



Bion on Sexuality

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Bion thought Freud had overestimated the importance of the sexuality, and that this had come about because the very situation of psychoanalysis (analyst and patient) stimulates the basic assumption of pairing (BaP), in which sexuality is in a central position. Bion, himself, does not talk much about sexuality. At the same time what he does say is often unexpected and illuminating, and some of this I shall detail.

A second path of enquiry in the paper is whether light can be thrown on our contemporary understanding of sexuality by Bion's general work and in particular by his 'theory of thinking'. Bion proposes that the first 'thought' occurs in the absence of the object being 'thought' about. Thinking develops through the alternation of being taken into the mind of the present object, and of bearing the experience of the object's absence. Is there an equivalent alternation in the development of sexuality, between the infant's satisfying sensual experiences with the object, and by contrast, his or her primitive recognition of being absent from the parental sexual relationship?

The paper ends with a discussion of Bion's use of the concept of the pleasure principle and why this may have inadvertently resulted in a pathologization of pleasure principle functioning.

The paper includes longish quotes from Bion in order to make available the detail of his thinking to the reader.

"It is as if there could be no possible reason for two people's coming together except sex."

Working with groups, before becoming a psychoanalyst, Bion identified three 'basic assumptions' at work in groups: dependence (BaD), fight-flight (BaF) and, our concern here - pairing (BaP).

"[T]wo members of the group would become involved in a discussion; sometimes the exchange between the two could hardly be described but it would be evident that they were involved with each other, and that the group as a whole thought so too. On these occasions the group would sit in attentive silence—rather surprising behaviour in view of the neurotic's impatience of any activity that does not centre on his own problem. Whenever two people begin to have this kind of relationship in the group—whether these two are man and woman, man and man, or woman and woman—it seems to be a basic assumption, held both by the group and the pair concerned, that the relationship is a sexual one. It is as if there could be no possible reason for two people's coming together except sex. The group tolerates this situation, and, although knowing smiles are interchanged, the group seems prepared to allow the pair to continue their exchange indefinitely. There are exceptions, but they are not so numerous as one would imagine, considering the other individuals in the group have a good deal that they would like to say.



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Now, it is clear that two people in a group can be meeting together for any number of purposes other than those of sex; there must, therefore, be considerable conflict between the desire of the pair to pursue the aim they have consciously in mind, and the emotions derived from the basic assumption that two people can be met together for only one purpose, and that a sexual one. ...

Anyone who has employed a technique of investigation that depends on the presence of two people, and psychoanalysis is such a technique, can be regarded, not only as taking part in the investigation of one mind by another, but also as investigating the mentality not of a group but of a pair. If my observation of the basic assumption of the group is correct, it is not surprising that such an investigation seems to demonstrate sex as occupying a central position with other emotions as more or less secondary.” (1961: 61-63)

and:

“...Psychoanalysis, in the light of my experience of groups, can be regarded as a work group likely to stimulate the basic assumption of pairing; that being so, psycho-analytic investigation, as itself a part of pairing group, is likely to reveal sexuality in a central position. Further, it is likely to be attacked as itself a sexual activity since, according to my view of the pairing group, the group must assume that if two people come together, they can only do so for sexual purposes. It is therefore natural that Freud should see the nature of the bond between individuals in a group as libidinous.” (1961: 176)

Bion is of the view that Freud has overestimated the importance of the sexual drive and contends that this has come about because the very situation of psychoanalysis (analyst and patient) stimulates the basic assumption of pairing (BaP), in which sexuality is in a central position. He puts forward this contention without doubt or qualification. When one reads his letters to his then analyst, Rickman, it is clear that he is very interested in psychoanalysis as a way of thinking and observing:

“Just out of hand it comes to me that the essentials are: 1 – a psych. who really can make clinical observations (this seems to me to be practically synonymous with “psycho-analytically trained...” (Wilfred Bion's first letter to John Rickman, written in his Harley Street office on January 29, 1939. Conci, M. (2011)

But Bion does not see ‘being psycho-analytical’ as necessarily entailing the holding of a particular set of beliefs - including Freud’s view of the centrality of sexuality in human psychic functioning.

“A central difficulty”

Before leaving Bion’s writings of the group-work period and in the spirit of drawing the reader’s attention to comments Bion made without necessarily knowing what to make of them. What do we think of the following quote:



“A scrutiny of the facts seems to lead to a central difficulty in bringing together sexual love, equal parents, an infant like ourselves, the Messianic hope which I consider to be an essential component of the sexual love, and a compulsion to develop that in itself necessitates a capacity for understanding.” (1961: 161)

Bion is discussing the basic assumptions referred to above. He seems to be saying that one function of the assumptions is the prevention of the key elements for life and development (including sexual life) coming properly together (rather in the nature of a chemical reaction). Did he think that the bringing together of the different elements would cause a ‘being alive’ effect that may be experienced as too intense to bear?

‘Basic relationships’, ‘Elements’, ‘A precursor of sexuality?’

Turning now to his books *Learning from Experience* and *Elements* a central enterprise that Bion sets himself in these books is the identification and clarification of core elements in human functioning, of relevance to the psychoanalytic endeavour. In the first of the books *Learning from Experience* (1962) Bion wants to delineate what he calls ‘the basic relationships’. He suggests that analysts might find helpful, as a clinical tool, the decision of which of the basic relationships is the ‘key’ to any particular session. Here is the discussion of his selection of what should be chosen as ‘the basic relationships’:

*“The feelings we know by the names “love” and “hate” would seem to be obvious choices if the criterion is basic emotion. Envy and Gratitude, Depression, Guilt, Anxiety, all occupy a dominant place in psycho-analytic theory and **would seem with Sex to be choices to place with love and hate.** In fact I prefer three factors I regard as intrinsic to the link between objects considered to be in relationship with each other. An emotional experience cannot be conceived of in isolation from a relationship. The basic relationships that I postulate are (1) X loves Y; (2) X hates Y; and (3) X knows Y. These links will be expressed by the signs L, H and K.” (1962: 42/43)*
(Emphasis added)

The second of the books - *Elements* (1963) - is named after his enquiry into the key elements to be attended to in psychoanalysis and we find the following comment:

*“The sexual instinct is an integral part of psycho-analytic theory, but the element of sex in the sense of something for which I need to look is not sex but that from which the presence of sex may be deduced. But for my purpose the term “element” cannot be properly used to denote something that would appear to be a property of some more fundamental thing whose presence it betrays. **Therefore the element I choose is not a sign of sexuality but a precursor of sexuality.**” (1963: 74)* (Emphasis added)

‘A precursor of sexuality?’

What might Bion mean by “a precursor of sexuality”? A search of his writings takes us back to his earlier group-work (referred to above), and his view that sexuality was



mistakenly given a preeminent place in human functioning because it was being stimulated by the 'pairing couple' of analyst and patient:

*"I shall now turn to a consideration of the air of hopeful expectation that I have mentioned as a characteristic of the pairing group. It usually finds expression verbally in ideas that marriage would put an end to neurotic disabilities; that group therapy would revolutionize society when it had spread sufficiently; that the coming season, spring, summer, autumn, or winter, as the case may be, will be more agreeable; that some new kind of community—an improved group—should be developed, and so on. These expressions tend to divert attention to some supposedly future event, but for the analyst the crux is not a future event but the immediate present—the feeling of hope itself. This feeling is characteristic of the pairing group and must be taken by itself as evidence that the pairing group is in existence, even when other evidence appears to be lacking. **It is itself both a precursor of sexuality and a part of it. ... The difficulty is that, thanks to the rationalization of the dawning sexuality of the group, the premonition of sex which obtrudes as hope, there is a tendency for the work group to be influenced in the direction of producing a Messiah, be it person, idea, or Utopia. In so far as it succeeds, hope is weakened; for obviously nothing is then to hope for, and, since destructiveness, hatred, and despair have in no way been radically influenced, their existence again makes itself felt.**" (1961:151/152)(Emphasis added)*

In this quote Bion refers both to a 'precursor of sexuality' and to a 'premonition of sex'. These 'pre's' invite us to take a step back, to catch the arising of what may become identifiable as 'sex'.

In *Experiences in Groups* Bion speaks of what he calls a "proto-mental system" (1961: 101). This, he says, is the level before events emerge as psychological phenomena. Only when events emerge as psychological phenomena "can we talk about feelings of fear or security or depression or sex, or other such". (1961: 101)

I think he is also saying that psychological phenomena emerge not as discrete entities, but in particular configurations. In the basic assumptions, for example, individual emotions are modified because 'cemented' together, for example:

"Anxiety, fear, hate, love, all, as I have said, exist in each basic-assumption group. The modification that feelings suffer in combination in the respective basic-assumption group may arise because the 'cement' so to speak, that joined them to each other is guilt and depression in the dependent group, Messianic hope in the pairing group, anger and hate in the fight-flight group." (1961:166)

I would like at this point to introduce another later comment Bion makes about sexuality:

"No element, such as the sexual element, can be comprehended save in its relationship with other elements; for example with the determination with which Oedipus pursues his inquiry into the crime despite the warnings of Tiresias. It is consequently not possible to isolate the sexual component, or



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any other, without distortion. Sex, in the Oedipal situation, has a quality that can only be described by the implications conferred on it by its inclusion in the story. If it is removed from the story it loses its quality unless its meaning is preserved by an express reservation that “sex” is a term used to represent sex as it is experienced in the context of the myth.” (1963: 45)

The elements in the Oedipal situation are not rigidly ‘cemented’ together (as emotions are in the basic assumptions), but are in a configuration that gives a particular meaning to sex and even to what is identified as sex at all. Does this matter clinically? Bion is cautioning against the view that we can use a mechanistic model to understand human functioning, and throwing light on the effect of the observer’s (analyst’s) mind on what is observed. His view also encourages an awareness of what model a patient may have of what constitutes sex, as well as the awareness of what models we may be using ourselves - including that provided by Freud.

The “sexual implications” of container/contained

“Description 1: The signs ♂ and ♀ I call the contained and the container. The use of the male and female symbols is deliberate but must not be taken to mean that other than sexual implications are excluded.” (1970: 106)

When Bion says that other factors as well as sexuality are implied in the concept of container/contained, we have tended to concentrate - with him - on these other factors (K and -K), and not on the implications of this concept for our understanding of sexuality itself.

In the following quote, taken from the same book as the quote above (*Attention and Interpretation 1970*), we see some elaboration of a libidinal motivation in the container/contained relation. In the section of the book from which the comment is taken, Bion is discussing the importance of the ‘discipline of memory, desire and understanding’ in making oneself available to the reality of the patient. He is being critical of the operation of pleasure principle functioning in the mind of the analyst. At the same time, it is one of the few places where he throws light on the “sexual implications” of the container/contained relation.

“♂ evacuates unpleasure in order to get rid of it, to have it transformed into something that is, or feels, pleasurable, for the pleasure of evacuation, for the pleasure of being contained. ♀ takes in the evacuations for the same motives.” (1970: 29)

Here we have a view of a sexuality driven by the instinct to ‘take in’ and ‘be taken in’ that is not present in Freud’s model, and potentially balances Freud’s model. Bion himself does not develop this; his interest lying, not in sexuality, but in thinking and ‘being’ with the patient (in a way that is intended not to be constrained by the basic assumption of pairing).

Sexuality: on the effect of the presence and the absence of the object



Bion, not infrequently, comments that 'more is going on' than sexuality and explored what this 'more going on' was. It may be timely to turn our attention back to sexuality, but armed now with Bion's theory of thinking. What light can be thrown on our contemporary understanding of sexuality by his work?

Firstly, to briefly introduce Bion's 'theory of thinking' for those not familiar with it. In a paper published in 1958 *On Arrogance* we see an early discussion of his realisations about how the mind develops through the mind of another - projection as a communication that can be digested and 'thought' by the more mature mind of the m/other and then returned. Three years later he presents his view of what he understands to be already in the mind of the hypothesised infant at birth. Here is the relevant part of his account from the paper in which he summarized his theory for the 22nd International Psycho-Analytical Congress Edinburgh 1961:

"iv. 'Thoughts' may be classified, according to the nature of their developmental history, as pre-conceptions, conceptions or thoughts, and finally concepts; concepts are named and therefore fixed conceptions or thoughts. The conception is initiated by the conjunction of a pre-conception with a realization. ... Psycho-analytically the theory that the infant has an inborn disposition corresponding to an expectation of a breast may be used to supply a model. ... The pre-conception (the inborn expectation of a breast, the a priori knowledge of a breast, the 'empty thought') when the infant is brought in contact with the breast itself, mates with awareness of the realization and is synchronous with the development of a conception...."

The infant's preconception works as a container for the realisation of the breast. At the same time the infant's overwhelming experiences are contained in the mind of the mother.

Bion then draws attention to the significance of the infants experience of the absence of the object in the development of 'thoughts':

*"v. I shall limit the term 'thought' to the mating of a pre-conception with a frustration. The model I propose is that of an infant whose expectation of a breast is mated with a realization of no breast available for satisfaction. This mating is experienced as a no-breast, or 'absent' breast inside. The next step depends on the infant's capacity for frustration: in particular it depends on whether the decision is to evade frustration or to modify it.
vi. If the capacity for toleration of frustration is sufficient the 'no-breast' inside becomes a thought, and an apparatus for 'thinking' it develops." (1962: 306/307)*

The introduction of the importance of the experience of absence in the development of thinking is an important addition to Freud's understanding of the development of thought. On re-reading the quote however I noticed that I was assuming that the experience of the absence of the object must be a developmental achievement, and one that involved having an internal object on which to depend; whilst Bion was including in his discussion inborn capacities of the infant - preconception and the capacity for frustration (helped by the object, but also an inborn capacity). There is a serious difference between the self regulation provided by the pleasure and reality principles in Freud's model of the mind, and Bion's (and many others') emphasis on the regulation provided by the object. Have we become so used to thinking in terms



of object relations, that we overlook what the hypothesised infant may be endowed to recognise or regulate itself?

Bion proposes that the hypothesised infant has both a preconception of the breast and a preconception of the 'primary couple'. The preconception of the breast is mated with the actual breast to produce a realisation. What about the preconception of the 'primary couple'? A second path of enquiry in the paper is whether light can be thrown on our contemporary understanding of sexuality by drawing on Bion's theory of thinking to contribute to a more general theory of development. In Bion's model of the mind it is the containment provided by the present object and the experience of the absent object which together enable the development of thinking. Can attending to the alternation or combination of experiences of presence and absence also be a clinically helpful idea in the field of sexuality - the combination of the infant's satisfying sensual experiences with the object, and by contrast his or her primitive recognition of being absent from the parental sexual relationship?

Bion on the Pleasure Principle

In an early psychoanalytic paper *Differentiation of the Psychotic from the Non-Psychotic Personalities* (1957) Bion comments that the actions of a psychotic patient led him to think in terms of Freud's concept of the pleasure principle:

The patient "was exhibiting the kind of motor discharge which Freud said under the supremacy of the pleasure principle 'had served to unburden the mental apparatus of accretions of stimuli, and in carrying out this task had sent innervations into the interior of the body'" (1957: 271)

A year later in 'On Hallucination' Bion comments that a psychotic patient's fear that he will make a murderous attack is intensified by his *"awareness of the extent to which he is dominated by a state of mind and feeling appropriate to that phase of development which Freud described as under the sway of the pleasure principle"* (1958: 348). In this state of mind actions are not intended to change the environment, but to unburden the psyche of destructive hate and envy. *"The lack of any impulse to alter the environment, together with the wish for speed that is associated with the inability to tolerate frustration, contribute to forcing a resort to muscular action of the kind characteristic of the phase of dominance by the pleasure principle."* (ibid) Bion further says that in the non psychotic part of the personality, the patient feared loving an object, because it would expose him to frustration. The patient's intolerance of frustration, then causing him to implement mechanisms that promise instantaneous solution - this, he adds, being a characteristic of pleasure principle functioning.

In these papers Bion is drawing on Freud's concept of the pleasure principle to discuss the role of evacuative projective identification, which he saw as synchronous with Freud's description of how the pleasure principle aims to *"unburden the mental apparatus of accretions of stimuli"*. Bion however is using the concept at a different level to that of Freud. He is describing the evacuation of frustrating perceptions and the fragmentation of the perceiving mind itself in order to evade reality. Freud's model is of a non-psychotic unburdening, without there being an attack on the mind itself.



Bion is aware that he is using the concept of the pleasure principle differently. In *Learning from Experience* he distinguishes between the ordinary pleasure principle functioning described by Freud “to disencumber [the personality] of accretions of stimuli” and what he calls its “abnormal” version in which the disencumbering becomes “replaced in the phase of dominance by the reality principle, by ejection of unwanted beta-elements.” (1962: 13)

Some pages later Bion writes “To make theory correspond to these clinical findings I have suggested an emended version of Freud's theory so that the reality principle should be considered to operate co-existentially with the pleasure principle.” (1962: 31) Initially I thought Bion was making a point somewhat similar to Loewald (1951) that both principles are operating from the beginning of life. However, I have come to think that Bion is doing something different. Bion's focus is on pleasure principle functioning operating from the beginning of life in terms of it's being anti-reality principle functioning, rather than a mode of functioning in it's own right.

Freud was aware that pleasure principle functioning can seduce, be used defensively, or become a refuge from reality principle functioning. Bearing these difficulties in mind, in Freud's view the regulation provided by the pleasure principle is of fundamental importance in the personality, particularly in relation to sexuality. As the reader will know, in Freud's model of the human personality the pleasure principle is the earliest mode of functioning. It continues throughout life both in the modified form of 'the reality principle', and in it's first, unchanged, domain in the regulation of sexuality. In discussing the operation of the pleasure principle Freud draws an analogy to the wilderness of Yellowstone Park. Whilst different to the surrounding cultivated inhabited land, it would not be correct to describe Yellowstone Park as an avoidance or evasion of 'civilisation'.

Bion is not looking at pleasure principle functioning which is occurring in it's appropriate domain (i.e. Freud's metaphor of Yellowstone Park¹), but pleasure principle functioning which is operating in a place that ought to be dominated by reality principle functioning. What we then have is a misuse of pleasure principle functioning in a place where it ought not to be operating. There has been some tendency however for this view to result in a pathologization of all pleasure principle functioning.

Conclusion

Sexuality was not Bion's main area of interest and, as discussed, he thought it had been accorded too central a place in the psychoanalytical model of human functioning. At the same time, I hope to have indicated how the extraordinary and

¹ “With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought activity was split off; it was kept free from reality testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone... In the same way, a nation whose wealth rests on the exploitation of the produce of the soil will yet set aside certain areas for reservation in their original state and for protection from the changes brought about by civilisation. (E.g. Yellowstone Park.)” (Freud 1925: 222)



often unexpected nature of his observations and theory of thinking provide us with fertile ground for the development of contemporary understandings of sexuality.

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