On the Systematic Study of Self-Deception

Harold N Boris

On the Systematic Study of Self-Deception

Harold N. Boris

e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

On the Systematic Study of Self-Deception

> What is the psychoactive ingredient in psychotherapy? What *did* Freud mean when he said, "Where id was, let ego be." Did he mean an undoing of all that knowledge repressed to enhance one's reputation in the eyes of the self? All those insights from which one had previously turned into outsights (in the manner of outtakes of a film)? Does psychoanalysis have something to do with learning the truth about one's self? About others? About reality, whatever that is, when it's at home?
>
> If so, what might the truth be—and better yet, who's truth might it be?
>
> This little essay does not attempt to deal with what is indubitably the life's blood of the psychoanalytic endeavor—that esoteric relationship that makes encounters or re-encounters with "truth" finally bearable; that special kind of care—well, love—in which one person can stand to stand another without having to do anything about him—which might itself turn out to be the psychoactive ingredient! I take this question up in the next essay, on "Treat or Treatment." In this one I'm after smaller game.

In defining psychoanalysis as "the systematic study of self-deceptions and their motivations," Heinz Hartmann set forth a criterion that encompasses certain psychoanalysts more surely and less irrelevantly than any theoretical or technical differences keep them apart. W. R. Bion (1966), who is one of those encompassed, speaks precisely to this point:

> I do not and never have been able to believe that what separates scientists are their differences in theory. I have not always felt "separated" from someone who differs from me in the theories he holds; that does not seem to afford a standard of measurement by which the gap can be assessed. Similarly, I have felt very far separated from some who, apparently, hold the same theories. Therefore, if the "gap" is to "be measured," it will have to be in some domain other than that of theory. [p. 578]

That domain, I suggest, is represented by the degree to which the analysts in question occupy themselves only with the truth. On the face of it, Hartmann and Bion look rather different. Hartmann is, first of all, a "Freudian," Bion a "Kleinian." As a Freudian, Hartmann has concerned himself largely with the degree to which ego functioning remains exempt from pressures of the impulses, while Bion has examined how pressures from the impulses influence ego functioning. But when Bion (1966) observes that "My suspicion of applied psychoanalysis, even if 'applied' to curing people, is that it is a method of bringing psycho-analysis under control and rendering it harmless to the Establishment" and that "as a rule, no analyst should permit himself to harbour desires; even the desire to cure is inimical to psycho-analytical development or the development of psycho-analysis, (pp. 575-576)" he joins Hartmann in viewing psychoanalysis as no more or less than the study of self-deceptions and their

motivations. Bion (1970) writes:

> The psychoanalyst's view is expressed by Doctor Johnson's letter to Bennet Laughton: "Whether to see life as it is will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable; that which may be derived from errour must be, like its original, fallacious and fugitive." [p. 7]

Ronald Laing too is encompassed within this domain, sharing with Bion and Hartmann and other such psychoanalytic theorists as Erik Erikson a preoccupation with the truth and truth's vicissitudes. Though this is evident in his previous works ("There is little conjunction of truth and social 'reality' "—*Politics of Experience* [1967]) the first knot in his *Knots* (1970) makes it unmistakable:

> They are playing a game. They are playing at not
>
> playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I
>
> shall break the rules and they will punish me.
>
> I must play their game, of not seeing I see the game. [p. 1]

It is interesting to speculate what, in addition to the training analysis, enables these men to focus so clearly on truth, to see "the game." About Erikson one can guess that his experience in studying other cultures, other historical times, and even, to a degree, animal ethology, augmented whatever grasp of relativity preceded these studies. Bion, it seems clear, learned enormously from the groups with which he worked. For groups, when one does not set out to acculturate them, set out to acculturate *one*. No doubt Laing's work with families served a similar function for him. Something then in the way of a cultural analysis seems a necessary adjunct to the personal analysis, because the personal analysis is a cultural artifact. This is perhaps especially true of the training analysis, which is to a degree done by and for the institutes which are, of course, social institutions responsible to the larger social order of its members. But one also has to take account of the work done by Bion and Laing with psychotic personalities.

Work with psychotics who, as Bion notes, count on engendering resistance in the analyst and who therefore unequivocally require of the analyst a painful struggle with the need for his own self-deceptions, seems also to have prepared Bion and Laing to do without the comfort of conventional wisdom. Envy, and envy's wish to denude and drain another of his most valued attributes, is a prepotent feature of all schizophrenics. If the analyst has deceptions to defend, envy will grind the analytic relationship into what Freud called analysis interminable and Bion calls chronic murder.

Whatever the side-effects, however, the end result is plain. These men have developed that special feeling for the relativity of truth, a feeling not possible for those who fail to see an alternative. Only when there are alternatives does skepticism ignite the depth-giving, binocular view of experience. Since everyone's self-deceptions are jeopardized by the knowledge that there are alternative possibilities, it behooves everyone to find others of like self-deceptive predispositions, so they can together constitute a universe. It is inevitable that men like Bion and Laing not only have to become social psychologists but also encounter difficulties with their nominal groups.

Not unexpectedly, this matter of truth engages Bion's and Laing's attentions. I have already quoted Laing's first knot. Bion discusses this issue in the chapter "The Mystic and The Group." He says that growth requires truth, but growth involves upheaval and psychological pain. The mystic is he who has access to new truths. Thus, the mystic is the source for both growth and pain. The group—or establishment—values the first and loathes the second, and wishes to use the mystic for the good in him, but annihilate the jeopardizing elements. The antiestablishment parts of the group proceed in an identical fashion.

That Laing has been embraced as a cult figure by the antiestablishment is a key to where he and Bion differ in how they use the truth. Much of what Laing has written is clearly inspired by D. W. Winnicott's formulations on the "false self." The "false self," according to Winnicott, is an entire organization of as-ifs, would-be's and ersatzes which cumulate into a masquerade that lives a lie in order to live. The measure of the falsity, however, is not relative to the "true" coinage of consensual "reality"; to the contrary, the similarity the false self has to the facsimile of the well-adjusted being is all too exact. The falsity is discernible only by penetrating to the vestigial truth of the deeply held inner experience, the psychic reality—what Laing, borrowing, calls Om, and Bion calls is-ness and at-one-ment and grid-classifies as "O."

Laing goes beyond Winnicott in his meticulous attention to the transpersonal aspects of truth and falsity. His special talent for observing the minutiae of the transactions and his great patience in pellucidly parsing out what transpires make him a superior guide.

But Laing, in contrast to Bion, is attracted more powerfully to revelation than to discovery; accordingly he looks where the light is brightest. This is a common flaw in the evangelist, and in Laing's case his writings relate to the dominant psychiatric culture as the Black Mass relates to the Sacred Mass. But the Lord's Prayer said backwards is still the Lord's Prayer; contrariety still celebrates what it does not wish to consecrate. Nevertheless,

inverting the order of things is a start, for that too is a way to see "the more that is there than meets the eye." And if Laing's revelations are approximations that are not quite yet truth, they are still helpful.

Knots, consisting only of observations, is free of the apocalyptic polemicizing found in Laing's previous books. Here his pleasure in startling us is confined to his intricate observations and a style curiously reminiscent of Eliot in "Ash Wednesday." The examples that *Knots* offers to the points in his previous books make it a useful adjunct to them, but the book also stands on its own.

In contrast, it might be said that Bion looks where it is least lighted and attempts a most difficult task. Disclaiming theorizing, Bion sets out to chart and codify what in this third book he calls the *Elements of Psychoanalysis*. His thesis is that psychoanalytic theory is a series of accretions which must be refitted to the observations from which the theory was derived. To do this, he uses a grid that has a classification of the development of psychologic activity on one axis, and a categorization of the activity on the other. This forges onto the grid everything from hallucinations to mathematical calculus. Once the elements are placed, the problem is understanding their meaning and function, and their transformations (the title of his fourth book) from grid category to grid category. "The grid is intended to remind the psycho-analyst… that what matters is both the communication and the use to which it is being put." If this sounds vexingly intricate, it is, especially as Bion constructs a language, sometimes to be free of associational distractions and sometimes to invoke other associations. Moreover his style, which begrudges every illustrative example that might deflect from the terse precision he is after, is as condensed as the mathematical formulas in which he yearns to convey his thinking.

Nevertheless, the result is elegant. Bion takes the familiar constituents of psychoanalytic theory and spins them as if in a kaleidoscope into forms and relationships that were seldom before evident. For example, the Oedipus complex, when searched for the meaning of the Sphinx and Tiresias, is seen to constitute a variation on a theme, other forms of which are manifest in the Eden and Babel myths; the common denominator is the problem of man's knowing God the (his) father. Clinically, the implications of this concordance range from thought disorders (one of Bion's particular interests), through stammering, to the function of telling lies.

Whereas Laing's fascination is with relationships, Bion's is with relationship. In his first book, *Experiences in Groups* (1961), Bion observes the behavior of groups, asking continually, as it were, what the members are trying to do. His sensitivity to relationship takes him well beyond the previously identified analogue, in which the group

leader stands for the parent. Not merely by noting the interchange of objects (of leader into parent) but by noting the nature of the activity, the verb, he is able to discern what happens in groups to a degree so extensive and illuminating that, had he written nothing more, he should have to be counted among the generative minds of this century.

In his series of books from *Learning from Experience* (1962) to *Transformations* (1965) Bion concerns himself with fantasy, and the disinclination to achieve reverie. Here too the verb is the guide to his inferences about people's use of objects. In *Transformations*, for example, he delineates ways of relating facts extrapolated not only from the clinically familiar alimentary and reproductive modes of experiencing, but also those ways which can be described in sensory, spatial, and finally nonsensory terms. His examination of projective identification and the transference—the two prime sorts of relationship—takes careful account of how these two conjunctions modify or are modified by the various experiential modalities.

The potential for failure and the methodology necessary for developing the alternative are what Bion turns to in his most recent book, *Attention and Interpretation* (1970). How, he asks, can the analyst perceive the patient's essential experience from within its particular formations and transformations, and then formulate this experience for the patient—and how can the nature of this activity be conceptualized? But before turning to these matters, it is necessary to set the stage. If for Bion and Laing psychoanalysis as science and as "therapy" is to see the truth, the whole truth, and to do nothing more nor less—neither cure nor treat, reform nor educate—with what should truth contend?

My own set of words for the main lines of both men's thought is that the great enemy of truth is hope. Hope engenders the fantasies that overwhelm truth and establish in its place self-deceptions. One's own self-deceptions depend, at least in part, on fostering self-deceptions in others. One does this by tempting their hopes. While man is not an island, he is by these requirements in fact a group creature.

In *Knots* (1970) Laing documents how entangled we become by failing to abandon the primal hope, which is expressed as follows:

> One is inside
>
> then outside what one has been inside
>
> One feels empty

because there is nothing inside oneself

One tries to get inside oneself

that inside of the outside

that one was once inside

once one tries to get oneself inside what

one is outside:

to eat or to be eaten

to have the outside inside and to be

inside the outside

But this is not enough. One is trying to get

the inside of what one is outside inside, and to

get inside the outside. But one does not get

inside the outside by getting the outside inside

for;

although one is full inside of the inside of the outside

one is on the outside of one's own inside

and by getting inside the outside

one remains empty because

while one is on the inside

even the inside of the outside is outside

and inside oneself there is still nothing

There has never been anything else

and there never will be [p. 83]

If the unsolvable paradox of the primal conflict lies in the simultaneously hoping to at once be contained by the "breast" (here as a symbol for the womb) and contain it, one must be reconciled to abandoning at least one of these hopes. Failure to find reconciliation leads one on a prolonged, perhaps lifelong quest, which eventually leads one no further than around another hapless circle, the symbol for which is the knot. Each journey around may seem to prescribe a different course over a cat's-cradle terrain marked by alternate desires. But no matter. Regardless of the path's configuration, "one goes round in a circle, in a whirl, going everywhere and getting nowhere" (Laing).

At the entrance to the Inferno, Dante puts the sign, "Who enter here, leave all hope behind." Indeed, there is no torment quite like hopelessness. But hopelessness marks the presence of thwarted hope, not hope's absence. Laing, in the epigraph of *Self and Others* (1971), quotes Confucius: "The way out is the door, why is it that no one will use this method?" Man is so reluctant to renounce hope and so eager to preserve it that he spurns its fulfillment lest he lose his hope.

Hope is for more and better; less than that induces despair. Despair induces suffering, and man's willingness to suffer—to experience and tolerate psychological pain, in Bion's phrase, and ontologic anxiety, in

Laing's—is limited. The psychotic individual, more than the rest of us, takes the precaution of preserving his hopes by losing his desires and by depriving the object of his desires of their desirability. "Some people exist," Bion writes, "who are so intolerant of pain and frustration (or in whom pain or frustration is so intolerable) that they feel the pain but will not suffer it and so cannot be said to discover it.... The patient who will not suffer pain fails to 'suffer' pleasure, and this denies the patient the encouragement he might otherwise receive from accidental or intrinsic relief" (1970, p. 9).

The temptations of pleasure, indeed of relief, lie beyond the door of which Laing speaks, and it is important to understand that they are kept there so they do not jeopardize hopes. Hopes, needing to be insulated, are best served when they are mediated by the group whose shared convictions protect hopes against erosion by pain or pleasure. Self-deceptions are susceptible to reinforcement or destruction by the examples of others. Groups barricade the members within from those "others" without. Man, unlike other animals, wars within the species to preserve the intactness of the boundary-preserving hopes. Truth is the first casualty of war, and war is therefore fought to preserve groups' deceptions.

Psychoanalysis takes place between people. The implications of Laing's thinking for the practice of psychoanalysis begin with his basic assertion that a man can only experience his experience of another man. The fidelity of that experience then has to be a function of the analyst's capacity to suffer the absence of hope. Collusion of hopes is the antithesis of psychoanalytic possibility:

> Jill is a distorting mirror to herself.
>
> Jill has to distort herself to appear undistorted
>
> to herself.

> To undistort herself, she finds Jack to distort her
>
> distorted image in his distorting mirror
>
> She hopes that his distortion of her distortion may
>
> undistort her image without her having to distort herself.
>
> [Laing 1970, p. 31]

Bion follows this line of thought in both subtle and far-reaching ways. He feels that the analyst cannot experience sensuous pleasures during the course of the hour or he fails to apprehend the ineffable presensuous pain analysands are preoccupied with. The analyst must school himself to be a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank photographic plate, a medium upon which the analysand may leave his imprint. This includes and even goes beyond the absence of personal and cultural countertransference. It means (Bion quoting Keats) a "negative capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." And, in Bion's phrase, without permitting oneself "the opacity of memory and desire." And in Freud's, "blinding oneself artificially."

> To attain to the state of mind essential for the practice of psychoanalysis I avoid any exercise of memory; I make no notes. When I am tempted to remember the events of any particular session I resist the temptation. If I find myself wandering mentally into the domain of memory I desist. In this my practice is at variance with the view that notes should be kept or that psycho-analysts should find some method by which they can record their sessions mechanically or should train themselves to have a good memory. If I find that I am without any clue to what the patient is doing and am tempted to feel that the secret lies hidden in something I have forgotten, I resist any impulse to remember what happened or how I interpreted what happened on some previous occasion. If I find that some half-memory is beginning to obtrude I resist its recall no matter how pressing or desirable its recall may seem to be. [Bion 1970, pp. 55-56]

Such a course, as Bion notes, is not possible for those who will not suffer and thus seek and serve that truth, our only consolation for the abnegation of hope. Is there consolation, then, in "mere white truth in simple nakedness" (Tennyson)? Perhaps none save that in Shakespeare's words, "Truth hath a quiet breast."

REFERENCES

Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences in Groups*. New York: Basic Books.

_____ (1962). *Learning from Experience*. New York: Basic Books.

_____ (1965). *Transformations*. New York: Basic Books.

_____ (1966). Review of Medical Orthodoxy and the Future of Psychoanalysis. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 47:575-579.

_____ (1970). *Attention and Interpretation*. New York: Basic Books.

Hartmann, H. (1959). Psychoanalysis as a scientific theory. In *Psychoanalysis, Scientific Method and Philosophy: A Symposium*, ed. S. Hook. New York: New York University Press.

Laing, R. D. (1967). *Politics of Experience*. New York: Pantheon.

_____ (1970). *Knots*. New York: Pantheon.

_____ (1971). *Self and Others*. New York: Pelican.