The Klein-Bion Expansion of Freud's Metapsychology

Sigmund Freud's genius was a child of its time and he was naturally preoccupied with the current scientific developments and psychotherapeutic methods. He wanted to create an explanatory science which could prove things. He naturally looked upon the mind and brain as phenomenologically identical and was preoccupied with a neuro-physiological model, with "hydrostatics", with the Darwinian framework of evolution applied to the mind. This model drew on comparative anatomy, embryology and, unfortunately, archaeology, backed by the first and second laws of thermodynamics, to form a metaphor which was mistaken for a theory. While these gave him tremendously useful tools they also imposed their limitations when treated as theoretical hypotheses requiring experimental proof.

This model of the mind, which is made explicit (as preconceptions) in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology", did indeed stay with him all his life. It was a model that was bound, by its own structure, to impose on him a view of mental life in which he could not possibly have believed but that he nonetheless used as a basis for scientific work. It view the life of the mind as bound to the body and its needs, and thus engaged upon finding means to gratify these needs without running into an absolute confrontation with the environment, human and non-human. Freud eventually also came upon evidence of another agency that the personality has to satisfy, that is the agency of the conscience, of the Superego. His picture of the personality was a slightly sad one as spelt out in The Ego and the Id. He pictured the Ego as serving three masters - the Id (the instincts), the outside world, and the Superego. Using all the tricks and devices of its intelligence to outwit these three masters, the Ego sought to find some kind of balance, a peaceful co-existence. When Freud later came to formulate the theory of the Life and Death Instincts, it appeared that the very purpose of life was to die peacefully. It does not matter that he could not possibly have believed this, but as a scientist he worked at his assumptions and hypotheses, pursued them relentlessly, and produced an imposing and substantial foundation for the science.

His greatest clinical discovery was, of course, the phenomenon of the transference but because of his neuro-physiological "hydrostatic" model of the mind, he was bound to view transference as a repetition of the past and therefore bound to think of neurotics as people "suffering from reminiscences". He could not think of them as people living in the past because such a concept could not find any representation in his model. He could think of them as being tormented by unassimilated painful experiences, analogous to foreign bodies, causing constant irritation in their minds - a kind of surgical model. We may remember that one of the few people to appreciate his earliest book, Studies in Hysteria, referred to his method as a "surgery of the soul". Later, under the Structural Theory, the Superego could be viewed as a vestigial organ of the mind, in need of dissolution - an embryological model.

This concept of the transference as an emanation of the past was also accompanied, necessarily, by a view of dreams which could not see dreams as dream life, but merely as brain activities serving a fairly trivial function, supporters of the neurophysiological process of sleep. Although dreams could be appreciated as a splendid source of information for the understanding of personality, they could not have assigned them a life function. Freud could not, therefore, even though he evolved a concept of Superego and spoke of internalization, come to a concept of an internal world. He could use that term only in an allegorical way. We can see in his work that he had opportunities for its more concrete use in the Schreber case where the world destruction fantasy obstructed, for Freud realized that the world that Schreber destroyed was not the outside world but something in his mind. Freud could not, however, because of his basic model, find a place to locate this internal world. This in turn prevented him from coming very close to the problem of mental health because his model of the mind could only clearly examine mental illness. At the very end of his life, in his great imaginative and speculative paper, "Splitting of the Ego in the Service of Defence", he did make an attempt to break with the concept of "Unity of the Mind" imposed by the one-to-one neuro-anatomical equation of mind and brain. This approach to transforming himself from a neuro-physiological psychologist into a phenomenological one can also be glimpsed in papers on fetishism and masochism - especially in "A Child is Being Beaten", where there is more freedom of imagination and concern with the meaning of things, and less emphasis on the distribution of energy and the attainment of what Cannon later called "homeostasis".

Freud also had difficulty, because of his basic model, in thinking of emotionality as the heart of the matter of mental life. He could
think of emotionality only in a Darwinian way as a relic of primitive forms of communication. He therefore, as it were, confused the experience of emotion with the communication of emotion, thus treating it as an indicator of mental functioning rather than as a function itself, much like a noise-in-the-machine.

These limitations of Freud's neurophysiological model of the mind highlight the significance of Melanie Klein's work. Its surprisingly revolutionary consequences were implied early in her career as an outgrowth of her listening naively to young children talking about the inside of their own and of their mothers' bodies. Freud could not adopt such naiveté when hearing of Little Hans talking about the same thing, telling his father about how, before he was born, he and his sister Hanna had ridden in the stork-box together, and had a relationship which was broken up by his birth. Freud could not listen in this way because he did not have a model that could take cognizance of it; but Melanie Klein did listen, and so doing made a discovery which contributed a revolutionary addition to the model-of-the-mind, namely that we do not live in one world, but in two— that we live also in an internal world which is as real a place of life as the outside world.

This gave an entirely new significance to the concept of phantasy, namely that unconscious phantasies were transactions actually taking place in the internal world. This, of course, gave a new meaning to dreams. Dreaming could not be viewed merely as a process for allying tensions in order to maintain sleep; dreams had to be seen as pictures of dream life that was going on all the time, awake or asleep. We may call these transactions "dreams" when we are awake, and "unconscious phantasies" when we are asleep. The implication was that this internal world must be assigned the full significance of a place, a life-space, perhaps the place where meaning was generated. Freud's formulation of the Superego could be expanded and transformed into the concept of internal objects. Psychic reality could be treated in a concrete way as a place where relationships were taking place and where meaning of life was generated for deployment to the outside world.

This transformation to a Platonic view is absolutely implicit in Melanie Klein's earliest work and it transformed her psychoanalysis at that point from a Baconian science, aiming at explanations and hoping to arrive at absolute truths or laws, into a descriptive science, observing and describing phenomena that were infinite in their possibilities because they were phenomena of imagination and not the finite events of the distribution of the mental energy of the brain. This geographic aspect of a model-of-the-mind, views mental phenomena as arising at a different phenomenological level from those of the brain, though obviously completely dependent in a "carrying" way on brain-body functioning.

Melanie Klein's evocation of the mental geography surprisingly revealed what might be called a theological aspect of the personality. Every person has to have a "religion" in which his internal objects perform the function of gods— it is not a religion that derives its power from belief in these gods but from the functions these gods actually perform in the mind. Therefore if a person does not put his trust in them to perform these functions he must undertake them himself. Here the relative inadequacy of the self leaves him in the lurch (the organizational concept of narcissism). In other words Melanie Klein, without completely recognizing it, transformed "Narcissism" from a theory about the nature of the Libido and its attachment to the body into a concept that is a much more social and organizational one. It finds that the phenomenology of narcissism arises from the relationships of the child parts of the personality to one another in psychic reality in so far as they are in competition with, or in defiance of the internal objects, those parental figures who perform godlike functions.

This geographical dimension of an expanded metapsychology implied that the concept of transference was altered. Instead of transference phenomena being seen as relics of the past they could now be viewed as externalizations of the immediate present of the internal situation, to be studied as psychic reality. Neuroses would not be seen as "suffering from reminiscences" but could be thought of as living in the past, represented in the immediate present qualities of the internal world. The narcissistic organization stands in opposition to the object relations in a very similar way to that in which atheism stands in relation to theism. In other words if a person does not put his trust in his internal gods, he must live in a state described so vividly by Kierkegaard as "despair".

In Melanie Klein's early work this opposition appears as those emotional situations which she called the paranoid-schizoid position in which a person is bound to abandon himself to a value system of self-interest, while in the depressiv-position concern for the good object is predominant over self-interest. This then was yet another revolutionary aspect of her work for it introduced values into the psycho-analytic view of the mind. Freud's view of science had required their exclusion to forestall any psycho-analytic "weltanschauung" which he feared, would turn the science into a cult.

These were, in a sense, the main changes in the model of the mind that Melanie Klein's discoveries contained implicitly, though
they were never spelled out as alterations or even as amendments to Freud's model. She describes a mind that deals with meaning, that deals with values, that oscillates in its relationships between narcissism and object relationships, that lives in at least two worlds, the outside world and the internal world. It is in the internal world of relationships that meaning is generated and deployed to relationships in the outside world.

This then is where her work stood until, in 1946, in "Notes on some Schizoid Mechanisms" she described the two mechanisms of splitting and projective identification. The study of the phenomena related to these two mechanisms remained the constant preoccupations of her students for the next thirty years. These two mechanisms describe the ways in which the mind destroys its own primal unity. Melanie Klein's expansion of Freud's description of splitting of the ego implied that a person lives multiple lives, in greater or less harmony and integration with one another. The bringing together of these splits is a very arduous and painful process involving the transformation of values from the paranoid-schizoid position to a depressive orientation. The concept of projective identification further complicated the model by multiplying the number of "worlds" that various parts of the mind may inhabit by adding the regions of "inside" objects to the duality of internal and external worlds. This had important implications for understanding difficulties of communication. Inhabitants of different worlds misunderstand one another because the language that they use has a different frame of reference. She demonstrated that to live in the inside of an object is to live in another world; it is not only a world that is different from either psychic reality or external reality, but it is a world of very severe disturbance, though not identical to the delusional system of the schizophrenic.

This idea of a complex geography of mental space throws a very bright light on certain aspects of dreams and pathological mental states. Recent experiences in analytic work for instance, suggest that the inside of the mother's body is generally divided into at least three areas that have very different meanings and very different organizations. The state of mind engendered in a part of the personality inhabiting each of these different compartments constitutes living in very different worlds.

The acute psychotic illness of a young man, who moved from one to another of these three worlds, illustrates beautifully the three different arenas of life that exist inside the internal mother's body.

A twenty year old youth, in a South American city, took off his clothes in the middle of the square and disappeared into the sewers; when police brought him out and took him to a mental hospital he told them that he had done this in order to escape from Hitler who was trying to enlist him for the SS. He spent about three months in this hospital during which time he became increasingly disturbed in a very particular way. He gradually began to complain that the place smelled foul; that the food was unclean, if not poisoned; that there were very sadistic things going on, particularly in the basement where he could hear screams. Gradually the atmosphere became so intolerable to him that he escaped. About a month or two later he asked to be admitted to a hospital in another town. There he stayed for several months and during his stay he gradually developed a very different kind of accommodation. He began to complain that the place was scintillating with sexuality. Everyone, staff and patients alike, was having sexual relations, the atmosphere was electric with sexual excitement which was driving him to continual masturbation, and that there were even sexual practices with children down in the basement, the sounds of which he found particularly unbearable. So he escaped from that hospital also. After a month or two he returned voluntarily to the first mental hospital and there, over a period of months, yet another entirely different kind of adjustment appeared. Gradually he began to complain that the atmosphere was delicious... everything smelled beautiful and, as a result, he could not stop breathing all the time. He kept breathing, breathing, and became terribly worried and depressed that he was breathing too much, that he was taking up too much of this delicious atmosphere, because he heard from the basement the cries of babies who were not getting enough oxygen as a result of his over-breathing.

This story illustrates the various qualities of the different worlds inside the internal mother's body. There is the rectum, a smelly and sadistic place; then the mother's vagina and womb, which is a very erotic place, and finally there is this idyllic place inside the chest, breast, or head. This illustrates the concreteness of these worlds in which a part of the personality can live. Experiences there cannot be communicated because the words have a different frame of reference — "air", for instance.

Melanie Klein's work, because of these transformed concepts, brought value into the centre of the problem. The elaboration of the experiences of different worlds and of a dream life as against waking life in the outside world; of unconscious phantasies as thinking processes where meaning is generated, particularly as one can study it in dream life; all brought emotionality also into a central position. Emotionality in this model of the mind could no longer be viewed as an archaic manifestation of primitive com-
munication processes; it had to be dealt with as the heart of the matter of meaning. But on the other hand the kind of meaning that was involved in Melanie Klein’s model seemed to be only the meaning of relationships; that is, her concept of splitting processes, being so bound to what could be visually represented in dreams, envisaged the personality as dividing into parts, each having a complete set of mental functions. Therefore in her work she was not in a position to investigate the separate Ego functions, but only the relations of the separate parts of the self to one another and to internal and external objects.

Conditions in which particular functions are disordered attracted Wilfred Bion, beginning with his investigation of schizophrenic patients and their difficulties in thinking. By tracing Melanie Klein’s concepts of splitting processes and projective identification not only to personality structures, but to separate Ego functions such as thinking, memory, attention, verbalization, action, judgment, he explored the possibility that the mind could attack itself in very minute ways. He adduced evidence of the splitting off of particular mental functions, as well as the projection of bits of the personality containing these isolated functions into other objects. Such objects of projective identification could then be experienced as able to perform these split-off functions, while what was left of the self could no longer perform them. And then, utilizing this concept of minute splitting and projective attacks on the self’s capacities, he began to investigate and elaborate a concept of thinking. What he did first was to separate thoughts, and the elaboration of thoughts, from thinking as the transformation of these thoughts. He then introduced a modification to Melanie Klein’s emphasis on the baby’s relationship to the breast and the mother as the great modulator of mental pain which enables the baby to proceed with its development.

Under Melanie Klein’s model, the development of the mind resembles the unfolding of a flower when it is adequately nourished and free from parasites or predators. Bion took quite a different view; namely that the development of the mind is a complicated process which has to be structured every step of the way and cannot therefore be compared with the biological forms of growth that are determined by genetic history and implemented by hormonal systems. He thought that mental development was in a sense autonomous; that the mind builds itself, bit by bit, by “digesting” experiences.

Bion took the view that the mother has to perform functions for the baby—mental functions—which the baby can then learn to perform for itself by internalizing her. He formulated it in terms of the baby’s relationship to the breast: essentially the baby, being in a state of confusion and having emotional experiences about which it cannot think, projects distressed parts of itself into the breast. The mother and her mind (experienced by the baby as her breast), has to perform the function of thinking for the baby. She returns to the baby those disturbed parts of itself in a state that enables thinking, and particularly dreaming, to come into existence. This he called alpha-function. He left it as an empty concept because he did not know how to fill it and he was not at all certain that it could be filled in by any substantial description.

This conception of the development of the baby’s capacity to think implied that it is not only dependent on the mother’s reverie to put order into chaotic experience, but also on her availability as an object for internalization. This has given new significance to the human infant’s protracted period of helplessness, so non-adapative on superficial consideration. By linking dependence with the experience of the absent object as the “first thought” Bion suggested a new, highly adaptive meaning for the long period of infantile helplessness, implying it is necessary for the internalization of the mother as a thinking object, not merely as a serving one. This gave new meaning to Freud’s speculation about Primary Narcissism and new importance to Melanie Klein’s dating of the onset of the depressive position.

His next move was to elaborate this scheme into a sort of Periodic Table, called the Grid, to try to describe how thoughts grow in complexity, abstraction and sophistication in the mind so that they can be used for manipulation in thinking. The basic level of thoughts proper in this Periodic Table (called Row C) is the one with which Melanie Klein’s work is concerned: that is, the level of dreams, dream thoughts and what Bion called myths.

In this Periodic Table of the growth of thoughts Bion also suggested that there may be a parallel growth in the mind of something that is in the service of misunderstanding of anti-thought, which is opposed to the discovery of truth, and which is essentially a system for generating lies: a kind of Negative Grid.

By juxtaposing the elaboration of truth and lies and attributing these functions to the good and bad breast (or Satanic part of the self) Bion gave a new meaning to what Freud had called the life and death instincts, and to what Melanie Klein had described in Envy and Gratitude as the confrontation of the good internal objects with the envious and destructive parts of the personality. They struggle for the mind of the child, much as Milton pictures Heaven and Pandemonium to be in conflict for domination of the mind of mankind.

Thus in Bion’s schema for describing thinking processes, parts of the personality that are bound in dependence, and potentially
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in a love relationship to the good object, are constantly being pulled away by lies to abandon their relationship to the truth. This is, then, the "Primal" source of mental illness. If, as he says, truth is the nourishment of the mind and lies are its poison, then the mind, given the truth, is able to grow and develop itself while, conversely, if poisoned by lies, then it withers into mental illness - which can be seen as a kind of death of the mind.

This juxtaposition of truth and lies also raises the level of concern with meaning to an aesthetic level. It helps to differentiate between different levels of relationships. These may reasonably be called the level of intimate relationships, the level of contractual relationships and the level of casual relationships. Mental health, and the development of the mind, derives from intimate relationships in which the primordial events are emotional experiences. Bion's work places emotion at the very heart of meaning. What he says in effect (and this is almost diametrically opposed to Freud's attitude towards emotion) is that the emotional experience of the intimate relationship has to be thought about and understood if the mind is to grow and develop. In a sense the emotion is the meaning of the experience and everything that is involved in the mind through alpha-function such as dreaming, verbalizing dreams, painting pictures, writing music, performing scientific functions - all of these are representations of the meaning. This is another way of saying that the meaning of our intimate relationships is our passions, and that understanding our passions has the function, primarily, of protecting these passions from being poisoned and eroded by the lies that are generated by the destructive parts of the personality. Mental health consists, essentially, in being able to preserve this area of passionate intimate relationships, the aesthetic level of experience, of which the emotion itself is the meaning.

To illustrate this and to show a minute fragment of complex dream thinking, how it takes forms and functions from the outside world, mixes them with words from the outside world and uses them to represent the meaning of emotional experiences, I shall describe three dreams from a patient whose dreams seem to be particularly thoughtful.

The patient, a woman in her early forties, reported that around age thirteen, from being a very mediocre student and a nobody, she had found herself propelled through her outgoing qualities into eventually becoming Head Girl. The transformation in her personality which had taken place between the ages of thirteen and sixteen was maintained through University and after. At the age of forty she suffered a sudden illness and underwent surgery. Although the surgery was said to have been very successful and the prognosis was good, she was thrown into deep reconsideration of her way of life. She felt that the illness had brought her to a crisis in her life which she could have faced years before. She then decided to come to this country for an analysis. Despite the extremely successful career, in which she had just been swept along, she had always nursed a longing to be a psychotherapist or a psychoanalyst. She entered into analysis not so much because of the depression, which she felt able to handle for herself, but because she had wanted to find out about this crisis in her life that she did not understand. After a few months' analysis, it began to become much clearer in relation to her developmental history - and at this time she produced three very interesting dreams.

The first dream took place the night after she had received a letter about some work she had done on an important political committee in her native country. She dreamed that the Chairman of her committee was inviting her, quite urgently, to come up on the roof of a tall building, handing her a Sten gun saying that she must come up and fight. But when she got up to the roof she saw another tall building, with people also on its roof, also armed with Sten Guns. Although she was not particularly frightened, when she noticed that among those other people were some of her friends, she absolutely refused, threw away the gun and climbed down. This was on a Friday. Over the weekend she had further dreams.

In the second dream she seemed to be in some sort of a cylindrical something or other that could have been a tent or a space ship. Anyway it seemed to be cylindrical and it seemed to have been so terrifically buffeted by the wind that its outer covering was in absolute shreds. But she noticed that there was also an inner covering which she could chip together to make the structure intact again.

The companion dream to this was that she went to a little cobbler's shop, a really old fashioned shop with everything all "higgledy piggledy", owned by a fairly middle-aged or old man. She had gone there to have a tiny little gramophone repaired: she was not quite sure if it was a gramophone, or a pair of scales such as one can see in shops. Anyway the old man seemed to take it to pieces and to take out some odd little things, like cartridge fuses, showed her how to chip these back into place, and gave her back the tiny little gramophone - "an old-fashioned gramophone", she said, "You know, like HMV" (His Master's Voice). She awoke feeling very contented.

Certain links between the dreams stand forth: the Sten gun, with its cartridges, links with the cartridges of the little fuse box; the blow of her illness, which is represented as the shredding caused by the blowing of the wind against the covering of the space ship that was just carrying her along, makes a further link with the word "clip", used in the sense of clipping together - but in another
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sense it is the "clip" holding the cartridges of the Sten gun — and the clip holding the cartridge fuses in place.

Taken in series the dreams show the crisis in her life to which she had been carried from the age of thirteen by the politically adaptive superficial social "covering" of her personality. The dream showed her the aggressiveness of her political behaviour, that is its aggressive meaning for herself. This had "blown her fuse" plummeting her into the depression and was also a climb down from her successful career. But at the same time she discovered, in the "old fashioned" and "higgledy-piggledy" process of analysis, a new constructive use for her mental capacity for thinking (fuses instead of bullets, clipping together instead of clips of intellectual ammunition) through recovery of dependence on her internal object (HIMV) to which she had not, presumably, listened since childhood. The link of thinking and judgment is implied in the evocation "little gramophone or shop scales".

I would agree with Bion that dreaming is thinking, that dream life can be viewed as a place to which we can go in our sleep, when we can turn our attention fully to this internal world. The creative process of dreaming generates the meaning that can then be deployed to life and relationships in the outside world. This means, in a sense, that all of our external relationships have a certain transference quality, that they derive meaning from what exists in our internal world. Sometimes they derive an adult meaning so that through our identification with our internal objects the adult part of our personality is able to meet other people on an adult level through communal phantasy, a kind of congruence of internal objects. It is this congruence of internal objects that brings people together and it is living in different worlds that drives them apart so that they cannot communicate with one another.

The outcome of Bion's modification of Klein's modification of Freud's model-of-the-mind, is a view of mental functions that gives emotionality its correct place. Our passions are the meaning of our intimate relations, and our other relationships at the contractual and casual levels really contribute nothing to our growth and development. It is only in our intimate relationships where our passions are engaged, that we can experience the conflict of emotional meaning which nourishes the growth of the mind. Dreams of the above sort demonstrate how our problems are spelled out and worked through and solved. In analysis what we are doing, more or less, is monitoring this internal world. We monitor it through the transference, and through the dreams, and through the play of children. In trying also to give a verbal form, a verbal representation, to the thoughts that are there in the dreams or in the child's play or in the transference reactions, we

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make them also available for more sophisticated forms of investigation, reality testing and logical consistency. But it is the poetry of the dream that catches and gives formal representation to the passions which are the meaning of our experience so that they may be operated upon by reason.

In tracing the implicit and explicit models-of-the-mind utilized in clinical work by these three masters, our central thesis has been that the three models of the mind, the neurophysiological one of Freud, the geographic-theological one of Klein and the epistemological one of Bion, can be seen to link with one another to form a continuous line of development. This line develops a vision of an apparatus for mental life which embraces meaning and emotion, where understanding is transformed into personality structure, allowing for a limitless area of discourse concerning an infinitely variable non-causal system with a potential capability for growth beyond the scope of Darwinian evolutionary modes.
Donald Meister (1924–2004) was a Kleinian psychoanalyst whose teachings made him influential in many countries. He became known for making childhood experiences with difficult childhood conditions such as emotional deprivation associated with the psychoanalytic theory of thinking created by Wilfred Bion.

Donald Meister

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- From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia