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Attacks on Separating: Supplementing Bion's "Attacks on Linking"

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*"All distinctions are mind, by mind, in mind, of mind
No distinctions no mind to distinguish" – R.D. Laing*

Abstract

Bion's vision of psychopathology as attacks on linking needs to be complemented by recognition of the psychopathology arising from attacks on separating (de-linking). In a truly dialectical perspective, the "feminine" bias of the "linkers" is not replaced by the "masculine" bias of the "splitters" but by a "bisexual" concept of mental evolution through cycles of integration, disintegration and reintegration on higher levels.

Des attaques de la séparation : complément des « attaques contre les liens » de Bion

La vision de Bion de la psychopathologie des attaques contre les liens doit être complétée par la reconnaissance de la psychopathologie découlant des attaques contre la séparation (déliaison). Dans une perspective véritablement dialectique, le biais « féminin » de « lieurs » n'est pas remplacé par le biais « masculin » de « diviseurs », mais par un concept « bisexuel » d'évolution mentale à travers des cycles d'intégration, de désintégration et de réintégration sur des niveaux plus élevés.

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In “Attacks on Linking,” Bion (1959) is concerned with “destructive attacks which the patient makes on anything which is felt to have the function of linking one object with another” (p. 308). He provides various clinical illustrations of these phenomena. In his work on “the Grid” Bion (1963) describes learning from experience as involving the linking or mating of a pre-conception with a realization generating a conception. A kind of mental coupling analogous to sexual intercourse leading to biological conception is viewed as central to creative thought. Out of the intercourse of two comes a third. Out of the creative mating of container and contained comes psychological growth and change—provided such coupling can be tolerated. Those who, owing either to primary envy and aggression or early failures of containment on the part of primary caretakers, or both, find exposure to such a “primal scene” to be unbearable feel driven to attempt to put a stop to such intercourse. In so doing, they block productive thinking, obstruct the analytic process, and undermine their capacity to learn from experience.

There is no doubt that such attacks on linking occur and not only in what Bion (1957) describes as the “psychotic” but also in the “non-psychotic” parts of the personality. The refusal to see similarities, to appreciate metaphors and analogies, and to make connections among phenomena that belong together, striving instead to keep them separated or isolated from one another, is a common form of resistance to mental growth. *But so is the refusal to make distinctions, to recognize important differences, attempting instead to keep merged or linked phenomena that should be separated out from one another.* Early in our education we all encountered tests that required us to “compare and contrast” the phenomena under study. This is because valid knowledge and proper mental functioning requires us to attend to both similarities and differences, to appreciate both links and distinctions or boundaries.

If psychopathology entails attacks on links it also entails attacks on boundaries. If it strives to prevent coupling by keeping objects apart, it also prevents productive coupling by undermining the fundamental separation that generates the two objects necessary for linking to occur in the first place. If there is only one, no linking is possible. Without implying that in focusing upon attacks on linking Bion intended to deny or was oblivious to attacks on separating, I feel it is worth emphasizing that it is a mistake to identify psychopathology exclusively with the former, that is, with the totalization of difference (de-linking) that results in the antitheses that constitute splitting, for psychopathology equally results from attacks on separating, the totalization of similarity (links) that result in the absolute identifications that constitute various states of psychological merger. However creative and life-enhancing transference may be at times, it is, after all, a form of linking that often involves distortion of neurotic and psychotic proportions. Primary process mentation is characterised as much by absolute identity as by absolute difference or antithesis. In contrast, secondary process mentation is characterized by relative similarity and relative difference.

In marked contrast to the Bionian stress on the role of linking in human mentation, Laing (1970) envisions the mind as a process of de-linking or differentiating: “All distinctions are mind, by mind, in mind, of mind; no distinctions no mind to distinguish” (p. 82). Laing was a follower of Jean-Paul Sartre for whom “man is the being through whom nothingness comes to the world” and human consciousness is “nihilating,” having “to secrete a nothingness,” a gap, lack or boundary, between subject and object, knower and known (Sartre, 1943, p. 24). In this light, the mystic “All is One” is a formula for an uncreative stasis: growth, development and evolution occur in time rather than eternity and require not one but two who are sufficiently separated to be

able to couple in productive intercourse generating a dialectical process of integration (linking) and disintegration (de-linking) through which reintegration on a higher level may occur, a synthesis that, in turn, may meet an antithesis leading to a yet higher synthesis, and so on.

Ogden (1990) writes: "A dialectic is a process in which each of two opposing concepts creates, informs, preserves, and negates the other, each standing in a dynamic (ever-changing) relationship with the other. The dialectical process moves toward integration, but integration is never complete. Each integration creates a new dialectical opposition and a new dynamic tension" (p. 208). He cites Hegel (1807) and Kojève (1934-1935) in this context, but his description of the dialectic seems to me to leave out the essential element of an *elevation*, an upward movement, a "sublation" or "sublimation" (*Aufheben*) involving a progressive ascent through the clash of opposites. Although the formula *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* can be traced to Kant, Fichte and Schelling, Hegel himself rarely employing it, I believe it nonetheless captures the essential idea: a thesis gives rise to an antithesis and out of the resulting conflict is evolved a synthesis that negates, preserves and *elevates* the component elements.

Sigmund Freud lived in a culture permeated by Hegelian ideas. We know he studied philosophy with Brentano and was, initially at least, enthused about both the man and his work (Brook, 2015). It is therefore no surprise that Freudian theory is thoroughly dialectical. Freud's idea of development through conflict and compromise-formation, his vision of conflict as entailing the valorization of one pole of a binary opposition (thesis) and the suppression or repression of the other (antithesis), and his notion of sublimation (Hegel's *sublation*) as a creative, higher-order solution to the conflict is manifestly dialectical. Despite his later, and as Brook (2015) points out, rather mysterious neglect of Brentano, not to mention his many disparaging remarks about philosophy as little more than a product of schizoid intellectuals, "thinkers who were for the most part turned away from the world" (Freud, 1933, p. 175), Freud clearly owed a great debt to the dialectical ideas pervading his intellectual milieu.

It would be false to suggest that Bion conceived learning from experience exclusively in terms of a preconception mating with a positive realization leading to a conception. In keeping with Freud's own thinking, Bion (1962) also viewed it as a process in which a preconception encounters a negative realization, a "no-breast" or "no-thing," thus generating thought. Nevertheless, I think the Symingtons (1996) are incorrect when having described Hegel's dialectical view of historical development they write that "Bion formulated development of thought on a model which is not dissimilar" (p. 56). Certainly in "Attacks on Linking" development is conceived as linking, mating, coupling, not as conflict and contradiction. The idea of the mating of a preconception with a negative realization, a "no-thing," certainly plays an important role in Bion's thought, but the encounter of a preconception with a "no-thing" is not quite the same thing as its encounter with a direct contradiction. An unfulfilled expectation is not quite the same thing as an active negation. An absence is not the same thing as a conflicting or contradictory presence. Nowhere in Bion is the theme of development through conflict and given anything like the emphasis it receives in Freudian thought.

I first addressed the respective biases toward linking and separating in "The Analyst's Metaphors: A Deconstructionist Perspective" (Carveth, 1984). I pointed out that although any two objects are inevitably similar in some respects while being different in others, some people, the *linkers*, are inclined to repress difference, while others, the *splitters*, are inclined to repress similarity. And, of course, a single person may

do either at different times or on different levels of consciousness. People are motivated to repress difference or similarity in order to defend against painful feelings of anxiety and depression having to do with separation or abandonment on the one hand and intrusion or engulfment on the other. Faced with a threat of abandonment one may seek to link; faced with a threat of impingement or engulfment one may seek to de-link, differentiate, separate and individuate.

Without lapsing into any biological or even psychological essentialism, Gilligan (1982) pointed to a general tendency for women to be linkers and for men to be separators, while acknowledging there are many exceptions to this rule. Hence, a view of analysis as separating or differentiating what has been fused may reflect a "masculine" bias in favour of difference, which may in turn be motivated by unconscious fears of symbiotic merger, impingement, annihilation, undifferentiation of self and object, loss of self-cohesion, castration, or the fear of "femininity." The conception of pathology as symbiosis or "attacks on boundaries" and the corollary model of therapy as boundary-making would appear to underlie the rigid insistence upon the achievement and preservation of a clear analytic "frame" that characterised the work of Langs (1978), among others. On the other hand, an equally one-sided view of the analytic process as deconstructing absolute difference, splitting or "attacks on linking" may be motivated by a "feminine" bias in favour of similarity that we see at work in therapies that privilege connection, relationality, empathic attunement and "transmuting internalisation" (Kohut, 1978) over confrontation, clarification, interpretation, insight, separation-individuation and mourning in the analytic cure. This bias is likely motivated by unconscious fears of object loss, loss of love, castration, and superego condemnation, each of which in turn may threaten loss of self-cohesion.

The "linkers" have a "feminine" bias toward connection: they want everything to touch, merge, and be the same and have little tolerance for differences. If they succeed in sublimating this bias toward *Eros*, they become the creative unifiers or integrators. The "separators" have a "masculine" bias toward difference: they want to differentiate and keep things apart and have little tolerance for similarity and merger. If they succeed in sublimating this bias toward *Thanatos*, they become the creative discriminators or distinguishers. But, ultimately, neither bias, to the extent that it entails a defensive repression of one or the other component of what Freud (1905) regarded as our inherent bisexuality, can alone result in the achievement of optimal psychic functioning because this requires attention to reality in its entirety, both similarities and differences. Hence, a more adequate conception of analysis is as both metaphor-analysis and contrast-analysis: it promotes both the transformation of absolute similarity into relative similarity (by pointing to implicit difference), and the transformation of absolute difference (splitting) into relative difference (by pointing to implicit similarity). For just as different things can never be absolutely the same and yet remain different, so different things can never be absolutely different, without being similar in at least some respects. Hillman's (1972) conclusion that "Analysis cannot constitute this cure until it, too, is no longer masculine in psychology" (p. 292), needs to be supplemented by the recognition that an opposing perspective that is exclusively "feminine" is no better. We are cured when we are no longer only either "masculine" or "feminine" in psyche—that is, when we manage to stop "essentialising" or privileging one element of our "bisexual" nature at the expense of the other.

Needless to say, the reason the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are placed in inverted commas is to indicate that the equations in which they figure belong to the Imaginary and Symbolic orders (Lacan, 1982). In other words, they refer to image and symbol rather than to anything biological, to what is *imagined* to be masculine or feminine in the order of human culture and not to what an "essentializing" perspective might regard as being literally, as opposed to metaphorically, the case. In what Burke (1939) called a "contextualising" perspective that restricts itself to the realm of *psychic reality* as the proper domain of psychoanalytical concern, the human subject is seen to be inevitably only figuratively masculine or feminine and never literally so. In bringing to light the repressed "bisexuality" upon which the fictions or tropes that constitute our gender identities are founded, psychoanalysis reveals the constructed, dramatic and imaginal quality of human identity (the "ego" or "self") as such. However, inclined we may be to take ourselves seriously in our roles as masculine and feminine actors, we are wise to remember that, as in all of our performances, in our sexual dramas we are never a man or a woman "as this table is a table" (Sartre, 1943, p. 64). We forget or repress this awareness only at the cost of falling into what Sartre described as "bad faith" or the "spirit of solemnity," a phenomenon that I have discussed as a defensive regression involving the literalisation of metaphor and contrast (Carveth, 1984), and that Lacan (1977) explained as the narcissistic alienation of the "ego" maintained by the primal and ongoing repression of the otherness within me (the unconscious) that would decentre my cherished identity and that, fortunately, periodically leads me to forget or mistake my lines.

The tendency for one or another image of absolute similarity or difference to hold us captive arises either from genuine ignorance of other possibilities or from a defence against the affects of anxiety and depression associated with the full range of infantile danger situations. We can only speculate about the factors contributing to a person's bias toward similarity, *Eros*, and "femininity," or toward difference, *Thanatos*, and "masculinity," and the resulting personality orientations toward saying "Yes" (agreeing, linking, and merging) on the one hand, and saying "No" (disagreeing, breaking links, separating and individuating) on the other. Factors such as, for example, the role of a depressed and withdrawn mother in the early development of the "linkers" and the corresponding role of an impinging, intrusive, and dominating mother, or a more general need to "dis-identify from mother" (Greenson, 1968), in the early formation of the "separators" might be important. However, such pure types are nonexistent because *Eros* and *Thanatos*, integrating and disintegrating tendencies, "femininity" and "masculinity," inevitably coexist in a greater or lesser degree of fusion; because both types of danger situation may motivate both personality orientations; and because both orientations may coexist on different levels of the personality structure and even serve to defend against each other.

These biases are reflected in psychoanalytic theory itself: while a predisposition toward linking may incline one to think of analysis as mothering, a bias toward separation may lead one to think of it as fathering. But despite its patriarchalism in other respects, it seems apparent that the bias of the "linkers," those predisposed to privilege similarity over difference, finds expression in the classical theory of the infantile danger situations, a theory that in focusing upon *loss* (of the object, its love, the phallus, superego approval) implicitly downplays those dangers having more to do with the object's overwhelming or malevolent *presence* than with its *absence*. The Freudian myth of man's eternal longing to "refind" (Freud, 1905, 222) the lost object of primary identification and re-establish the oceanic bliss or Nirvana of primary narcissism (Freud, 1920, 1930;

Grunberger, 1979) is only half the story: it needs to be complemented by insight into the equally primordial and eternal wish to "re-lose" or "re-destroy" the primary object, the primary identification (Greenson, 1968) and Eden itself, regarded as a dubious paradise, more as a prison or a coffin than a haven. And despite their matriarchalism in other respects, in the work of theorists such as Klein, Winnicott and Mahler, the Freudian bias toward *Eros* (a reflection of Freud's idealised image of the mother-infant relation) is balanced to some extent by insight into wishes to destroy links, resist impingement, separate, individuate and guard autonomy, wishes associated with *Thanatos* understood as the psychic desire to separate in the service of independence or self-cohesion, whether this aim leads in the direction of literal life or death. It is perhaps at least partly in this bias of the Freudian tradition toward *Eros* (only partially corrected in 1920 with the introduction of the final dual drive theory) that the explanation lies for its relative failure to recognise the importance of (i.e., its relative repression of) the role of the destructive mother-image (May, 2001) in the genesis of various types of psychopathology and, consequently, its tendency to privilege anxieties concerning loss over those having to do with impingement, persecution or annihilation.

According to Ricoeur (1970), "'Symbols give rise to thought,' but they are also the birth of idols. That is why the critique of idols remains the condition of the conquest of symbols" (p. 543). When relative similarities are totalized into identities—and to cite but a few examples, women literally equated with castrated men, human motives with animal instincts, human selves with ceramic artifacts, or psychological dysfunctions with medical illnesses—the consequence is a psychic regression from the differentiated experience characteristic of the secondary process and the depressive position to the undifferentiation or fusion that characterises the primary process and the paranoid-schizoid position. It is important, however, to recognise that in addition to involving defusion or splitting, regressive mental functioning also entails varying degrees of fusion or undifferentiation. Conversely, it is not simply that in the primary process metaphors are literalised such that analogies are reduced to identities, but also that contrasts based on recognition of relative differences are totalized into antitheses, binary oppositions, or splits: the sexes, for example, being thought of literally as opposites; or psychosis and neurosis dichotomised; or the "drive-structure" and "relational-structure" models of the mind represented as simply irreconcilable (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983, chs. 1 & 12); or human relations forced into the reductive pattern of such (phallic-oedipal, anal and oral) binary roles as castrator/castrated, superior/inferior and feeder/fed; or the paranoid-schizoid (PS) and depressive (D) positions of mental life (Klein, 1946) dichotomized rather than dialectically interrelated (though admittedly Kleinians have always postulated ongoing oscillation between the two positions).

The one-sided conception of psychopathology as "forbidden mixture" developed by Chasseguet-Smirgel (1984) in "Perversion and the Universal Law" needs to be complemented by recognition of the pathologies of "forbidden separation." Whereas the Bible, as Chasseguet-Smirgel points out, certainly does proscribe regressive fusion, as in incest and other violations of the boundaries separating the sexes and the generations, it also prohibits regressive defusion, as in the splitting of the Godhead which is the object of the monotheistic critique of dualism: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (*Deut.*: 6:4 *KJV*). In my view, regressive splitting and fusion function as defences against core anxieties of absolute incorporation or engulfment on the one hand and absolute separation or abandonment on the other. But while the fundamental anxieties motivate the various concretized associations, fixed ideas and black and white thinking—the psychic rigidification or mental totalitarianism—that serve to defend against them, they do not merely give rise to

defensive reification but are themselves manifestations of it. For such anxieties embody the myths of totalized identity (complete loss of boundaries or de-differentiation) and totalized difference (complete loss of connection or links) that always already reflect regressive fusion and defusion.

Although these twin anxieties are most evident in the borderline "need/fear" dilemma that for Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975) represented unsuccessful resolution of the "rapprochement crisis" of separation-individuation, I believe that in more primitive and global forms they also underlie psychotic, and in milder forms neurotic, pathology as well. In other words, there is a continuum of psychopathological reactions of undifferentiation and disintegration ranging from the mild (neurotic), to the moderate (borderline and narcissistic) to the severe (psychotic). Emancipation from psychic enslavement by the myths of oneness and separateness in their varying degrees and manifestations requires a therapeutic process of demythologization or deliteralization in which "dead" or "dying" metaphors and contrasts are "resurrected" or "revived." In coming to be recognised as merely relative the myths of absolute engulfment and abandonment lose their power to dominate our subjectivity. In returning to "life" they at the same time liberate us from the "deadly" serious, primary process world of psychotic incorporation and polarization, fusion and defusion. In this way, therapeutic deconstruction permits a degree of transcendence of the splitting and fusion characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position and advance to the more differentiated and integrated secondary process order of reality and relatively mature (secondary) identifications characteristic of the depressive position.

Just as it is necessary to overcome the splitting entailed in a conception of the paranoid-schizoid position as all-bad and the depressive position as all-good by recognizing the good in PS and the bad in D and the dialectical interdependence of the two positions or mental levels (Carveth, 2016), so the merits of the primary process (e.g., emotional intensity, passion, the inspiration phase in creativity) and the demerits of the secondary process (e.g., excessively moderate, dispassionate or "dis-affected" states) must be kept in mind. Loewald (1971, 1981), among others, emphasized the creative potential of primary process thought and the adaptive potential of regression, especially when secondary process functioning has become too distant from its vital roots in the unconscious. At the same time, it seems important to recognise PS and D, primary and secondary processes, as the terminal poles respectively on a continuum, the "intermediate area" of which may be viewed, following Winnicott (1955), as a "transitional process." The "transitional area" includes types of mental functioning that cannot clearly or consistently be assigned to either PS or D and that seem somehow to overlap or fall between these categories. It is commonly recognized that use of transitional phenomena requires a "willing suspension of disbelief," but I have argued (Carveth, 2013, chapter 10) that in actuality it requires suspension of *both* belief and disbelief. Both vital experience of the arts and transitional faith in and worship of the sacred exist between the poles of dogmatic literalistic belief and an entirely rationalist scepticism that, having been achieved, is temporarily suspended on entry into the transitional area and resumed again on exit. Although, as Winnicott understood, it remains important to accomplish the transition from the merely subjective to the merely objective, it is in the transitional area that vitality and meaning may be found.

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