



## Rudi Vermote's response to David Taylor

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I thank David Taylor for his delicate and thoughtful discussion. In it he explains his preference for the so called 'mid-Bion' who studied the thinking or psychic processing of experiences, combining sharp clinical observation with the application of scientific models. One of the geometrical models that Bion relied on, is Poincaré's theory. The way in which Taylor illustrates how Bion used this theory for his own theory of transformations makes his commentary an outstanding contribution to the study of Bion's work.

Taylor further discusses how the 'late-Bion' changed his focus to O and he rephrases this shift in order to keep it clear of the jargon which it has generated over the years. He talks of *knowing* versus *being* and of O as the ontological power. Taylor's change of metaphors is enlivening but it runs the risk that we get a false sense of being on more familiar grounds and it may load Bion's theory with philosophical connotations to *being* that Bion did not himself refer to. As I understand Bion and as I experience it, O is a zone that we can consciously and unconsciously be in contact with.

Taylor's main criticism of the 'late-Bion' is that he saw *being*, as unknowable and that he became less sharp in his clinical observations and had less scientific rigor when apprehending *being*. In this Taylor seems to represent the opinion of many colleagues (O' Shaugnessy, 2005).

I enjoyed Taylor's comment but from his response, I get the impression that the most important point that I tried to convey about the late-Bion did not come through in my text. Taylor's commentary gives me the opportunity to formulate my point about Transformations in O and psychic change more strongly. For reasons of space, I do not mention here the many co-existing and important elaborations of vertices of Bion's work, like those of Ferro, Grotstein, Ogden, Britton to name only a few. My point is that while 'mid-Bion' is concerned with the psychic processing (or thinking) of emotional experiences, 'late-Bion' presents pivotal ideas on the heart of psychic change and consequently develops a discomfiting and radical technique. While 'mid-Bion' is about transforming psychic experiences into representations and the further transformations of these psychic representations, 'late-Bion' aims to operate at the conjunctions (or patterns) which are not yet expressed in sensuous, emotional, relational phenomena (or, as Taylor states, 'dim apprehensions of something which seems central to the patient'). Bion in fact discerned three levels of psychic functioning which are not so different from current neuropsychological findings on cortical, prefrontal, basal limbic functions. First there is a level of logical thinking, understanding (Reason), second a level of creative spontaneous associative dream verbal thought (Idea or Knowledge) and third a level of undifferenti-

ated, a-sensuous, not yet represented and therefore unknowable psychic functioning (for which he coined the term O, but also called the 'pre-natal zone' and the 'hallucinatory zone'). The important point is that for the late Bion the first level or Reason is an obstruction to transformations both in Knowledge and in O. Bion therefore advocates to refrain from reason during the sessions to facilitate a contact with O, a contact which may lead to a transformation in O. But that is not all: Bion indicates that there is an even more radical state of mind than refraining from reason to facilitate a contact with O. As the not yet differentiated and unrepresented reality is a-sensuous, the analyst should not be blinded by the senses and therefore get rid not only of reason, understanding, narrative coherence or giving meaning (which is seen by many authors relying on the first and mid-Bion as the aim of T(K)), but also of desire or experiencing Love-Hate-Knowledge during the sessions. This is controversial as we tend to see this experience in the countertransference as the base of our analytic instrument and the food for T (K). In the same vein the analyst should also discard memory during the sessions, which Bion sees as a desire towards the past. Bion advocates that one should train this radical dispassionate attitude in order to get free from the senses and desires also outside the sessions, and learn to 'see' the underlying psychic reality and its constant conjunctions as a Seer. When getting rid of all our usual grips it is only Faith that remains. According to Bion, this should be the right state of mind to be in, in order to get into contact with the essence of a person and of an interaction before it takes a concrete expression, in other words to get the experience of being in touch at a level that provokes profound psychic change. As I already expressed in my paper, to Bion these experiences are so fundamental that he thinks they happen only once or a few times in an analysis but it is these experiences that make an analysis terminable. These transformations in O are new experiences, rather than a psychic processing or thinking of what already happened as is the case in transformations in K. We cannot will these transformative experiences, only let them happen. These experiences can find a form (not vice-versa), and then become differentiated (TK touches TO tangentially). In Bion's words, such an experience moves on a vertex from infinite to finite. An interpretation stemming from such a 'O meeting K', is both a prelude to action and an action (the finding of a form coincides with a new experience). Bion compares this to the 'language of achievement' of Keats.

The central question is of course whether the hypothesis of the existence of an asensuous psychic reality and the possibility to get a contact with it during the sessions holds stake clinically. If we take Bion's ideas seriously, we should try them or else discard these ideas as a delusory fantasy. Or should we attenuate and integrate these discomforting ideas within the frame of established technique and knowledge and rephrase his technical advice as simply taking a not-knowing stance for instance? Bion himself seems to have been radical about it. As I described, we see a change in his life after he formulated his ideas on T(O). He seems to have had the courage to get rid of everything that tied him down and to restart from scratch in California. He no longer prepared lectures in advance in order to stay maximally at a level

of experience and wrote in a way that he hoped would provoke experiences in the readers, as in *A Memoir Of The Future* (Bion 1991). However we do not know to what extent he used his theory and technique about T(O) in his own clinical work. The few testimonies of former analysands of Bion rather indicate that he used an orthodox Kleinian style. Of course that says nothing about his inner mental state during the sessions. Taylor is right that it would have been far easier if Bion had illustrated these ideas with detailed clinical examples. However Bion thought that offering such clinical material is nothing more than wanting to prove some idea which is the opposite of what he wanted to convey as he expressed in the Commentary in *Second Thoughts* (Bion, 1967). What we do know of are his clinical seminars and supervisions after *Attention and Interpretation* through his recordings and it is surprising that there he barely talks about T(O). However, true to his insight, he preferred provoking experiences than answering questions. Instead of logical thinking, he used techniques like the reversal of perspective, exploring subjects in a very indirect way, answering questions by questions, silences, looking at evolutions and patterns on different vertices instead of making causal links. He adopted a Socratic questioning attitude and dropped any theory, even his own, in order to leave room for something new to happen. However these lectures and supervisions were a kind of public performance with a theatrical effect as well.

We do not know how Bion really was in the sessions; we only have his technical recommendations in his theoretical works such as that the analyst should be free during the sessions 'from being 'blinded' by the qualities (or his perception of them) that belong to the domain of the senses should enable the analyst to 'see' those evolved aspects of O that are invariant in the analysand' (Bion, 1970, p59). In other words, the analyst should try to be at this point where the undifferentiated gets a finite form, a point in infinity where he/she could see the thoughts as they emerge.

I cannot say that I am at this level, but when I was writing the text already a long time ago, I looked for some moments of profound and lasting psychic change in my psychoanalytic work, wondering if Bion's model of psychic change that he presented in *Attention and Interpretation* could be applied to these clinical experiences. In the two brief examples that I gave, we see an unexpected change, alongside an attitude of not wanting to understand. In both cases something happened in the patient in interaction with the analyst and this at an undifferentiated level. In both cases it evoked a dream in the patient that seems to play a capital role. Although the psychic changes are permanent (getting in contact with psychic life in the first patient, a change in sexual identity problems in the second), the moment of psychic change itself seems ineffable. I remembered it afterwards, but the patients had forgotten that moment of change, like one forgets a dream. In the second case an image evolved in a state of regression – a kind of hallucinatory zone – that surprised both of us. It was as if I saw something of an inner constellation, an essence of her which took a form in this strange word. These examples do not prove anything, but they do not contradict late Bion's hypothesis and model about psychic change and his ideas about an interplay of TK and TO.

In discussing these vignettes, Taylor gives superb and sophisticated interpretations which show the beauty of the psychoanalytic approach. I agree that this work of interpretation is without doubt of vital importance outside the sessions, but the important question is whether these changes would have taken place if as an analyst I had had during the session, a mental attitude of wanting to understand and help the patient to understand in the way Taylor formulates it ('analytic thinking and the development of the patient's understanding'). It reminds me of Matte Blanco, telling a story of a man coming in a pub, walking over the walls and the ceiling (head upside down) to the bar and asking for a glass of milk. Classical psychoanalysis asking 'why did he ask for a glass of milk?', a focus on understanding which bypasses the wonder of psychic change that we do not understand yet.

I agree with Taylor that Bion's model and technique remain at a hypothetical level and before advocating it, as a clinician researcher myself (e.g. Vermote et al., 2010) I fully agree that it would be good to research this technique which is paid so much lip service to. It is possible to take a qualitative research approach by gathering detailed psychoanalytic observations of what happens during nodal points of change and study the relationships of these changes with the inner attitude of the analyst that Bion advocates. Several Working Parties of the EPF look for instance already at the fine grain of a session by methods like in the Working Parties on Comparing Clinical Methods or the Specificity of Psychoanalysis (see IPA and EFP websites). We can also envisage more prospective empirical research approaches. Bion defined his method rather well, it is possible to train in it and apply it consequently. Other people than the analyst can look for the effects of this method on process and outcome and compare it with other approaches. Bion changed the path of psychoanalysis, if we take the evolution of his theory seriously we should research whether his counter-intuitive ideas on psychic change and the consequent radical technique make sense and when it is promising, develop them further.

## References

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