

The Apparatus and the Assembly

What Bion's *A Theory of Thinking* Offers to Epistemology

— A Philosopher's Reading —

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1 Introduction: a philosopher among clinicians

This essay is written by a reader who is neither a clinician nor a Kleinian. I come to Bion's *A Theory of Thinking* (1962, reprinted in *Second Thoughts*, pp. 178–186) as a patient, a student of theory, and —most centrally for what follows— as a reader trained in philosophy with a long-standing interest in epistemology. I should say at once what Bion himself says of his paper, because the rest of what I write depends on respecting that statement. Bion announces in the opening lines that he is presenting «a theoretical system» whose resemblance to philosophy rests only on shared subject-matter; the theory, he insists, «differs from philosophical theory in that it is intended, like all psychoanalytical theories, for use» (p. 178). He is offering clinicians an instrument and wants its hypotheses «restated... in terms of empirically verifiable data». Whatever I write here must be read against that explicit clinical aim.

My hypothesis —and I mark it plainly as a hypothesis— is that the apparatus Bion constructs *for clinicians* also functions, when held at a philosophical angle, as a gift to epistemology. I do not claim Bion intended this gift. The most I claim is that a reader trained in philosophy can recognise, in his clinical descriptions, a model of how a mind comes to *bear* what it is to know —a question less worked over than the more familiar one of how a mind comes to *justify* what it knows. A second, smaller hypothesis, developed in section 4, surfaces from the verb itself: I first encountered Bion in Spanish translation and found that his English original makes the joints of his model visible in a way the translation occludes, and I will suggest that the reason is not only stylistic but sedimented in the Germanic body of the word *thinking*.

A note on register. Where I report what Bion says, I cite the text. Where I extend, propose, or speculate, I say so. Some claims in section 4 are framed as endolinguistic hypotheses under a falsifiability protocol I have proposed elsewhere; they are not advanced as proofs.

2 What Bion says: the apparatus on its own terms

Bion organises the chapter around a single inversion. «It is convenient», he writes, «to regard thinking as dependent on the successful outcome of two main mental developments. The first is the development of thoughts. They require an apparatus to cope with them. The second development, therefore, is of this apparatus that I shall provisionally call thinking. I repeat — thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts» (p. 179). And immediately: «this differs from any theory of thought is a product of thinking, in that thinking is a development forced on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round» (p. 179).

Three claims are folded together here, and it matters for what follows that we keep them separated. First, *thoughts come before thinking*. Second, *thinking is a developed apparatus*, not a faculty given with the psyche. Third, *thinking is reactive*: it is forced on the psyche by the pressure of what the psyche has to think.

Bion then offers a taxonomy of what he is willing to call «thoughts» (paras. iv–v). A *preconception* is an empty disposition —Bion explicitly identifies it as «the analogue in psychoanalysis of Kant’s concept of ‘empty thoughts’» (p. 179)— modelled on the infant’s «inborn expectation of a breast». A *conception* arises when the preconception mates with a realisation: breast expected, breast met. A *thought*, in Bion’s restricted sense, arises when the preconception mates with a *frustration*: breast expected, no breast. The «no-breast inside» is the inaugural thought. A *concept* is a conception or thought once named and fixed.

The hinge is the capacity to tolerate frustration. «If the capacity for toleration of frustration is sufficient the ‘no-breast’ inside becomes a thought, and an apparatus for ‘thinking’ it develops» (pp. 179–180). If the capacity is insufficient, the no-breast cannot become a thought; it remains a «thing-in-itself» to be evacuated, and the psyche develops not an apparatus for thinking but a hypertrophy of projective identification.

Two further pieces of Bion’s text bear on what follows. Bion lists the apparatus as fourfold —Thinking, Projective Identification, Omniscience, Communication (p. 184)— and treats communication not as an adjunct but as constitutive: «the human individual is a political animal and cannot find fulfilment outside a group, and cannot satisfy any emotional drive without expression of its social component» (p. 185). Without the development of social capacity, he adds, «even scientific communication» would be impossible (p. 185). And of the mother: her «capacity

for reverie is the receptor organ for the infant's harvest of self-sensation gained by its conscious» (p. 183). The dying feeling the infant projects becomes tolerable only by sojourning in the mother and returning marked by her capacity to bear it; if the projection is refused, the infant reintrojects not a softened fear of dying but «a nameless dread» (p. 183).

These are Bion's claims, in the chapter, in his words. The rest of this essay reads them at a philosophical angle.

3 What the apparatus offers epistemology

Classical epistemology, in most of its forms, begins from a given thinker and asks how that thinker comes to know. *Cogito ergo sum*. Whatever the thinker subsequently doubts, the thinker is at least secured as the seat of the doubting. Knowledge in this tradition is something a thinker *does*; the thinker is the presupposed subject of the verb. Kant complicated this by showing that the contents of cognition are jointly shaped by sensibility and understanding, but the architecture of a knowing subject was left in place. The empty thought, in Kant, is still *my* empty thought.

Bion's text —read, again, philosophically rather than clinically— proposes three displacements I find genuinely useful to the philosophy of knowing. I offer them as my reading, not as Bion's argument.

First, *thoughts before the thinker*. If thinking is an apparatus developed under pressure from thoughts that are not yet thought by anyone, then the order of foundation is reversed. The thinker is not the seat of the thought; the thinker is what gets organised around an unmetabolised excess. The *cogito* is no longer a starting point but a developmental achievement.

Second, *absence as the epistemic primitive*. The inaugural thought, in Bion's model, is the no-breast: a presence-by-absence, a realisation in the negative. The classical tradition tends to treat knowing as the establishment of a positive correlation between mind and object; Bion's first thought is the correlation between an expected object and its non-appearance. The implication, if we extend it, is that all knowledge bears the structure of a frustration that has been tolerated long enough to become representable. This is not far from certain currents in phenomenology —the negative theology of presence in late Heidegger, Sartre's careful descriptions of *néant*— but Bion arrives at it through clinical observation, not through ontological argument, which is precisely what makes the convergence interesting.

Third, *thinking as a capacity built to bear*. Bion's apparatus is not, in the first instance, a cognitive apparatus in the computational sense. Its first office is to make the gap between wish and fulfilment tolerable: thinking, in his words, is «a means by which the frustration that is tolerated is itself made more tolerable» (p. 180). Translated philosophically, this is the claim that

the very capacity to know depends on a prior capacity to *suffer the absence of what one would know*. Epistemology, on this reading, has a temperament before it has a method.

The most striking of Bion's philosophical neighbourships, in this chapter, is with Kant. Bion explicitly takes the preconception as the analogue of Kant's «empty thoughts». But Kant's empty thought is an empty *form* that awaits the matter of intuition. Bion's empty thought —let me venture this as my reading— is something stranger: a dispositional emptiness that is mated either with realisation or with frustration, and whose mating with frustration is the very birth of the apparatus that will later be capable of having Kantian empty thoughts at all. Bion does not pose the question, but his model implies one: *under what conditions is a psyche able to have, sustain, and use an empty form?* His answer, in essence: when it has tolerated enough no-breast to no longer need to evacuate it.

One last point on what this offers. Bion underlines that «the human individual is a political animal and cannot find fulfilment outside a group» (p. 185). In a chapter ostensibly on the *individual* psychic apparatus, this is a remarkable inclusion. Thinking, for Bion, is not the private exercise of an enclosed subject. Communication —and with it, the implicit existence of those who can receive a communication— is internal to the apparatus from the start. The maternal reverie that returns the infant's projection in a bearable form is the first scene of this group-internal structure. The mother does not teach the infant to think; she is the first organ in which thinking takes place at all.

This is the door, I believe, into the etymological observation that follows.

4 The verb itself: an endolinguistic hypothesis

I should signal a register shift. The work I do under the name *endolinguistics* attends to what the consonantal and prosodic structure of words registers about the affective and cognitive dispositions of those who speak them. It is not classical etymology, and I have argued elsewhere —I summarise the constraint here so it can be tested against what follows— that endolinguistic claims are *hypotheses about resonance*, not proofs of meaning. They organise probability fields; they do not legislate identity. The legitimate use of an endolinguistic observation is to suggest a falsifiable line of inquiry, never to settle a metaphysical claim.

With that warning in front of me, I venture the following hypothesis. The English verb *think* sits inside a Germanic lexical field that is unusually dense for a single human gesture: *think, thought, thank, thanks, thing*. In modern German the same field is articulated by *denken, Gedanke, danken, gedenken, Ding*. Old English *þencan* (to think) —where the letter *þ* (called *thorn*) writes the voiceless *th* of *thin*, and its sibling *ð* (*eth*) the voiced *th* of *this*— is cognate with

þancian (to thank) and stands in close proximity to *þing*, the assembly. Old Norse *þing* —still preserved in place names like Thingvellir— named the gathering at which a community brought a matter forward for adjudication. The same root sediments through Old High German *Ding* (which Heidegger would much later worry into a philosophical motif).

It is worth pausing on what a *þing* concretely was, for without that image the word «assembly» stays too thin. The Icelandic *Alþingi*, founded around 930 CE, convened every summer at þingvellir, an open plain by a lake. For two weeks the free men of the island gathered to hear the *lögsögumadður* —«the speaker of the law»— recite from memory, from the *Lögberg* (the Law Rock), a third of the legal corpus then in force; and to bring before the gathering the matters of the community: feuds between families, manumissions of slaves, divorces, sentences of exile, peace-makings between clans in vendetta. The word *þing* named at once *the gathering* and, by metonymic extension, *the matter brought to it*. Hence the double trace that modern English still preserves: *thing* as material object and *thing* as concern or affair («the thing is...», «do your thing»). Before any central authority existed, what held the Germanic community together was precisely this practice: *bringing the matter to the þing*. The law did not descend from a sovereign; it rose, once a year, into the common space.

The hypothesis I want to propose, and to mark explicitly as a hypothesis, is this: when English speakers say *to think*, they are speaking inside a phonic-affective field whose oldest gesture is *to hold a matter before the assembly*. To think a *thing* is to bring it to a *þing*. To *thank* —*þancian*— is to acknowledge, in the same vocal arc, that the matter has been received and held. If this resonance is real, then *thinking*, in the specific Germanic sense Bion happened to inherit when he wrote in English, is constitutively a public-private operation: the bringing of a matter to a space where it can be deliberated, even when that space has been internalised into a single psyche.

I cannot prove this. I do not claim it is what Bion meant. I claim only that it is a falsifiable conjecture, and that the convergence with Bion's text is striking enough to put on record.

For consider: Bion describes the apparatus of thinking as something whose first scene is the mother's reverie —a *receptor organ* in which the unbearable matter is held until it can be returned in metabolised form. He describes communication as constitutive of the apparatus, and writes that without the development of a social capacity even scientific thinking would be impossible. He insists, finally, that the inaugural thought is the *no-breast*: a matter that cannot yet be settled, presented to a psychic space that must learn to hold it. Each of these moves —held matter, receiving organ, deliberative interior, communal precondition— is at home in the semantic field of *þing*. The maternal reverie is, on this reading, the proto-assembly. The internal apparatus of thinking is the assembly internalised. The unmetabolised matter is what has not yet been *thinged*, not yet brought before any forum capable of receiving it.

This is not what Bion says. It is what his English permits me to hear when I read him. And it would be unhearable, I suspect, in a translation that renders *thinking* with the Spanish *pensar*—a verb whose root (*pensare*, to weigh) names a different gesture entirely. *Pensar* weighs the matter; *to think* brings it to assembly. Both are real; they are not the same motion. The reason Bion reads more clearly in English than in Spanish translation is not, or not only, that he wrote in English. It is that the verb he was using already carried, in its Germanic body, a hint of the model he was building. A philosophy of mind written in a *pensar* language and a philosophy of mind written in a *think* language will tend, all else equal, to find slightly different things.

The hypothesis is offered to whoever wants to test it. The test would consist in tracking, across the Germanic lexical field and against control families, whether the *think* / *thank* / *thing* cluster systematically organises around the gesture of *bearing a matter to a forum*, in contrast to the Latinate clusters around *concupere* (to grasp), *reflectere* (to turn back), *meditari* (to dwell), *intelligere* (to read among), *cogitare* (to shake together). Each of these Latinate verbs names a different cognitive gesture; none of them, in its root, names the assembly. Only *think* does.

5 Closing

Two things should be kept distinct in closing. The first is what Bion says: a clinical theoretical system intended to be restated in empirically verifiable terms, useful whenever a disorder of thought is suspected. Bion does not propose an epistemology, and there is no warrant in his text for claiming he meant one. He proposes an apparatus.

The second is what a philosopher who has read him carefully can take away. On my reading—offered as a reading, not as a translation of Bion’s intent—the chapter quietly suggests three reorientations of unusual value to epistemology: thoughts precede the thinker; knowing begins from a tolerated absence; the apparatus of knowing is in the first instance an apparatus of bearing. To these I have added a further hypothesis, this one mine and falsifiable: that the English verb *to think* carries in its Germanic body a resonance with the very structure Bion’s model describes—the bringing of an unsettled matter to a space in which it can be held. The maternal reverie is the first assembly. The mind is the assembly internalised. Whatever else thinking is, on this reading, it is not the lonely exercise of an enclosed *cogito*; it is what a psyche learns to do once it has tolerated enough absence, and inherited enough community, to bear a matter without evacuating it. If this reading has any standing, it is owed to the verb as much as to the man.

References

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