

Discussion of Esther Bick's Paper 'Further Considerations on the Function of the Skin in Early Object Relations'

Donald Meltzer

Esther Bick was a gifted therapist and teacher whose great difficulty in writing has deprived us of a record of the scope of her observations and ideas. The patient described as 'Mary' was undoubtedly the most moving, arduous and enlightening clinical experience in her life and most of her richest ideas were derived from that work. But it was the correlation of analytical data with infant-mother observations that fashioned the concepts about which she felt the strongest conviction. While these ideas of skin-containment, second-skin formation, the dead-end, looping, adhesive identification and dimensionality went beyond what Melanie Klein had described with regard to infantile development and psychopathology, Mrs. Bick's approach was completely Kleinian in its preoccupation with object relations and narcissism, with persecutory and depressive anxieties, with modes of defence and types of identification. Despite her professional background in psychology she was less interested in cognitive development as was, for instance, Roger Money-Kyrle, or in thinking processes, like Bion or myself. For this reason she did not follow up the line of inquiry into dimensionality as I was doing in the research group on autism, and later preferred to speak of 'adhesive identity' rather than 'identification' since the cognitive implications and the impairment of symbol formation did not attract her interest.

I mention these facts in order to introduce an attempt to show the way in which Esther Bick's work, Bion's ideas and my own approach described the same universe of phenomena from different and complementary points of view. I am speaking of work that went on in the period following Melanie Klein's death, in the sixties and early seventies, when Mrs. Bick and I were working very closely together but neither of us had any direct contact with Bion and before Bion's ideas had worked their way into the centre of my own clinical preoccupations. It was, historically, a period in which the enthusiastic exploration of schizophrenia by Kleinian analysts had rather spent itself, for the concept of the paranoid-schizoid position failed to penetrate the mysteries of delusional systems any further than Freud had managed with the Schreber case. Perhaps the paranoid-schizoid position was never achieved by some children or could be lost as an organised state in severe regression. The thesis of minute splitting processes in object relations or narcissistic organisations did not seem to cover the phenomena. Rather it seemed that basic mental functions had been attacked and lost or never developed.

In this conceptual impasse, Mrs. Bick turned towards infant-mother observation and work with psychotic children, I returned to an earlier interest in autism and dream-construction, while Bion took the bull by the horns. It was pretty clear that,

just as Freudian psychoanalysis had lacked a useful theory of affects and values which Mrs. Klein's work was supplying, Kleinian psychoanalysis lacked a theory of thinking. It was widely assumed that this was the realm of philosophy and that such people as Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Langer and Cassirer would soon present us with a philosophy of mind, language and symbol formation in due time for use in our consulting rooms. Bion's formulations eventually showed us how wrong this trust had been, for his *Theory of Thinking* flies in the face of academic philosophical thought in placing emotion at the very heart of thinking processes.

It is a pity that Mrs. Bick never came to terms with the full scope and significance of Bion's work, for without the *Theory of Thinking* her discoveries about the skin-container, like ours about dimensionality, dismantling and adhesive identification's clinical ramifications, appeared merely as rarities of psychopathology. But once Bion had opened up the vast panorama of alpha and beta, of the symbolic and non-symbolic areas of mental life, we could see that our researches were pioneering the investigation of the non-symbolic area, the realm of beta elements, of hallucination, delusion formation, psychosomatic disorder and basic-assumption mentality. Esther Bick's skin-container personality, our description of two-dimensionality in the post autistic children and Bion's distinction between exo- and endo-skeletal personality structure could be seen as identical. But Bion's genius saw the grand structural scheme where we, as clinical researchers, discovered only the various phenomena.

I have taken this line for discussing Mrs. Bick's work in order to bring out its full significance, for in her scant writing, occupied as it was with description, the importance of her work does not shine through. But those who worked closely with her in supervision and seminars know better the range of her grasp of the nature of mental processes and the depth of her knowledge of the human condition.