

Group mentality and 'having a mind': Reflections on Bion's work on groups and on psychosis

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R. D. Hinshelwood

Bion was fascinated that the experience of being in the presence of another person's is a difficult one. Having a mind is not easy, and his contributions add considerably to the debate about what it is to have a mind. In a late paper, he described the problem of having a mind that is aware of minds:

When two characters or personalities meet, an emotional storm is created. If they make a sufficient contact to be aware of each other, or even to be unaware of each other, an emotional state is produced by the conjunction of these two individuals, these two personalities, and the resulting disturbance is hardly likely to be something which could be regarded as necessarily an improvement on the state of affairs had they never met at all. But since they have met, and since this emotional storm has occurred, then the two parties to this storm may decide to "make the best of a bad job". What this means in analysis is this.

The analysand comes into contact with the analyst by coming to the consulting room and engaging in what he thinks is a conversation which he hopes to benefit by in some way: likewise the analyst probably expects some benefit to occur - to both parties. The analysand or the analyst says something. The curious thing about this is that it has an effect, it disturbs two people. This would also be true if nothing was said, if they remained silent... The result of remaining silent, or the result of intervening with a remark, or even saying: "Good morning" or: "Good evening", again sets up what appears to me to be an emotional storm. What that emotional storm is one does not immediately know, but the problem is, how to make the best of it; this means a capacity to turn the circumstance - as I choose to call it for the moment - to good account. (Bion 1979, pp. 1-2).

This kind of encounter might be termed 'attachment' or 'bonding', adapted from Bowlby's psychoanalytic ethology. But those are quiet terms, and Bion is describing something far from quiet - a storm, in fact. A mind not only craves an attachment to another mind but, having found one, is then disturbed by an emotional storm(1) . I think Bion is neutral about whether that is a storm of loving or of hating - or what the actual emotional tone is. But, his point is that an encounter is both craved and it is also resisted as a disturbance. It is 'minded'. And he attempted to dissect out that process of minding.

However, to not mind something interested Bion, too - how somebody manages not to do anything with their mind, both in the mindlessness of groups, and in the rubble of a destroyed mind of the schizophrenic. Because of the resistance to being 'stormed' by others, a mind takes protective action. Psychotic patients can abolish their minds altogether rather than suffer those emotional storms. Those with personality disorders tend to exploit this kind of meeting by deliberately engaging with other minds to create such storms for specific purposes(2) . And those of us somewhat less disturbed manage to numb our minds in certain ways, and live in a psychic storm-shelter as it were, constructed of the familiar defence mechanisms, and to live in socially prescribed rituals.

Psychoanalytic work with schizophrenics in particular goes to the heart of the question, what is a mind. Somehow schizophrenics seem to lack a proper one. It is not that they have conflicts in their mind, as do neurotic patients, they seem instead to have a mind that fails to operate as a mind (Bion 1957). Bion, at his most creative during the 1950s, decided that the deficits of a schizophrenic's mind can point the way to defining the essential function of 'having a mind'.

Meaning

The variety of different responses to the emotional storm of encounter, leave us with the question of what constitutes ordinary ways of dealing with such disturbances. In other words what is involved in living within that perpetual storm, and how can one flourish there - rather than escaping from it. Bion's answer was characteristically provocative. He described the ordinary process as 'alpha function'. He offered this as an empty term, one which further work would fill with further meaning. It is a supposed mental processing which creates an individual mind out of this experience of encounter. He asked of us, his readers and successors, the task to fill in his empty term.

Bion's own work has led to what is now loosely called 'containment'. Alpha-function is the transformation of the storm into material that can be used for thinking, analogous to the metabolism of the body's digestive system. He referred to those products of alpha-function as the 'furniture of dreams' (3) which, arising from the conversion of raw experience of encounter, are used to create structures we know as dreams, and of which we then have a further experience. The conversion of raw experience into dream-like creations is complex..

As the conversion process takes the raw experience and creates thoughts, it creates a new quality. It is a quality which dream symbols have as their essence - that quality is 'meaning'.

I suggest that meaning is the inherent quality of the thoughts which our minds work upon; and without meaning such thoughts would not be thoughts; and in some cases (psychotic people) the mind does not have meaningful objects with which to think. Thus, the human mind must deal in meanings, that is to say a 'substance' or a category which is not just information, as we might say of a computer. It is a specific experience we know as the quality of meaningfulness. A mind may register an event, but so can a computer, which creates a display on its screen. But a whole lot more happens in a mind than in a computer. What is registered in that mind acquires a collateral quality - the felt quality of something being meaningful.

This is the subjective 'addition' to the more mechanical recognition, such subjective qualities are described as secondary characteristics, or 'qualia' (4). Whatever the ontological nature of qualia, that experience in which we say to ourselves 'that means something to me' is no doubt wired into the brain; it is something which then attaches to various experiences, memories and phantasies. The world of qualia is akin to the Kleinian notion of unconscious phantasy. An experience of a particular other person can have all kinds of associations, which derive from the accumulation of past experiences and memories of them; mother at the meal table may arouse very different meanings from mother when typing at the keyboard of her computer, or mother in the bath. Various qualia accrue to registering the idea of mother, depending on all sorts of conditions.

To see something which looks blue, say the mug on my desk, I recognise the colour (the shape and purpose of the mug, too). This is the secondary characteristic, the subjective experience of blue. But I also have a sense in that subjectivity that blueness signifies something to me - it has meaning. For instance when Heisenberg was asked to comment on the mathematical properties of space, he is said to have replied 'Space is blue and birds fly through it'; and he thus indicated that even a physicist finds powerful personal meanings in what he deals with.

Generically, qualia are what we call a meaningfulness. In essence, 'to mind something' equates with 'meaning something to me'. In this view, it is the unique property of minds to give a meaning to experiences, and it produces them in the processing of those storms which mental interaction creates. Thus to have a mind, implies dealing in meanings - not in information. Nor does it deal in more material substances, as does the body, on which of course a mind must also depend. But despite depending on the body functioning with material substance, the mind functions (or alpha-functions) with meaning(5).

Representations

This suggests a further aspect of the conversion of raw experience to thinkable objects. The combination of registering an experience plus the special quality of meaningfulness creates an object of thought, and this is represented in a mind. To simple recognition is added meaning, and this combination produces what I believe we would call a 'representation'. In the immaterial world of the mind, a 'representation' has a felt existence, a thing that feels tangible and manipulable. Representation is not just a passive process. It indicates that something has been 'minded', and that goes beyond mechanical computing.

Having a mind

At the same time, there is another fall-out of alpha-function. This third component, to add to registering and meaningfulness, is the sense of having a 'place' where representations reside - and can be further manipulated, processed or transformed - with subsequent further meaningfulness, in the creation of new meanings. This additional aspect of alpha-function, is the sense of 'having a mind' and Bion believed that the creation of objects of thought (alpha particles) meant the creation and development of the mind to think them. Thus Bion's transformation process (alpha-function) in creating a representation also creates the sense of a mind in which the products of the encounter exist. For Bion thoughts require a thinker, that is to say, a mind, a place where thinking can happen to thoughts. The experience of discovering a meaning, is linked to, or the other side of the coin to, having a mind. Both arise together(6).

The space and time co-ordinates where that thinking occurs is then identified with a specific material place - the body on which the mind depends. A lot seems to explode into existence with alpha-function - recognition, meaning, representations, a thinking mind; and even one might say the basis of a personal identity, a self which is irrevocably linked to that space (mental) and location (bodily).

Reversal of alpha-function: I suggest I have not distorted Bion too much in elaborating his views in this way. His aim initially was to find the contrast with what happened in a schizophrenic where mind, meaning and identity all seem to be corrupted. He started his investigation of alpha-function in effect with the results of some sort of 'reversal of alpha-function' (Meltzer 1978). The schizophrenic dismantles his own mind by making attacks on the meaningfulness of the representations in his mind. He destroys the links that make up the matrix of meaning - the configuration of space which is blue with birds flying, for instance. As a schizophrenic once told me "the sky is emptied, that's why birds can't fly" - meaningless deconstruction of his

thoughts, which might have once been the bleakness of Keats' 'La belle dame sans merci', with its chilling refrain 'And no birds sing'. In that sense, the reversal of alpha-function disconnects meaning; and the result is the bleakness and depression that Keats experienced in his own life.

Group mentality

I now wish to move to phenomena in groups. The nature of a group is to be a place where persons encounter each other. And I shall claim they are a particularly good arena to investigate minds that 'mind' encountering. I want especially to shed light on the to-and-fro process, between constructing meaning and mind, and the opposite, the dissolution of mind.

Bion started his small group work with the three concepts, 'group mentality, group culture and the individual' (Bion 1961, p. 61). 'Group mentality' was the idea that the members of a group can pool a lot of contributions 'anonymously'. Neither explicit nor conscious, these contributions exist as a collective pool that is the group, rather than any individual(7). He gives as an example, an air of hostility in a group whilst each of the individual members denied feeling hostile.

However, these three concepts proved inadequate. In the third paper in his series on groups, he was forced to admit that his experience eventually 'knocked holes in my theories' (Bion 1961, p. 61). He then had to rethink. He did not give up his idea of group mentality but developed it, bringing in then the idea of the basic assumptions - to which the individual contributes implicitly and anonymously. Implicitly, the purpose of the basic assumptions have as their purpose to preserve the group - and to do so in one of the three forms (pairing, fight/flight and dependency).

Merely by relating to a group the individual regresses to these innate set of assumptions about being in a group. Bion could then define group mentality as 'a machinery of intercommunication that is designed to ensure that group life is in accordance with the basic assumptions' (Bion 1961, p. 65). These assumptions seemed to him to be innate or instinctual, a set of three endowed 'valences' that embodied unthought assumptions about the nature and purpose of the group and which all human individuals have available for linking with each other. This kind of instinctual linking underlies, and can often override, the conscious communication system.

Later, around 1952, after he finished working with groups, he began to review his ideas again. At that time he was already working psychoanalytically with schizophrenic patients. As Eric Miller noticed, Bion moved away from the innateness of basic assumptions:

...early on [Bion] made references to the instinctiveness of the phenomena, but later he shifted to treating them as postnatal formations and linking them to Kleinian theory of the infant's very early development of defences to cope with distressing unconscious phantasies (Miller 1998, p. 40).

In that paper, in 1952(8), he made a hypothetical suggestion, that basic assumptions might be derived from something else - derived from psychological developments, rather than innate (Bion 1952). And he speculated that the basic assumptions were derived from the very thing he happened to be pre-occupied with in 1952, psychotic functioning which he was then analyzing. That speculative move was to suggest that the basic assumptions are based on the mechanisms central to schizophrenia. Mattias Sanfuentes (2000, personal communication [Chapter in this book]) has pointed out that the 1952 paper was revised for publication in Klein, Heimann and Money-Kyrle (1955). That 1955 version filled out this speculation(9). Bion had by then begun to clarify his theories of schizophrenic thinking (Bion 1954, 1955) - the self-destructive dismantling of thought processes, the obliteration of time and of sophisticated cognitive function. These were 'attacks' made by schizophrenics, upon linking, and remarkably they resemble his earlier descriptions of the state of mind of a group dominated by basic assumptions. So, Bion moved, first speculatively (1952), and then on the basis of his clinical work with schizophrenic patients (1955), from an innatist explanation of basic assumptions to an explanation in terms of psychotic mechanisms. Group mentality is thus a psychotic mentality. It is a mentality become mindless.

In these basic assumption states the group appears to have lost the non-psychotic, alpha-function of the individuals - there is no moral sense, a loss of mature judgement (all is exclusively good or bad), an absence of recognising consequences to actions, a lack of development in group thought and achievement, a failing of the sense of time etc. What we witness is the reversion to a psychotic mental functioning - the reversal of alpha-function.

Bion's view of psychosis was that the individual mind dismantles itself with the loss of the 'furniture of dreams', and instead creates meaninglessness - nameless dread and 'bizarre objects'. In a group, a similar process goes on in which work group function reverses. This is a reversal of alpha-function as a group. I shall give extracts from two groups to contrast states in which mentalisation - the awareness of other minds in the group - occurs. And states where it seems absent.

These are two rather ordinary pieces of clinical material from out-patient groups of non-psychotic patients. In the first, we can see how the individual's link together, not just in the surface content of what each one say, but also at an emotional level. The emotional storm of the encounters impels the course of the dialogue:

Two men in a group were discussing a trivial detail about some maintenance work on a car that belonged to one of them. 'A' described his difficulty with a rusty bolt. 'B' talked about how he had once had the same problem and had solved it by hitting the bolt with a hammer; he seemed pleased with himself. Another man, 'C', gave a slight laugh and remarked on 'B's hint of pride. 'A' looked startled and then a little angry, as he realised that he had given 'B' the opportunity to be pleased with himself. He told 'B' that it was no solution to hit the bolt with the hammer and explained why. Clearly he now wanted to put 'B' down. Two women in the group were looking on with some fascination at this male sparring. One said 'Men!' with mock exasperation. The other said her husband had returned from a football match recently with a bruise on his cheek which he had refused to talk about.

In this interchange five people were involved who seemed willing to tune in, in their own characteristic ways, to the male rivalry and psychological bruising which was going on. They tuned in to each other at an emotional level as well as a cognitive one. One person's comment seemed to stimulate the next through having an emotional colouring that linked to the previous person. And this is repeated through a number of links between all five. The emotional colour that one person was expressing was intuited and responded to, at that implicit level. This was not just exchanging information, meaning was passing from one to another. They were 'working' together on some feeling. Of course, in this case it was not particularly harmonious, respectful or friendly. But they were reading each other accurately and it is this quality of being 'in tune' which I emphasise here(10). I contrast it with the second piece of clinical material:

In another group a woman, 'X', described an event in which her husband had had a row with her mother. Another woman, 'Y', waited just until this story had finished, and immediately asked for the dates of a forthcoming break in the group sessions. They had been announced recently. The therapist pointed out how 'Y' had cut across the first woman's story. She had also cut out her own memory of the dates. 'Y' immediately turned to enquire of someone else. A man started to talk about his mother-in-law, seemingly following the first woman, though clearly absorbed only in his own tale - more to do with seeking out a mother for himself because in childhood he had spent long periods separated from his own mother.

In this group, the connections between the separate contributions is quite different. People cut across each other's contributions. They did not really encounter each other. There may be some connection in terms purely of content - for instance the man at the end returned to a discourse about his mother - but the connection was only superficially linked with the first woman, 'X'. Each seemed to remain cut off in an emotional sense from the one before. There was plenty of talk but no encounter; no-one worked on the emotional storm - rather the storm was obstructed. In the second group, emotional obstruction destroyed meaning, at the group level. Any coherent experience of being together was annulled. Thus they do not register each other in the sense of another mind filled with emotional meanings, and the dialogue is constructed of fragments of unintegrated meanings. One could say that the group mentality is a mindless one.

These clinical examples of ordinary dialogue show a crucial difference. At first glance perhaps one could say it was a difference in the dominant basic assumption: In the first group, there is a tendency for a hostile fight/flight atmosphere (aggression and rivalry), in the second, a dependency atmosphere (about mothers, the need to be told the dates again, etc.). However, I have stressed another difference, one highlighted in Bion's latter work. In the first group, the individuals remain in contact with each other as individuals(11). They appear to relate to other's feelings with their own storms of feelings. There are repeated encounters that can be followed in sequence as one person is mobilised to respond in key with the emotional impact of the speaker before. But in the second group, a dismantling of links seems to dominate, so that the members are not individuals but members of a group in which linking has collapsed(12). From a group point of view, the second group has come apart and fragmented. Coherent meaningfulness has disappeared, and internal representations cannot be communicated.

Despite the incoherence, a peculiar state of homogeneity pervades the second group. The homogeneity is a joint agreement, but it is the agreement to be in this incoherent, disconnected condition! Thus, a kind of unthinking, mindless co-operation occurs. Bion expressed his surprise at this paradox when he saw it in a group of patients,

I have always been quite familiar with the idea of a patient as a person whose capacity for co-operation is very slight... I reflect that from the way in which the group is going on its motto might be: 'Vendors of quack nostrums unite.' No sooner have I said this to myself than I realise that I am expressing my feeling, not of the group's disharmony, but of its unity (Bion 1961, p. 52).

The individual is co-operating in a kind of way - co-operating in forming a stable group in which co-operation is impossible! This implies a complex phenomenology of the person as both individual and group member, which Bion tried to articulate:

Thus we have a situation in which the individuals behave as if they were conscious, as individuals, of the basic assumption, but unconscious of it as members of the group (Bion 1961, p. 94).

In other words, they are committed to the 'machinery of intercommunication that is designed to ensure that group life is in accordance with the basic assumptions' (13).

Here Bion is struggling to conceptualise some radical inconsistency in the members of the group. The individual functions in two separate ways at the same time - he can function mentally in a coherent manner with meanings that he can fashion and express. But as a group member, he dismantles meanings in the creation of the mindless group mentality, in which encounter and linking collapse. Reverting for a moment to an individual context, Freud described the Ratman's thought insertion, in which words were put into the Ratman's mind which disrupted his ability to think and study. Jonathan Lear commented on this, 'the vehicles of meaning themselves [words] are used to disrupt meaning' (Lear, 1996, personal communication). So it is with this group situation in which the individual, as an individual handles meaning but operates quite differently from the individual as a group member who dismantles meaning. This paradox that Bion puzzled over in groups, is once again premonitory of an idea he rediscovered and formulated later in his work with psychosis.

The non-psychotic personality was concerned with a neurotic problem, that is to say a problem that centred on the resolution of a conflict of ideas and emotions to which the operation of the ego had given rise. But the psychotic personality was concerned with the problem of repair of the ego (Bion 1957, p. 272).

The paper from which this quote is taken described a personality as having this contradictory form - being both psychotic and non-psychotic in different parts. His work with psychotic people enabled him to see these two kinds of functioning in which an individual can be in two different states of mind. It might of course mean that a psychotic is split up in such a way that in different relations he operates differently, or at different times, or under different internal conditions. But the example of the group, shows the individual operating on the one hand as a creator of meaningful communications, and also destroying meaningful links at the same time.. In fact the very act of expressing a meaningful symbolic contribution to the group, disrupts the possibility of meaning in the group. When the woman, 'Y' turned to the group therapist to ask the dates of the break, she was making a meaningful communication, but she was at the same time destroying the meaning of the woman, 'X', who had just spoken.

The group shows these 'parts' of the person, if parts they be ('function' would seem to be a better term) in interaction with each other - one function, the creation of meaning, being set to interfere with itself! The psychotic process of reversal of alpha-function is implicated in the specific linking via the basic assumptions.

Groups and psychosis

Clearly there is something amiss with Bion's idea that attacks on linking (Bion 1959), and thus reversal of alpha-function, render the individual psychotic, in the straightforward way he described. And Jaques (1955) too thought that 'the relationship between the operation of basic assumptions and of depressive and persecutory phenomena remains to be worked out' (p. 487). People in the group in which meaningful contact is being actively abolished, are not necessarily psychotic. They abolish their encounters, but not their minds.

Bion tended to see the nature of psychosis as a structural problem. The intrusion into a sane personality of an increasingly large psychotic part. Thus one or other part - the sane or the psychotic - can take over, and be in charge of the overt personality, at different times. He did not pursue this anomaly of structure in the personality. However Rosenfeld (1971), O'Shaughnessy (1981) and many other contemporary Kleinians, have put this kind of structuring of the personality under close examination.

But structural phenomena of this kind are only one possibility. In groups we can see an intricate phenomenology that weaves between the creation of meaning, and its dissolution. In the example of the second group, the individuals were not in a clinical sense psychotic. They remained quite able to formulate articulate, coherent statements about themselves and others' minds. Therefore their attacks on linking was not a sufficient condition for a psychotic state of mind. It may be a necessary one - without which a mind cannot become psychotic and mindless. But other factors must come into play. When does the attack on links produce a psychotic person and when does it not? It is quite likely that this distinction will be found to be at the root of the distinction between those diagnosed as psychotic and those diagnosed as borderline.

A group highlights, and magnifies up to visible proportions, the divergence between the attacks on linking and the full psychotic state. The group mentality, which embodies a reversal of alpha-function, is not in fact a psychosis. At the level at which the problem starts - the level of encounter with other minds - the dismantling

of mind is not complete. To understand this further needs a wider discussion about the group as the locus for symbolisation. But in passing we can note Kaës' view that a group supports

an accreditation for an intra-psychic representation and a 're-run' in speech-form which gives it meaning within the context of interpersonal, group and societal relationships (Kaes 1984 p. 363).

Thus, meaning itself is enhanced and codified within a group which renders it into a transmittable form - using a symbolic system, language. Language seems to hold things together with a kind of extra-personal system of meanings. Links cannot be broken between words and within the system of semantics. Linguistic linking survives even when personal meanings are under attack. In this sense, a group gives a second dimension to meaningfulness - the codified language. It exists as a separate dimension from the personal meanings conveyed in the emotional side of a communication. Those are the product of the individual alpha-function. Meaning is the product of an individual mind based on encounter, but it has in the context of a group where those encounters happen, an external component, as well as the internal one. This sense of meaningfulness sustained by language seems to operate at a group level, and thus to sustain the meaningfulness which the individuals require to continue having a mind.

Bion made a rather unwieldy synthesis of his views on groups and psychosis. This entailed trying to elaborate group basic assumptions with psychotic mechanisms of defence. But this first effort can be made more fluent, and has true relevance to the phenomena in groups if we consider the vicissitudes of emotional linking between people. It gives us understanding of therapeutic opportunities which I tried to show in my brief examples. This greater fluency comes from teasing out the implications of alpha-function as the core of what is now known as mentalising.

Concluding reflections

Psychoanalysis has a good record in contributing to the philosophy of mind and can potentially make an important contribution to the current interest in the philosophy of consciousness. And Bion's work on thinking and on groups is central to any such contribution(14).

The new reality principle

When Freud talked of the reality principle, he talked as if it (reality) had the quality of a physical reality, stable, consistent and reliable. And contrasted it with the psychic reality of the subject's inner world of impulses, dreams and feelings. Increasingly, psychoanalysis has come to recognise that reality, the really important reality for the human being, is the reality of other people. A person's external reality is the inner reality of someone else. The implications of this for the psychoanalytic theory of mind has been the development of object-relations - i.e. the relations with other minds.

Recently the word 'mentalise' has been used to describe the ability to conceive of a mind. Mitrani (1996) describe the autistic defect in those terms, where the relations, and whole way of life and relationships appear to function mindlessly. Fonagy and Target (2000) have used the term, 'mentalise', to pinpoint the deficit which, in their view, characterises borderline personality disorders. There is clearly an inter-'mental' or interpersonal aspect to mentalisation, which Kaës (1984) has pointed out in groups. He described mentalisation as: 'first and foremost, a psychic work, that is work concerned with the formation and transformation of psychic qualities' (p. 362). And he explicitly connected this with Bion's 'alpha-function'.

It would seem that the core feature of a mind is that it encounters other minds. A mind is, as it were, a mind-recognising apparatus, and this could supplement the Turing test(15) . The mind could in this way be distinguished from a machine that simulates mental functions. If one of the pre-occupations of philosophy is to construct a theory of mind, then it would seem that such a sophisticated philosophical field of endeavour is common to everyone who has a mind. We must all have a theory of mind in order to qualify as having a mind.

Mindblindness

The psychoanalysis of which Bion was an exponent takes it as central that the human mind recognises other minds. Failure to do so is a major psychopathological event. We might take either a clinical point of view of such a failure, or a developmental one(16).

From the developmental point of view, failure to develop a mind in this way is now commonly regarded as a core of autism, a 'mindblindness' as Baron-Cohen (1999) calls it. The notion of 'mindblindness' starts from the premise that the core feature of a mind is that it can recognise the existence of another mind - that is to say, a mind, in order recognisably to be a mind, must have a theory of mind. Autistic children appear to miss that developmental step, and schizophrenics to have retreated from it(17).

The new neuroscience

Such an object-relations theory of the mind can inform recent neuroscience and the philosophy of consciousness. To relate adequately to the external world, means recognising the existence of a personal

mind in others, an experience which presumably involves the sense of 'having a mind' oneself. This has led to a 'philosophy of consciousness'. One attempt to solve the question: What is it to have a mind? was addressed in an evolutionary way by asking: Who (or what) has a mind? In other words, what distinguishes the human mind from the 'minds' of other animals. For instance Lloyd-Morgan (1930) attempted a comparative appraisal of the 'minds' of animals, and Premack (1988, see also Premack and Woodruff 1978) was interested to compare the chimpanzee with man. These were somewhat speculative appraisals. More recently Nagel (1974) has asked whether we can know the 'mind' of another species - he instances a bat. The current investigation of consciousness is in terms of human psychology (Nagel 1986, Dennett 1991, Humphreys 1993, Dennett 1995, Meetzinger 1995, Damasio 2000). Little of this work takes account of psychoanalytic discoveries, although as Solms and Kaplan-Solms (2000) point out, psychoanalysis originally derived from neuroscience, and Freud's work in neurology and on aphasia. And the distinction between conscious and unconscious that is so refined in psychoanalysis and in Bion's work, could contribute an important but forgotten dimension to the current neuroscience.

Bion's views can fit with those emerging from the new neuroscience, with his capacity of specific subjective functioning. I have shown how his work can specifically describe the causal 'subjective' matrix - recognition, meaning, representation, mental space and identity - within which mind occurs. It is surely important preparatory work to clarify the objective conditions under which these subjective phenomena erupt into being. For much of neuroscience, a theory of mind is an infantile achievement. However, work in psychoanalysis and in groups suggests that such an achievement is a wobbly one, and adult life within our interpersonal context with others, is a fluctuating experience of 'having a mind', formed or distorted by encountering others

What is it to have a mind? How do the first flickering moments of a mind come into existence? How and under what conditions does it snuff out again? It is a research trail like that which physicists are following back to the first moments of the universe itself. Following that trail is one of the current topics of psychoanalytic research. But we are not alone, psychiatrists, experimental psychologists, neuroscientists are on the trail with us. There is a potential in Bion's work and writings which are highly stimulating, despite running into contradictions, and which remain a source of ideas and evidence to be mined in the future long after him.

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Notes

1. By making these storms of feelings central to the working, and even existence of the mind, I am resorting to what I believe to be a fundamental psychoanalytic premise. However, in the field of experimental psychology too there is a similar position which makes 'feelings be the primitives of consciousness... [The idea that human consciousness depends on feelings helps us confront the problem of creating conscious artifacts' (Damasio 2000 p. 314). (back)
- 2 Severe personality disorders, pre-occupied as they are with abuse, can employ their sensitivity to such storms of encounter in order to express something of their terror of intrusions, violation and abuse, into others. (back)
- 3 Formally, he referred to the raw material, upon which alpha-function works, i.e. the storm, as 'beta-particles', and the products of alpha-function as 'alpha-particles', which are the elements with which the mind can begin to work, as in dreams. (back)
- 4 For a discussion of the problems of such non-objective subjective additions, see Levine 1995. (back)
- 5 I am here adapting Bion who described the food of the mind as 'truth' - in my account it is meaning. (back)
- 6 It seems important to distinguish 'representations', which can be restricted to these 'things' in the mind, from symbols. Symbols are clearly related to representations. They are, perhaps external 'representations'. But they are more than representations - symbols are the conversion of representations into something that is communicable to other minds. There is a difference. Symbols are created as a result of some actively worked up representations - symbols are representations put in the form that can be externally recognised. The term symbol-formation is used, and it has something to do with Freud's notion of dream-work - that work that has to be done on the dream itself to communicate it to the analyst. It is put into words, it is converted into a formal narrative as far as possible - secondary process gets going on it. Thus symbols have three components: the real thing, the internal representation and the symbol that gives expression to the internal. (back)

- 7 This has significant similarities to Bleger's idea of the pooling of primary undifferentiated aspects of the individual, in the group, which Bleger was developing at the same time (Bleger 1972, 1980). (back)
8. The paper was published in the International Journal of Psycho-Analysis collection to celebrate Melanie Klein's 70th birthday. (back)
- 9 The 1955 version was republished, without further changes as the last Chapter in his Experiences in Groups. (back)
- 10 This connects with the notion of 'attunement' stressed by Stern (1985) and others in the mother-baby interaction. (back)
11. This is an example of a group in a work mode which is coloured by (rather than dominated by) the basic assumption. (back)
12. Elsewhere I have examined these kinds of group states in greater detail, and speculated on their therapeutic benefits or otherwise (Hinshelwood 1994). (back)
13. In the case of that second group, it was the dependency assumption. I do not want to add complexity by going further into the conditions when a basic assumption dominates in this psychotic way; and the conditions when encounters do happen, but flavoured with a basic assumption.. (back)
- 14 See also Guy da Silva (1997). (back)
- 15 That test, in effect, decides if a mind is merely a complex machine (Turing 1950). (back)
16. Frith (1994) makes it the central feature of the clinical picture of schizophrenia, following Bleuler's (1911) early recognition of this deficit in schizophrenic patients. (back)
17. Hobson (1993) reviewed this core problem of autism from a psychoanalytic point of view. Originally, Klein (1930) described an autistic boy, in fact before Kanner (1944) first labelled the syndrome. Thereafter, the interest in autism has been pursued by Meltzer et al. (1975), Tustin (1981: see also Spensley 1994) and Alvarez (1992) and others have extended this work considerably. That test, in effect determines the possession of a mind, as opposed to information processing (Turing 1950). (back)

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