.309)

No one has any qualms nowadays in accepting, that just like in any other branch of science struggling under the Uncertainty Principle, so too in psychoanalysis, and may be most particularly so in psychoanalysis, the following acute observation by a theoretician of human behaviour from a seemingly unrelated discipline, rings poignantly true. She writes: “The Möbius strip of the mind, with subjectivity on one side and objectivity on the other, twists around and brings us back up against the problem of faith [in whatever we cannot be conscious of]. In [such a] faith, “*one somehow knows through personal commitment, that one’s own truth is ‘impersonally given’.*” (O’Flaherty, 1986 p. 295) An echo of this paradox in the realm of knowledge, has been captured exquisitely, by a contemporary poet, who writes:

*Blink and you will miss it*

*that one brief glow*

*of understanding*

*never truly found*

Ruth Padel (Green Flash)

**Intersubjectivity in the Psychoanalytic Encounter**

If, as first suggested by Hegel, subjectivity emerging as it is, from absence and lack, brings with it, its cognate i.e. desire[[15]](#footnote-16) – then intersubjectivity in the analytic situation, just like anywhere else, will bring with it, mutual desire. The scientific literature on the analysands’ desire, is abundant. From its ambivalence to the resistances that plague it, from its manifestations to its latencies, from the investment in the analysing process and/or in gratification, to the investment in the inertia and the masochistic complacency of the repetition of the status quo, the permutations of the analysand’s deployed desires appear to be endless. It is only lately and rather gingerly however, that a substantial amount of literature on the analysts’ – mainly covert and pre- or un-conscious – desires, is beginning to be accumulated. Usually acknowledged only retrospectively (après coup) the analyst’s desire is engendered from the elements he/she feels lacking (in the here and now, yet subjective representations of internal unconscious phantasy scenarios).   
  
 Desire being synonymous with something lacking, however legitimate, rationalized and inevitable the analyst’s desires may appear to be, they still point to the his/her state of dissatisfaction, and unfulfillment. The analyst’s desire in other words, is a matter of his/her psychic pain (masochistically invested?), and hence his/her unconscious expectation of discharge/release.

- It may be the very legitimate desire to do analysis (whatever the definition or   
 meaning of that is)  
  
- It may be the equally very legitimate desire to cure or allay distress in the other  
  
- It may be the equally very legitimate desire to be trusted – to gain the other’s   
 confidence  
  
- It may be the equally very legitimate desire to be recognised as a good object that   
 ‘does well’  
  
- It may be the equally very legitimate desire to expect be given gratitude (Gabbard,   
 1999)  
  
- It may be the not so legitimate desire to be accepted as the one who knows   
 (unconsciously omniscient), engendered by an uncontrollable ‘*fear of not knowing*’.   
 The risk of this resulting in an imposition of a mis-representation, is particularly   
 high. (Ogden, 1988)  
  
- It may be the not so legitimate desire to ‘not know’, i.e. to fight the analysand’s and   
 one’s own inner truth. Were that then to ‘mate’ with the analysand’s corresponding   
 defences, it would result in a situation of illusory stability in quasi-progress   
 known as ‘bastion’ or ‘enclave’. (Brenman Pick, 1985)

- It may be the not so legitimate desire to live through the analysand, what   
 one has failed to live in one’s own life[[16]](#footnote-17)   
  
- It may be the not so legitimate desire to intrude and control other peoples’   
 lives ‘*for their own good*’, in identification with such an archaic internal object.  
  
- It may be the not so legitimate but inevitable desire, to master one’s own feelings by   
 manipulating their object-carriers (v. Brierley quote above)

The cases of the so-called ‘anti-analysands’ (McDougall, 1972) are prime examples of situations where the desire of both analyst and analysand is being seriously tested.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The aforementioned elements, plus a variety of other subtle unconscious dynamics, in effect manage to decentre the self of the analyst, as much as that of the person seeking analysis. Freud’s highly sarcastic comment that “….man feels himself to be supreme within his own mind. Somewhere in the nucleus of his ego he has developed an organ of observation to keep a watch on his impulses and actions and see whether they harmonize with its demands” (Freud, 1917 p.141) proves to be a total deception. The analyst who presents himself to him/herself as much as to his/her analysand as the ‘one who knows’, who feels secure in his position, and who reassures his/her conscience that he/she is the font of empathy and the font of containment, is no more than a tightly and narcissistically defended personality. It is an unavoidable truth, that encountering the person of the analysand (a ‘Face’ as it is nowadays referred to) is unavoidably encountering the Unknown, i.e. it is coming in contagion with the essentially *Not-Me*, and thus such an encounter cannot but evoke trepidation as well as fascination.

And it is this extraordinary combination of such strong emotions that captivates one, in such object-relationships, whilst giving shape to one’s very own personal analytic identity. One well recognized defence against these emotions, emerging from the predictability-prone tendencies of the human brain, is ‘transference’. “Transference is a name we give to the illusion that the unknown object is already known…” writes Ogden (Ogden, 1988p. 655). He also underscores that as a consequence of this, no encounter can now be experienced as entirely new, unknown, and in need of the insecurity filled attempt at knowing it afresh. Going back to Levinas, we are reminded that the ethical rapport with the ‘Face’ is always asymmetrical, in that it subordinates one’s existence to the Other. Levinas is in fact describing, in his own language, what Jean Laplanche has called the hollowed-out transference – a very archaic relational dynamic, based on asymmetric receptivity and the enigmatic / unknowable presence of alterity. (Laplanche, 1994) Laplanche then links this, to a circumstance he defines as, mother’s adult sexuality chiselling out the ‘primal seduction’ of her baby.

If Laplanche’s ‘transference in plenitude’ [*le transfert en plein*] refers to presence, activity fulfilment, and narcissistic development, his ‘transference in hollowness’ [*le transfert en creux*] must refer to absence, receptivity, the unknown / enigmatic and the dissatisfaction and pain of yearning. Chetrit-Vatine (2012) has linked these ideas to the ethical responsibility inherent in the psychoanalytic situation. Melanie Klein had of course, highlighted the congruence between ethical responsibility and the development of identity, years ago. Concern for the object and owning up of responsibility for it, is the very essence of ‘the depressive position’ and hence a sign of personal maturity, throughout life. Ethical responsibility within the analytic situation, just as without, naturally entails, being at ease with one’s own fallibility and limitedness.

It is having this experience with your analyst i.e. the responsibility of his/her silently acknowledged limitedness, that one hopes will be introjected and identified with, by the analysand. Ethical responsibility that the analyst has towards the face of the analysand runs in parallel at an unconscious level, with (potentially twisted) elements of the ethical responsibility that the analysand too, undoubtedly carries towards the face of his/her analyst. One cannot exist without the other, and no analysis can conclude without them being verbalized and adequately worked through. It must not be a coincidence, that the goal in analysis has sometimes been described as *the analyst simultaneously giving both a container to the analysand’s content, and a content to the his/her container*. (Green, 1990 p. 42)

The complementarity of opposites can best be captured in the following words, that Sophocles has Oedipus pronounce:  
  
 “*when I am nothing, only then, am I a man*”  
 Oedipus at Colonus (line 393)  **Epilogue**

The rather accumulative quality of this essay – saturated as it is, with so many different people’s thoughts – aims at challenging the *narcissism of minor differences* that seem to pervade the current fragmented state of the human sciences. It attempts to highlight the struggle between a) the presence, unity, and sameness, often erroneously deployed as innovation or advancement, and b) the generative veridical difference and creative alterity, even when an encounter with it, may turn out to be quite destabilizing. Knowledge, however treasured and amassed it may be conceived of to be, is always indubitably accompanied by its shadow – ignorance.

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1. *“Natura se obducere amat”*  attributed to the ancient philosopher Heraclitus. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Gérard, A. 2014 p. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. One is reminded here of Freud’s comment, that: “the initial helplessness of human beings is the primal source of all moral motives.” (Freud, 1895, p.318) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. It is worth noting that the pinnacle of the mystical quest in Jewish mysticism known as “*devekuth*”, even while propounding supreme love-attachment and absolute devotion towards the Godhead, it never relinquishes the dyadic element inherent in the acceptance of alterity, i.e. the distinction between the human and the divine. This stands in contrast to the neo-platonic (and often Christian) concept of fusion into ‘the One’. (Katz, 1978 pp. 35-6) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. This stands in stark contrast to the Greek notion of Godhead. The relationship that the Greek man had with his/her Gods, may have been characterized by a variety of emotions, but ‘love’ was certainly not one of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Concepts borrowed from Aristotle’s exposition of the constituent elements of tragedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Kristeva (1974) has made use of the obscure platonic concept of *Khora* – a place of ‘third kind’ (*τρίτον γένος*) where entities ‘exist as potentials before they are born’ (*έδραν δε παρέχον όσα έχει γένεσιν πάσιν*), hence a place that antecedes and ‘by some kind of twisted logic’, is not perceptible by the Symbolic which would signify the paternal (*μετ’αναισθησίας απτόν λογισμώ τίνι νόθω, μόγις πιστόν*) (Τimaeus, 52e) and is thus, only Semiotic i.e. maternal. It can be thought of therefore, as the ‘*topos* of pre-conceptions’. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. An ancient Greek word meaning ‘refrain/abstain’. Interpreted as ‘suspension of judgement’, it forms the central tenet of the philosophy of Pyrrho of Elis. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. This annoying since insurmountable truth applies to psychoanalysis just as much as it applies to all other disciplines. Medicine with its so called “evidence based” methodology, instead of promoting healthy questioning and ‘progress-in-the-midst-of-approximations’ tends to feed into a collective fantasy of omniscience and possessiveness of knowledge – thus confusing hope for further discoveries with self-congratulatory triumphs of imagined conquests. Neuro-science too, appears convinced that one day the obstacle of the so called “hard problem of consciousness” will be scientifically overcome, thus eliminating all dark/negative points of the human mind! Equally disturbing is the unconscionable assuredness and pseudo-optimism regarding limitless progress (a remnant of the Enlightenment, no doubt), displayed by a variety of other disciplines including the technologies, economics and not least, the numerous social sciences and their understanding of the complex dynamics of human collectivity. Hanna Arendt warns of the dire consequences of *knowledge parting company from thought* and recognises this, as a political action! (Arendt, 1998 p.3) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Reference is being made here, to a book by G. Rosolato, bearing that title. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. The biblical injunction against creation of idols and the use of God’s name, i.e. the emphasis on perceptual absence, surely contributed to the establishment of this theoretical viewpoint. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Amongst them, the British *Cloud of Ignorance*, the German texts of Nikolaus of Küs and Meister Eckhart, the French writings of Marguerite Porete, the Spanish voices of St Theresa of Avila, and St John of the Cross, as well as many others [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Given that the Christian God is defined as Love, the relationship that humans have with Godhead cannot but be one of mutual love. To the extent that Godhead is apophatic, divine love cannot but be apophatic as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Even though Epictetus had already detected this, when he wrote in the 2nd century AD: “ Philosophy begins with the insight into one’s own illness, and into one’s powerlessness in front of Necessity” (Diss. II: 11) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Hegel’s succinct formulation, written in the late 1830’s is the following: “Die Subjektivität besteht im Mangel, aber Triebe nach einem Festen, und bleibt so Sehnsucht [Subjectivity exists in a lack, but driven as it is towards something solid, it remains a longing]” (Hegel, 1986 p. 418) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Carl Jung wrote that: “Nothing influences children more powerfully than the lives that their parents did **not** live. The entire life of some individuals is sometimes only a search for an answer to a question posed by their parents.” (Micale, p.290) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)