



## Psychoanalytic Controversies

### Introduction to ‘On the value of “late Bion” to analytic theory and practice’

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#### On recognizing the controversy

Over the course of the past decade the ever-growing interest in the writing of Wilfred Bion in the analytic community worldwide has reached new levels. There are now many conferences, study groups, lectures and books centred on Bion’s work. Two new books on this topic are coming out in the psychoanalytic book series of Routledge just this year. Some of the familiar names who have contributed to this development are Elizabeth Tabak de Bianchedi, Michael Eigen, Antonino Ferro, James Grotstein, Thomas Ogden, and Joan and Neville Symington, all of whom have written extensively about Bion’s unique contribution to psychoanalysis. Emphasizing the value of Bion’s “later writings” from 1966 onwards, these writers and others associated with their approaches have pointed to how the work of this originally Kleinian author may be seen especially in these later years both to advance other theoretical and clinical approaches (interpersonal, intersubjective, bipersonal, relational, and that of Winnicott) and to offer a new line of thinking of its own. Some authors lay especial emphasis on late Bion’s radical departure from his Kleinian origins. Others, who wish to remain within the Kleinian framework, consider Bion’s later writings as important and even radical innovations within it. According to some of these writers, these innovations allow for bridges to other analytic streams.

While London Kleinians too hold Bion’s work in high esteem and see it as innovative and clinically important, it would be wrong to take this shared appreciation as indicating an area of common ground in a world of psychoanalytic diversity. While rarely openly discussed in lectures or publications, it would seem that London Kleinians tend to take an unfavourable view of Bion’s later writings (in contrast to his early ones), and tend to consider the interpretation and positive assessment of Bion in light of them, as well as clinical practice on the basis of them, to be very problematic. In London one gets to know of this position and one may infer it from passing remarks in the relevant literature, as well as from the almost total neglect of Bion’s writings from 1966 onwards. The absence of more explicit expression of

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objection may perhaps be understood as part of a current effort to devote energy to the elucidation of what's considered to be valuable and relevant to analytic work, rather than to enter "controversial discussions" which require a more critical stance, with no clear gains in view. Moreover, entering the controversy also requires in-depth study of Bion's later writings and their present-day interpretations, which are generally regarded among London Kleinians to be obscure, incoherent, mystical rather than analytically helpful, and highly jargonized.

In order to evaluate such objections and determine the value of Bion's later work, it is important openly to discuss its contribution. The innovations that he introduced need to be specified, their clinical utility assessed, and their place within psychoanalytic thinking and practice made explicit. Also, in the absence of open discussion of this kind, there is the danger that analytic thinking and practice will become distorted and limited. Differences that do exist between ideas and between analytic traditions (e.g., between Kleinian and American Relational traditions) may be blurred through shared reference to Bion, resulting in more superficial thinking and practice, or these differences may be recognized and affirmed but without an understanding of their meanings and true grounds and sources, which would result in the development of dogmatically-held positions.

### **A previous *IJP* discussion of Bion**

Six years ago, a commendable effort was made in the controversy section of the *IJP* to discuss differences in the understanding of Bion. It included a series of papers, beginning with Edna O'Shaughnessy's (London) "Whose Bion?" and followed by reflections by Elizabeth Tabak de Bianchedi (Buenos Aires) and Antonino Ferro (Pavia). As the present controversy is an attempt to get a deeper grasp of these differences, it is first worthwhile to return briefly to that earlier discussion.

The first paper in that series presents the distinction between Bion's early and late works. O'Shaughnessy maintains that the heart of Bion's contribution lies in its advancing our understanding of "the instinct to know—the K link", which has been the central concern of psychoanalysis from Freud onwards (2005, p. 1253). She later details his many theoretical and clinical contributions and how "Bion's conception of clinical practice is closely related to the Kleinian development of Freud" (p. 1525). His opus, she writes, should be read "as a *transformation* of the work of his predecessors, especially Freud and Klein" and in dialogue with his contemporaries, especially Rosenfeld and Segal (p. 1526).

She maintains, however, that in Bion's later work his thinking becomes "less disciplined...mixing and blurring categories of discourse, embracing contradictions, and sliding between ideas rather than linking them" (2005, p. 1524). She brings as an example his concept of O, which, she holds, in Bion's later writings takes on multiple contradictory meanings and ultimately becomes confused (e.g., mixing rapport with the godhead and psychosis). She associates her reading of Bion with that of Bleandonu and Meltzer and contrasts it with those of others (e.g., Eigen, Ferro and the

Symingtons) who consider Bion's formulations to underpin non-Kleinian conceptions of clinical practice or even to be antagonistic to Klein's work. In this context she cites Symington and Symington (1996): "Psychoanalysis seen through Bion's eyes is a radical departure from all conceptualizations which preceded him" (p. xii). She also contrasts her views with those who (like Grotstein) highly value Bion's later writings "as freely transcending caesuras in a way that brings the author's thinking to a culmination, especially about clinical practice" (p. 1525).

While O'Shaughnessy's critical remarks centre on matters of clarity, style, form and affiliation, it would seem that her objections to late Bion, in fact, pertain to the very nature of what it presents as psychoanalysis. This is hinted at in the conclusion of her paper, where she affirms that faced with these very different readings of Bion it is the task of the reader to discern both what is true to Bion and what in Bion is true to psychoanalysis.

In her reflections and response to O'Shaughnessy, de Bianchedi agrees that one should assess Bion's contribution in relation to those of his predecessors and one should be free to take a discerning and critical stance towards it. One may and should also be critical of the way Bion is read and used, in an effort to avoid "the disease of trivialization, fanaticism or sacralisation" in regard to his ideas. However, she maintains that Bion's late work is just as coherent as his early work, albeit written in a "more ambiguous and less positivistic" style than before (pp. 1530-1531) and she affirms that she considers Bion's ideas regarding transformations in O to be complementary to those he put forth on transformations in K. She defends his use of mystical terms by explaining that he is actually referring to the kind of intuition necessary in the analytic situation and derived from psychoanalytic experience. And more generally she thinks that Bion's later "less scientific terms" are aimed at "giving something like an electric shock to trivialized or very socialized terms" (p. 1532).

She goes on to describe his ideas on emotional turbulence and containment and the new state of mind that she believes Bion advocates — a "lonely and detached" state that is "more complex and difficult to achieve" than that recommended by Freud. But these contributions are not in contention and are presented as part of the early period of his work (ibid). Later concepts that de Bianchedi commends are those of "the pre-natal level of the mind" and "the existence of a sub-thalamic terror as a possible explanation of certain human violent actions without previous thought" (p. 1533). She states that Bion's *Memoirs of the Future* (1975, 1977, 1979), although peculiar, are of value; but she does not here explain why. In her conclusion, de Bianchedi summarizes her view of Bion, which has to do with taking a stance that tolerates emotional storms of contact with another, "dangerous emotional experiences of the meeting of pre-natal and post-natal parts of the personality," and "not understanding", and that is intuitively and creatively open to feelings and thoughts (p. 1353).

As this summary of de Bianchedi's reflections exemplifies, it is difficult to maintain a focused discussion of differences. De Bianchedi argues in favour of Bion's later work by associating it with the analytic stance of tolerance and openness to feelings, thoughts, and various parts of the personality. It

may be suggested, however, that in fact all analysts, regardless of how they read Bion, would, in general, agree with the value of maintaining such a stance. What would have been helpful here is a focus on the specific nature of the tolerance and openness that Bion advocates in his later writings and its role within the broader analytic context. By describing how this differs from what Bion advocates in his earlier writings, what the clinical and theoretical implications of this shift are, and why specifically they are of value, as de Bianchedi affirms they are, a more in-depth discussion of the differences would be possible.

In the third paper in that series, Antonino Ferro responds to Edna O'Shaughnessy's position by stating that (a) he considers Bion's later works to be the most significant because of their "insaturation" and "the openings of meanings" that they allow for (p.1535), and (b) he acknowledges Bion's Kleinian origins but that at a certain point his thinking constitutes "a quantitative leap, a caesura...a 'catastrophic change'" (ibid.). He goes on to describe his own approach to Bion, which focuses on the "tools for thinking" that Bion provides, with a special emphasis put on his idea of "waking dream thoughts" (pp. 1535-1536). He is concerned with the transformations of these in the analyst and the patient in the course of analysis, laying stress on the involvement of both parties and how this ultimately allows us "to think new and unknown thoughts" (p. 1539).

Ferro's explanations of these processes are very dense and seem to assume familiarity with his own construal of Bion's terms within the context of "field theories". It is clear, however, that for him, too, what Bion develops in his work is the importance of the analyst being tolerant and open to the patient's reality, sensitive to primitive forms of mental functioning and aware of his own limitations. This, he maintains, requires unorthodoxy and spontaneity of thinking, which stands in opposition to giving a "Freudian or Kleinian interpretation" (ibid.). A little later he moderates this distinction and clarifies that

the alphabetization of  $\beta$ -elements will not be entirely the result of verbalized interpretations, but will consist of the sequences of emotional and relational moves between the two members of the couple, both engaged in their own mind's growth (p.1540).

He concludes by emphasizing that "theory" stands in the way of "the analyst's capacity to be in unison with his patient...[and] the live contact of minds which is the only factor of growth" (p. 1541) — hence also his appreciation of what he sees as the open-endedness or "insaturation" of Bion's later writings.

It is clear that while Ferro, too, associates what seems to be a widely accepted analytic stance of openness specifically with Bion's later work, he is explicit about there being differences between his and O'Shaughnessy's readings and assessments of Bion. However, because of the heavy use of complex theoretical terminology and the lack of a clear differentiation between Bion's work and Ferro's integration of it into his own conceptions of field theory, it is not easy to discern the specific nature of these differences and what underlies them. The questions remain open: What, more

specifically, is the nature of the shift (theoretical and clinical) that takes place in Bion's later work as he understands it and what are the reasons for it and the implications of adopting it? And in turn, how might a London Kleinian respond to Ferro's view on these matters and why might he remain unconvinced of the value of Bion's late work?

### The present Bion controversy

In the present controversy, we hoped to answer some of these questions and in this way focus and further advance the discussion begun in the first. We aimed to go beyond affirmations of preference and value to get to the heart of the differences. To do so, we invited Rudi Vermote, an analyst from Brussels, who in recent years has written and lectured much on Bion, to present the case for the value of his later work to analytic theory and practice. That is, the author was requested not only to make a case for what it is that Bion said or to simply state what he values in Bion, but rather to show the reader *why* what he believes Bion said is valuable and why it is valuable specifically to psychoanalysis. It was important that the presentation would not be burdened by complex terminology familiar only to those well-versed in Bion's later writings and that the value to analytic practice would be illustrated through clinical examples. It was thought that this would not only highlight the clinical implications of taking a position within this controversy but would also bring to the fore the kind of clinical evidence that is adduced in favour of these positions. David Taylor, a London-Kleinian analyst who for many years has taught Bion's work at the Institute of Psychoanalysis of the British Psychoanalytical Society, was invited to respond to this presentation. Finally, Vermote was offered the possibility to write a rejoinder to Taylor's response. In light of our awareness of the difficulties in having a clear and constructive dialogue on this controversial issue, we thought that this framework might provide a good containing structure for developing such a dialogue.

As the reader of this controversy will note, Vermote's approach in his paper is to show us the logic of the development of Bion's thinking from the early writing to the later, pointing to the issues and evidence that led Bion to his new formulations. In this way, Vermote well positions himself to outline what lies at the heart of this shift—Bion's insight into psychic change at an undifferentiated and unknown psychic layer, which he refers to as O. After clarifying the nature of this shift, Vermote goes on to describe how it has a positive effect on his own analytic work. In this context he brings two clinical vignettes. These make concrete the specific meaning of the analytic stance of tolerance and openness that, he maintains, distinguishes Bion's later work from his early writings.

It is not only the analytic stance, however, that comes across as different. The entire analytic framework (the nature of the relationship, the interventions, the aims) and the way in which it is considered to be analytic, are also modified. Vermote emphasizes that the new stance, based on the new understanding of psychic reality, does not do away with Bion's earlier and more traditional contribution, which was based on his idea of "transformation in K".

Vermote maintains that “early” and “late” Bion could be held together in an overarching “dual track model”. His ideas and clinical material are presented in an admirably open way that allows the reader to reflect on whether the different theoretical tracks and analytic stances that they entail could indeed be held together within a single analytic framework and relationship.

In his commentary on Vermote’s presentation, David Taylor retraces the steps that lead up to Bion’s later works. Taylor is careful to avoid using Bion’s terminology in order to leave open to question its validity and value. In doing so, he refers to the landmarks in Bion’s development that Vermote mentions, but the reader should note that in various ways he somewhat differently conceives of them and their role in Bion’s thinking. In this context, Taylor emphasizes that the move from K to O involves reconsideration of the relationship between “being” and “knowing”. He offers an in-depth analysis of this step in Bion’s writings and why it was taken.

This then provides some of the grounds for his critique of Vermote’s evaluation of late Bion. Additional grounds emerge from Taylor’s examination of the clinical illustrations that Bion offers in the course of *Transformations* (1965). He ultimately argues that the analytic stance advocated in late Bion is one of “radical openness” which may come at the expense of the processes of understanding *what* is going on in the analytic encounter and the meanings of this.

The final part of Taylor’s commentary includes reflections on Vermote’s clinical vignettes. Here Taylor not only illustrates the theoretical points he discussed and their clinical implications, but offers the reader an opportunity to see how someone coming from a London Kleinian perspective may experience and consider analytic encounters described from the perspective of late Bion.

In his conclusion, Taylor refers to points of agreement with Vermote, but reiterates the reasons for his “significant reservations” regarding late Bion. He stresses that one of Bion’s failings in his later work was his inadequate concern for the demonstration of “the workings of the analyst’s observations and reasoning” without which, Taylor maintains, it is not possible to distinguish misfounded leaps of imagination from those that draw us nearer “to what lies behind the surface of the facts”. What is valuable in Bion’s legacy and should be continued, according to Taylor, is the ongoing accumulation and evaluation of clinical evidence. The way Taylor shares the workings of his mind may be regarded as a step towards the realization of this legacy.

In Vermote’s rejoinder to Taylor’s commentary he expresses appreciation of the astute analysis offered but also disagrees with it in a fundamental way. He feels that something essential in Bion’s thinking as well as in his own presentation of Bion gets lost in Taylor’s reformulation of the developments in Bion. The point that Vermote would like to highlight is that for late Bion “Reason is an obstruction to transformations both in Knowledge and in O”. The important clinical consequence of this is that the analyst should “refrain from reason during the sessions to facilitate a contact with O, a contact which may lead to a transformation in O”.

It is not only reason that should be refrained from, according to Bion, but also understanding, narrative coherence, desire, memory, giving meaning, or experiencing Love-Hate-Knowledge during the sessions. Refraining from these is part of the effort to facilitate contact with O or, as Vermote puts it, the effort to “learn to ‘see’ the underlying psychic reality and its constant conjunctions as a Seer” and to touch “the essence of a person”. Vermote suggests that his point about this aspect of Bion’s late work did not get across to Taylor, but also considers that the differences are actually over the question of the existence of an a-sensuous psychic reality and the possibility of accessing it clinically in the way Bion recommends.

Having raised this question it would seem that Vermote very briefly alludes to a crucial issue that, I think, should not be overlooked. This is the issue of *how* one comes to address the question of the existence of an a-sensuous reality and the possibility of accessing it clinically. One option is to actively explore the clinical possibilities in relation to an a-sensuous reality, to open oneself to the unknown. Another is to consider this unknown realm from the perspective of already existing analytic models that seek understanding, meaning and coherence. According to Vermote, when one does the latter, Bion’s thinking becomes limited to technical advice regarding the analytic stance, which may be considered problematic. Vermote clearly prefers the first option, which he considers the more radical and courageous one, and the one that is also truer to Bion’s own approach.

He goes on to comment further on the extent to which Bion in practice adopted the approach he recommends and on his own experience of adopting it, returning to his clinical vignettes in order to highlight this. He reaffirms his assessment that it did allow him to come into contact with the ineffable essences of his patients and that this brought about significant psychic changes. In this context, Vermote regards the alternative, Kleinian kind of possible understandings that Taylor offers of the clinical material as beautiful and important outside of the sessions; but Vermote maintains that were they to have been applied within the sessions they would have prevented the psychic change—precisely because of their being directed towards understanding. Here Vermote mentions an anecdote told by Matte-Blanco that suggests that the traditional approach to understanding is rather limited. Not only does it neglect that which lies beyond any sensuous experience; but, narrowly-focused on the motives of verbal expression, it also in fact neglects huge chunks of that which is sensual and obviously significant.

In the conclusion of his remarks, Vermote takes a cautious scientific stance and advocates the empirical investigation of Bion’s innovations. At the same time, he strongly conveys his assessment of them as groundbreaking contributions to the development of psychoanalytic thinking and practice.

This rejoinder foregrounds some central questions regarding the differences that emerge in the course of this debate. One may wonder: Is it indeed the case that Vermote and Taylor understand Bion to be saying different things? Or do they agree on what he says but differ on the question of its validity, e.g., the validity of the claim that there is an a-sensuous psychic

reality, or that it is clinically accessible? Or if they agree that such a reality may exist, is it then that they differ on the *relevance* to psychoanalytic work of accessing such a reality? That is, perhaps the underlying point of contention is on whether it is indeed the analyst's task to come into contact with this reality, with their patient's "ineffable essence", and whether this should be done (at least at times) at the expense of understanding.

To this last question Vermote would offer a resounding "yes". To do otherwise, from his perspective, would be to adhere to traditional analytic roles at the expense of psychic integration. But then one may wonder whether indeed psychoanalysis is aimed at integration through any means, or whether it is aimed only at the kind of integration that is possible through analytic understanding. Moreover, from the perspective that Taylor puts forth, to put aside understanding is not to be open-minded and open to contact with the patient, but rather to stand in the way of such contact, as Taylor attempted to show in his study of the clinical material. This perhaps has to do, in part, with the fact that "understanding" from the perspective that Taylor represents is a rich process, not an intellectualized effort or one narrowly-focused on verbal communication. Rather, it attempts to mentally grasp the multiple experiences and meanings, conscious and unconscious, conveyed in a relationship. And from this perspective adopting a "late Bion" analytic stance would too convey a meaning that would influence what the patient expresses and its meaning. From Taylor's perspective to bracket this fact would be to limit our understanding of the patient. But here, one may suggest, lies the heart of their differences: Vermote would not be worried by such a limitation, maintaining that this facilitates contact with something essential in the patient that lies beyond understanding.

Can psychoanalysis investigate seriously this mysterious essence, and is it possible to do so without speaking in terms of what it is that is understood when the analyst makes contact 'with a living subterranean flow behind'? The authors present different positions on this issue as well.

### Concluding invitation

This exchange between Rudi Vermote and David Taylor over the value of late Bion points to how dialogue over controversial matters that go to the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice can be meaningful and respectful, and can deepen our understanding. Clearly, agreement was not reached through this dialogue and so it is interesting to continue to reflect on the ongoing differences, as well as on the nature of the assumptions and considerations that underlie them. The clinical material presented and the authors' understandings of it provide a special context in which to further evaluate the validity and relevance to psychoanalysis of Bion's late clinical ideas. As always, the IJP readership is invited to contribute to this process of reflection and exchange by submitting comments to the IJP website at <http://www.pschoanalysis.org/uk/ijpa/>