

The Post-Kleinian Model of the Mind: Central Features

The mind

The mind is regarded by Bion as a relatively new evolution from the adrenal glands. It processes feelings, which if developed into thoughts, make the mind grow. The problem is that the mind is a non-sensuous reality whose operations and governance are mysterious. 'Our minds are made up for us by forces about which we know nothing' (Bion).

The individual mind is a group not a single entity – there is no 'unity of the mind'. These group members may be considered as forces, characters, infantile or adult parts of the self, or part-objects.

Unlike physical instruments, the mind is capable of observing itself, and changes through the act of observing.

How the mind grows

The mind grows through self-knowledge acquired by thinking. Thoughts are the food of the mind. They are not invented or 'thought up': they are received, and always seem to come from outside the existing personality and its conscious wishes and intentions. This arouses curiosity and associated ambivalence.

The first sign that a thought is trying to enter the mind is a 'fact of feeling'. The feeling has to be acknowledged, observed and tolerated or 'suffered' until its meaning becomes apparent. If the turbulence is weathered the thought will find a place in the existing mental structure that expands the individual's state of knowledge (called by Bion 'psyche-lodgement'). Emotionality is thus at the heart of thinking.

Mental growth, according to Bion, is 'catastrophic and timeless' – it is not smooth or automatic, but proceeds in minute leaps of 'catastrophic change' that occur each time a thought finds entry: hence the need for mental strength. If the mind is not in a constant state of evolution, it 'dies' (that is, becomes complacent, authoritarian, etc).

Growth is not automatic, it requires constant work. Bion calls this psychic work 'learning from experience', as distinct from 'learning about' in a merely factual or informative sense. It requires patience, and modulation of pain, not modification of pain.

Pathology is stuck or thwarted growth. This can be brought about in a variety of ways – lies, omnipotence, rigid conformity, look-alike substitutions for real experience.

Pre-conceptions

The post-Kleinian model follows a Platonic 'realist' system (Money-Kyrle). Thoughts or conceptions derive from a world of higher knowledge (ideas), in which goodness, beauty and truth are inextricable and are attributes of any new idea. An idea makes its initial contact with the mind in the form of a pre-conception. According to Money-Kyrle there are three innate preconceptions with which the human individual is endowed from birth: a good (feeding) breast; a creative parental couple; and death (the knowledge that everything has an end). All these have their negative or denying counterparts, designed to avoid pain and frustration.

Each step forward in knowledge entails a preconception which 'mates with a reality' (Bion) in order to become a conception embedded in mental structure. Thus the process of acquiring knowledge is logical and never-ending. Each new idea is based on the existing state of ideas (knowledge) in an individual mind, and onward steps cannot be bypassed through a shortcut. Ideas cannot be destroyed once they have been incorporated into personality structure – they have become 'known'; they can however be distorted or 'forgotten' (covered over).

Preconceptions in another sense can also refer to omnipotent pseudo-thoughts that use old, stale thoughts to block curiosity and the possibility of further investigation. Worn-out thoughts can become a mental 'exoskeleton' (Bion). They may take the form of pseudo-maturity (know-it-all).

Mother-baby and container-contained

Thoughts enter the mind via a mediatory dialogue between self and objects. The Platonic realm of ideas or ultimate knowledge (Bion's 'O') is by nature unattainable, but specific, relevant pieces of knowledge can enter the individual mind in a symbolic form (they 'intersect' with a particular reality). When a developmental thought impinges on the mind it is processed by means of the internal mother-baby relationship. This mediation is founded on biological origins and primary external relationships, but external relationships do not 'explain' either growth or its failure (stasis/regression); the relation between external circumstances and internal strength in an individual remains mysterious.

Bion's term for this internal mother-baby knowledge-feeding relationship is 'reverie', by means of 'alpha function' (the basis for symbol formation). Disturbing feelings are projected into the mother-container and transformed into meaningful thoughts which advance the infant's self-knowledge. (Bion's speculations are confirmed by a wealth of actual infant observations.)

This is also the basic model for the psychoanalytic transference relationship.

Internal objects

Psychic strength depends upon the condition and qualities of internal objects, initially the internalized mother. And internal objects are themselves not fixed – like the self, they are in a state of evolution (or can be frozen or disempowered by infantile envious attacks). The knowledge they contain cannot be destroyed or reversed, but the link to the infant self can be broken, which means the objects and their psychic food become inaccessible, at least for the time being.

Internal objects are the most advanced part of the mind and the source of the individual's ethics and creative capacities. Knowledge is attained first by the object and then by the self.

The ultimate object is the 'combined object' with male-female qualities in creative conjunction. Its most primitive part-object representation is the breast-and-nipple (container and explorer). Unconscious phantasies of the sexual organisation of internal objects can take a myriad forms (described by Meltzer in *Sexual States of Mind*), of which the phantasy of a creative conjunction is the most sophisticated, and sadistic perversity the most destructive.

In dreams and phantasy object relations often take the form of 'part-objects', functioning but non-integrated aspects of the object as body-parts.

The depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions

Self-knowledge and personality development are based on internal object relations. Melanie Klein defined two fundamental positions of the infant-self in relation to the object: the depressive and the paranoid-schizoid. The 'depressive' does not mean depressed (in the melancholic sense) but means that infantile omnipotence is deflated, and the link with the knowledge-feeding object is strong, and dependence acknowledged. This is the state of 'knowledge' – an aesthetic condition of temporary harmony and integration. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the self suffers from its lack of understanding and is tempted into evasive omnipotent solutions that are under its own control, but illusory.

A capacity to tolerate frustration ('patience') is key to constructively suffering this uncomfortable condition of not-understanding. 'Suffering' means tolerating the pain until it is understood (through alpha function, with the help of the object). The pain is modified and the mind is enabled to work back to the depressive state of reality-acceptance. Bion comes up with the formula $Ps \leftrightarrow D$ to denote how the two states are in continual oscillation. This oscillation is inevitable and 'normal', indeed a sign that 'useful work is being done'.

Types of identification

Internal object relations involve different types of identification.

Pathological projective identification is based on envy (Klein), while introjective identification acknowledges the object as a source of goodness, beauty and truth (Meltzer's clarification of the term, related to Freud's superego-ideal). An ethical conscience is based on love and gratitude not on moral codes and punishment.

Introjective identification acknowledges the separateness of the object and its distance from the self. Separation or absence (as in ‘mourning’) enhances the drive to internalize the qualities of an object that cannot be exclusively possessed. This enables love and gratitude and a responsible orientation to the world-mother and its needy ‘babies’.

There are two types of projective identification: communicative and intrusive (Meltzer). Communicative is the basis of the internal mother-baby reverie, the means for identifying and working through conflicts. Intrusive is pathological, based on a phantasy of controlling the object/ mother from the inside.

Another type of identification was observed by Meltzer as ‘adhesive’ in the context of autistic children ‘dismantling’ their object in a two-dimensional relationship, in an attempt to evade the conflicts entailed by recognition of a separate object.

Aesthetic conflict and LHK

The infant self at birth brings preconceptions from prenatal life which (in most circumstances) find their realization in the beauty of the mother’s face and breast (Meltzer) – the first object. This discovery or recognition arouses love, but this is shortly clouded by the fear of helplessness and separation. Hatred and distrust arise in the face of the object’s unpossessability and unknowable intentions.

The picture of this first ‘apprehension of beauty’ is why Meltzer places the depressive position prior to the paranoid-schizoid (by contrast with Klein’s initial ordering). Without the initial impact of beauty there is no need for distrust and recoil from an experience which may be overwhelming. It is the presence of the object, not the absence, that creates trouble. However aesthetic reciprocity between mother and baby, in the external world, normally modifies the fears of losing the object, as always following the oscillating life-rhythm of Ps↔D.

As the rhythm becomes established and the infant’s trust grows stronger, curiosity about the inside of the mother’s body (her mind) develops into an imaginative search for knowledge. For the baby the mother represents ‘the world’ and this is the origin of both art and science. The epistemophilic ‘instinct’ (Klein) is in fact not an instinct but a complex emotional response to the first object relationship. Bion’s formula is LHK (Love, Hate, Knowledge).

The ‘aesthetic conflict’ between love and hate of the object that begins at birth has to be undergone at every moment of developmental change (‘catastrophic change’). And each time trust fails, the infant personality is tempted to retreat from aesthetic conflict and fall into any of a whole variety of regressive defences, temporary or entrenched (minus LHK). According to Meltzer all the psychoses may be seen in terms of this retreat from the impact of beauty and truth.

Symbol formation and dream life

The answer to aesthetic conflict is symbol formation. Knowledge is contained in symbols – not verbal language alone but dream, phantasy, visual and auditory formations. This is how the human animal gains knowledge about itself (Cassirer, Langer) and resolves its emotional conflicts in a creative or developmental way. All modes of expression can constitute the ‘language of achievement’ (Bion) if they are authentic and appropriate, the result of psychic exploration and communication. Alternatively, they can be omnipotently controlled, becoming the sterile or obstructive ‘language of substitution’.

A true symbol is a container for the ‘truth’ of a psychic situation (Bion’s ‘intersection with O’). The standard alternative is to invent false symbols or talk the ‘language of substitution’ – language designed to impress and deceive not only the listener but the self – a familiar and ubiquitous phenomenon.

Because dreams cannot be invented, they constitute the primary material for psychoanalysis, which Meltzer terms a ‘forcing house for symbol formation’. The symbol of a particular emotional situation is founded on recounted dreams or present phantasy which then takes shape as a result of the transference-countertransference interaction. This shaping constitutes the meaning of the emotional experience of the session.

Shaping the symbol (Coleridge’s ‘shaping spirit of imagination’) is a mixed conscious and unconscious process (as in art forms) but it is not a diagnostic or formulaic process. Meltzer calls it ‘interpretative reverie’, which may evolve into ‘interpretation’. Bion says it requires the exercise of patience, allowing an ‘underlying pattern’ to emerge from the phantasy. The pattern can then be described, and

subsequently formulated. This is the achievement of K – not the complete truth, but the limited truth of a specific moment, that Bion calls ‘alignment with O’ (or ‘at-one-ment’). This is a revision of Klein’s ‘reparation’, the basis for the depressive position. Truth comes from outside the self, mediated via the creative internal objects, and when symbolized it becomes visible or known.

The preverbal, the prenatal, and the protomental

Once symbol formation is understood as a function of object relations, and as more comprehensive than the purely verbal, it is easier to imagine its primitive origins in prenatal life. The capacity to form symbols of emotional experiences develops in a continuum through the ‘caesura’ of birth and into the preverbal language of infancy. This ‘caesura’ (observed by Freud and developed by Bion) is then echoed by subsequent growth-points. And each symbol can also be envisaged as having a history – an origin and a line of growth.

As with preconceptions, there are both useful and stultifying versions of protomental states. The protomental can ossify into basic assumptions and express itself in psychosomatic disorders. Yet all mental life has vital primitive roots, founded on the earliest unity of psyche and soma, which need to be acknowledged (unconsciously) in the process of symbol formation.

All psychic events take place in the unconscious. Consciousness is the means of observing them – the ‘organ of attention’ (originally described by Freud). In the post-Kleinian model, the traditional distinction between unconscious and conscious modes of existence is in effect superseded by the ‘caesura’ between prenatal and postnatal parts of the mind, and by protomental (unthinking) states *versus* mental (thinking) ones. Unlike conscious and unconscious, these are different psychic worlds, different modes of being.

Psychoanalysis, the family, and education

Of the many types of learning, ‘learning from experience’ is a function of communicating with internal objects, making use of opportunities provided by external objects (teachers, relationships, etc) and life events. Families are the primary environment for this. But psychoanalysis also is an educational environment, which only becomes alive when both analysand and analyst are learning from experience. Not just the thoughts but the *functions* of the thinking mind are introjected (Money-Kyrle).

The goal of psychoanalysis is not to cure or normalize but to ‘introduce the patient to himself, for that is a marriage that will last as long as he lives’ (Bion). The transference-countertransference is the basis for this voyage of discovery. The analyst, demonstrating by example the process of learning and thinking, helps to set in motion the individual’s development of a personal identity, that grows organically from within rather than being imposed by social norms from outside or by omnipotent individual desires which are also imposed not drawn out (e-ducated). Bion calls this developing an endoskeleton, rather than being constricted by an exoskeleton.

Psychoanalysis only works when it is a ‘work group’, when both parties are focused on the task of seeking for symbols of the experience, not just ‘talking about’ it. The psychoanalytic method with its ‘natural history’ and its capacity to evoke symbols becomes the container for both people. Meltzer calls it a ‘conversation between internal objects’; Bion says the growth-promoting object is the analysis not the analyst, and there is always at least a third person in the room – an observing eye (or object). Such a meeting always entails emotional turbulence; but if this can be tolerated with ‘negative capability’ (no rush for answers), eventually a ‘pattern will emerge’ – a symbol of the present emotional conflict.