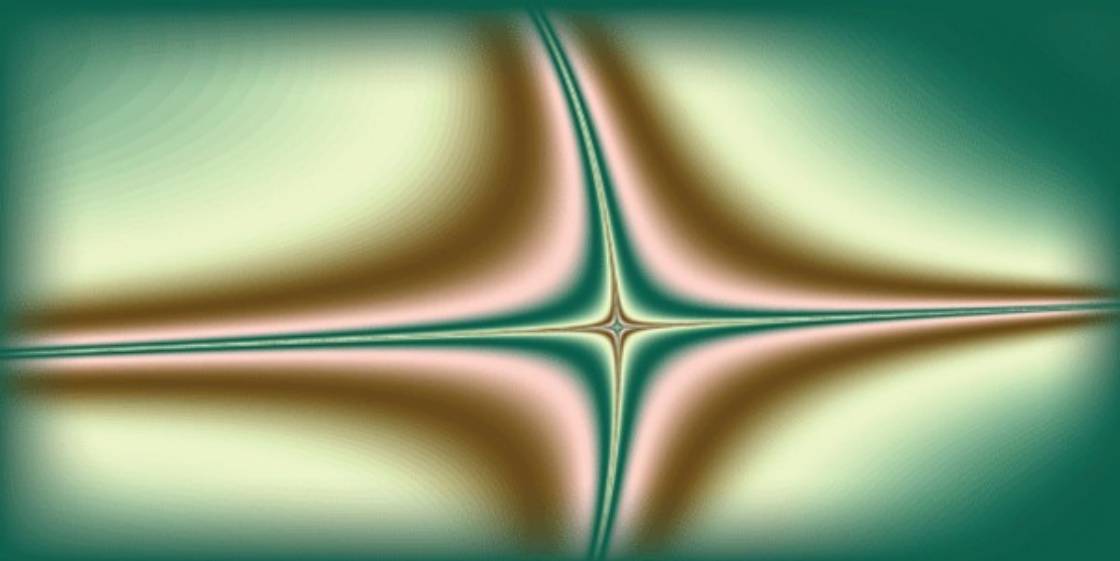


# Four

on adding up to a family



**Christopher Bollas**

Dimensions of Psychotherapy, Dimensions of Experience

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Psychotherapy, Dimensions  
of Experience**

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## About the Author

**Christopher Bollas** is a psychoanalyst in private practice in London, and a member of the Group of Independent Analysts of the British Psychoanalytical Society. He is author of *The Shadow of the Object* (1987), *Forces of Destiny* (1989), *Being a Character: Psychoanalysis and Self Experience* (1992), *Cracking Up: the Work of Unconscious Experience* (1995), *The Mystery of Things* (1999), several other books and numerous articles. He is widely held to be among the most creative and influential psychoanalytic writers of our day.

# Four: on adding up to a family

*Christopher Bollas*

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There is something to be said now and then for refusing to take anything for granted, a Cartesian act that suspends assumed knowledge.

For example, we have all had a father, and while we may imagine the way he appeared, or we may recall some particular moment with him, or think of him through the sound of his

name, or just sense him as part of ordinary unconscious contemplation, yet all these thinkings will be rendered under the generic concept of ‘father’. But what exactly is that, we may ask, what is a father? Simply because we have one, can remember moments with him and can name him does not suggest that we know what he is.

To some extent psychoanalysis over the last forty years, especially in the work of Jacques Lacan, has been asking that question. Part of the Lacanian answer is that ‘a father’ is

more a name than a person, associated with lawmaking, interdiction, and judgement. Lacan elaborates Freud's definition that earlier identified the father as the figure who would castrate the son if he were to defy him and as the figure who announces the presence of the sexual relation to the mother, which dispossesses the self of any illusion of divine, immaculate, conception.

Yet of course, each of us does have our own individual father—along with the functions held in his name—and it



is psychologically impossible not to mix—or mesh—our individual experience with the integrity of the object. Whatever ‘father’ is as a set of functions personified in this name, the father we actually have in our own life is a composition of many differing impressions derived from many differing types of experience: in reality and dream life.

We may also ask, what is a mother? —a puzzle that preoccupied Winnicott (1965) in some ways, although by concentrating on ‘the good enough

mother' he might appear to have over localised his question in a domestic soap opera. But he wrote about the 'holding environment', 'the facilitating environment' and about the intelligent care mothers provide when they assist their infant's 'going on being', and when he wrote about the 'essential aloneness' in all of us, a memory of sorts, of our transition from pre-birth to birth, and further back, from the inorganic to the organic; this essential aloneness seemed to form something of the core of the self's 'capacity to be alone' which was always paradoxically

dependent on the presence of the other. And it would always really be on the presence of the mother. He once wrote that ‘there is no such thing as a baby’ and then he paused long enough to create an aperture of surprise before he said ‘without a mother’. But he demonstrated this in his prose, because when writing about the self’s aloneness, capacity to be alone, its true self gestures, and its need for continuity in being, he was also always talking about the presence and the work of the other, of the mother who holds these elements of the infant’s life

in her psyche-soma. The mother is everywhere in Winnicott's writing. The challenge still remains, however, to think what we mean by the thought of a mother and the fact that we all had one and that we all refer to one actually rather disables us from considering the mother-idea.

To think this idea, we would have to fashion a potential space out of the work of constructed ignorance; we would have to assume that we know nothing of her and by not knowing what mother meant, we inhabit a

mental space that allows us to create her anew and thus to rethink the mother-idea.

John Rickman's (1950) seminal paper, 'The Factors of Numbers in Individual and Group Dynamics', set both Michael Balint and Winnicott to work on a psychoanalytic numerology. These days we may safely assume that the number one refers to the self alone, the number two refers to the infant-mother relation, and the number three refers to the self's relation to the mother and the father (see also

Poulton, Chapter 11 in this volume). Each of these numbers suggests in the minds of many psychoanalysts different psychologies: i.e. one-body psychology, two-body psychology, and three-body psychology. It could be argued that the clinical usefulness of this numerology is that in thinking about which number is prevailing at any one moment in time the psychoanalyst knows whether he is engaged with a one-body presentation, a two-body presentation, or a three-body presentation. In terms of a psychoanalytic numerology he is

working either with the number 1, the number 2, or the number 3.

Counting on this distinction means that the analyst presumably knows which sorts of interpretations to make. If the analysand, for example, is talking to the analyst about his wife it might be presumed that the analyst is listening to the patient's work with the number 2. In fact, as we know from object relations theory, the patient may in fact be talking to a part of himself by projection into the wife; the patient is working with the number 1, or more

aply, indicating that there is something about being one of 1 that he cannot bear well, so he resorts to creating a false second. Alternatively, a patient might be talking about a particular character dimension, such as his inability to think properly about what he regards as the more important issues of his life. In time, however, the analyst might discover that in fact this point of view is the death work of the other: that it reflects the projective identification of one of the parents. Thus what looks like the patient's



work in the area of the number 1 in fact is work with the number 2.

Assisting the psychoanalyst in the development of a psychoanalytic numerate *sense* will be the countertransference. The patient talking about this deficiency nonetheless calls upon the psychoanalyst's inner sense that what the patient assumes to be his own creations feels to be the nature of oppression. The patient's affective turmoil surrounding this topic, including his hesitations, his sudden

grammatical breakdowns, and so forth, seem to be the work of an ‘interject’: that is, an internal object that has been projected into the self by the other. The interject reflects the unconscious work of the other and sits inside the self subject to very little unconscious elaboration, as it never constituted the desire of the subject in the first place. After a while and shaped by the form of the analysand’s transference, the psychoanalyst can sense whether this object addressed by the patient is work in the area of 1 or 2.

Our numerology is further complicated by psychic striation. A segment of time within a session may express work in all three numbers at the same time, segregated only by psychic function, not by temporality. So a patient might be talking to a part of himself—1—while simultaneously undertaking a dialogue with the mother and also engaging in some conflict with the father. Which of these numbers, to ask a Freudian question, bears the highest ‘psychical value’? We might say that at any moment in time the entire numerology is present

and engaged in some form of work, but from moment to moment does one number intensify in relation to the others? A patient talking about a wife may one moment be discussing his own femininity, another moment his unconscious attitude toward his mother's disposition towards him, another moment the object of his father's desire. All three numbers, like all three structures, are always present, but it is a matter of which number is the most active in any moment in time.

It will be seen, naturally, that a psychoanalytic numerology bears no relation to mathematics proper.

For example, from a psychoanalytical mathematic,  $1 + 1 = 3$ . In psychic life there is one event which psychoanalysis must count in this way. For when the mother and the father copulate and the mother bears a child  $1 + 1 = 3$ : mother plus father create a baby. That is, if the family were counting, it would now add up to three. Matters are almost infinitely more complex than this, for as Lacan

and others have argued, at any sexual moment there are six people present: each partner's parents. So in this respect, intercourse counts as follows:  
 $1 + 1 = 6$ .

If the family were counting.

But how could we assign a numerate function to an immaterial entity? Let us say that I can count, my father can count, and the rest of the members of my family could count, but on what basis would we be able to say that the family-in-itself could count? Perhaps we mean that we could

assemble the family and then ask them to count together out loud all at once. But I have just said in the addition  $1 + 1 = 3$  that the family is counting and we know at that point that the infant cannot count. And if the family does not exist until the number 4—which is what I shall be shortly arguing—then how could we say that the family is counting when in fact it is not yet there in a position to count?

This is quite a problem.

I shall hedge by saying ‘if’ the family could count, it would make the

above addition, but presuming *psychic numeracy*, any couple could contain the number 4 within them, and it would be from this numerate function that ‘the family’—as an internal object—could make the addition.

We know, for example, that a couple on the verge of having their first child are beginning to assemble in their respective minds what it means to be *forming a family*. It takes many forms. The couple search for the child’s name. They outfit the baby’s room and buy its first objects. In many



countries they sign it up for a private school before its birth. They arrange in some way for visits to come of differing members of their respective families of origin and they shall receive gifts from family and friends in anticipation of the infant's birth. In the system unconscious much more work is taking place than this as the partners find thing-presentations gathering in the unconscious around the number 4. They also begin a very long and complicated effort to construct a shared number 4, and in psychoanalytic numerology this would

be a case where  $1 + 1$  cannot = 4 (it could only establish the number 2), but bearing in mind that in intercourse we said that six people were present, is this a case of  $1 + 1$  equalling 6: one partner plus two parents and another partner plus two parents? But that does not add up to 4, it is 6? All along, the idea of there being four people present is based on the number 1 thinking this. That is, in the psyche of one individual participant in intercourse there are four objects present: the self, the sexual other, and the self's parents: i.e. 4. But if we think of this from the future

family point of view—that is from the future number 4 back to this 1 + 1, then as all members must count ... as is the case with family life, then we must include both participants' parental couples of origin, in which case there are at least six objects in some form of intercourse. (It will be obvious to some that I am also leaving out other objects that would make for a higher number, the most important being any couple's imaginary or actual children who are also part of the primal scene.)

From a psychoanalytic perspective we may find a psychic numerology that not only does not add up, but multiplies in difficulty each time one attempts such adding up.

We can see that the problem with the above is the fecund effect of sexuality upon psychic numeracy, as  $1 + 1$  in the sexual addition does not add up to 2, but actually makes 3 and creates the possibility for 4.

To come more directly to the point —and I hope in the nick of time as I am very very far from the world of

mathematics—I shall be counting on the number 4 to count for the family. If 1 stands for the self, if 2 stands for self and other, if 3 stands for the after-effects of sexual intercourse, then 4 stands for the family.

But wouldn't 3 be the family? And isn't it an odd way to describe the birth of a child as 'the after-effects of intercourse'?

When a couple copulate and the after-effect is a child we cannot assume there is the presence of a family. For the family to 'arrive',

further addition is necessary. There are many more contributing elements to the family than simply the arrival of the prospective family members.

For example, to take the failure to count to 4, Isobel and James have intercourse and the after-effect is Jill. Isobel never loved James and after her birth Jill is given up for adoption. Isobel gave James his marching orders before the birth of Jill, and although the child was born, the family was not.

Harry and Jessica are childhood sweethearts having grown up on the

same street only yards from one another. Harry's father committed suicide when he was five and his mother—left with three young children—became severely depressed, took to drinking spirits, and by Harry's age 9 she was hospitalized for the first of many admissions. Harry was looked after by his mother's brother, but his uncle hated him and subjected him to severe beatings until he reached mid-adolescence. Jessica's mother had been married twice before and had six children before Jessica was born. A born-again Christian she was

extremely exacting and devout in a misguided way, demanding that the children 'do without'. When Jessica was eleven the mother began to have visions of Jesus visiting the home and one day heard him say that she must strip naked and walk the middle lane of the street as a form of prayer for him to come to her. This she did although she was hit by a car and severely disabled, a shock to her life that she met with stony silence and a refusal to do anything but weave quilts for a Christian Aid store in the small town where they lived. Harry and



Jessica seemed to constantly run across one another during these years. They didn't so much play together as they spent blank time in one another's presence. When Harry's uncle ran off and Harry's mother was put into care, Harry dropped out of high school and lived in another neighbour's garage. Jessica helped him get some of the things he needed and one day that seemed to be Jessica and they fell deeply in love when they were both seventeen. They moved into a large Chevrolet Impala where they slept, had meals together (from the local fast

food merchants) and tried to put a life together. They eventually moved from their 'home' town and travelled to California where each took up differing jobs, although problems began to arise in their relationships. They seemed to have little ability to tolerate the other's imperfections, such as they were, and they could not talk it through. Both had psychotic episodes, one turned to crack cocaine, and although they lived together, for all intents and purposes they were no longer a couple. They *had* talked about having a family. It *had* served as an

important *object* of conversation, but to the counsellor who eventually saw them—in their late twenties—it was very clear that the fourth object in this was an aspiration considered from  $-1$ .

Minus-1 I shall use in this situation to identify a position within psychoanalytic numerology that would follow Bion's (1962) concept of  $-K$ . Where  $K$  stands for knowledge,  $-K$  would therefore stand for a mental state organised to rid the self of what it knows. Anyone counting on his future from  $-1$  will only add to further losses.

$-1 + -1 = -2$ . The more that Harry and Jessica talked about their life and their future the more they added to their own subtraction. In five years they were so full of psychic losses, each attempted addition only adding to their woes, that they had accumulated a numeric imbalance. There were too many losses. They had to give up on each other—as Harry was to say ‘we must cut our losses’—in order to start again.

We may conjecture that the concept of  $-1$  in psychic numeracy identifies a

position in which any self is less than 1. To be less than 1—or to use Bret Ellis’s title even *Less than Zero* (1985)—is to have so many parts of the self missing that the self does not add up. In this case, it does not add up to 1. Such is the fate of the psychotic individual and in thinking of Harry and Jessica, both of whom were parented by psychotic parents, and each of whom was divested of important parts of the self by the work of their own psychotic methods, we may see how psychic losses can lead to a form of adding up that only makes

further losses inevitable. For if the mind cannot add in the first place, then any attempted addition will ultimately subtract from the solution, and the self will be left with a never-ending loss.

We could think of many situations in which intercourse and the aftereffects do not create a family, just as we can think of many situations in which a couple thinking of a family are not actually counting up to 4.

To count to 4 in psychoanalysis, one must make the following addition. After  $1 + 1 = 3$ , there is further

addition. Out of these three people another object is formed. It is the first interpersonally constructed vital shared object that serves the function of opening lines of communication between its participants in order that the family may be created. If one partner in the couple cannot count to 4, then even if the other partner can, and even if they go on to have many children, we can say that they have not been able to construct the fourth object: they will not, then, have become a family.

Another way of considering this numerate distinction—between 3 and 4—is that 3 counts for the family of origin and 4 for the family of one’s own creation. Each of us is an after-effect of  $1 + 1$  and we are part of 3 that we take to be a family of origin, but as I shall argue shortly, we may be overly presumptuous to argue that this group of three is in fact a family. A child born as a result of the mother’s rape by a stranger is part of 3, but not part of a family of origin.



Family work, whether in family therapy, in group therapy with couples, or even in individual psychoanalysis with the patient's transference of the family reveals deeply painful failures of groups of people who cannot count to 4. Of course, with a Harry and a Jessica—as with many psychotic couples—it is very clear that no family can be created and we bear witness to a different type of pain, to the awful realisation that psychosis only subtracts from life. They might try false additions, but in time their losses

will show up on some psychic accounts sheet.

But the more common anguish psychotherapists face is the group of three or four or six or eight who have in one way or another struggled mightily to form a family and have failed.

Jim is in analysis and he has almost no memories before the age of thirteen. He is thoughtful and relatively insightful and his initial seeming amnesia was puzzling. He was not at a loss for trying to tell

himself about his mother, his father, and his three sisters in my presence. He could do this. But he was describing individuals who were part of a group but who had never formed a family. So ‘family memories’ were, paradoxically enough, recollections of the group, but not remembrances of the family.

The group of people brought together through the after-effects of intercourse are not the same as a family.

So what then *is* a family? What is that additional integer that makes 3 into 4? I answer solipsistically. It is the number 4 that has already added itself up.

It is the integer that arrives only when the group has *created* the space for the fourth object to show up, a psychic object that serves the thing-presentation called ‘my family’ that will, in itself, act as a form of intelligence in the unconscious communications between the members of the group.

A family, then, is a special evolution in the history of the unconscious.

Indeed the history of the word ‘family’ reflects this evolution. According to the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins* the word for family is from the Latin *famulus* which meant servant. From this was derived *familia* which referred only to the domestic servants in a household and their employers. It was introduced into English in its original Latin sense and so it survived until the end of the

eighteenth century, but by the seventeenth century it widened in its usage to mean the whole household. Finally it narrowed to ‘group of familiar people.’

So we come to *familiar*. Bloomsbury writes that familiar originally meant ‘of the family’ and intriguingly its most common usage referred to a familiar enemy or familiar foe, that is, an enemy within one’s own household or family. It then broadened to mean ‘intimately associated’ and

finally to ‘well-known from constant association’ (218).

From this etymology we can see a progression: from a collection of people who form a group, to a group of people who become ‘intimately associated’ with one another: that is, who become familiar with one another. An intermediate meaning seems to have been—familiar enemy—an enemy within the group. (We may keep this as a question. Does the fourth object have something to do with facing an enemy in a group, an

encounter which *adds* to one's psychic economy?)

The Oxford English Dictionary's fifth definition of family is 'the group of people consisting of one set of parents and their children, whether living together or not; any group of people connected by blood or other relationship' (913). If the *blood* connection is intrinsic to the creation of family we see here the after-effects of sexuality. A family will be created out of the blood link between mother and father, giving rise to the potency



of the statement ‘he or she is blood’, meaning in contemporary usage: family. The OED also informs us that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England there was a sect called ‘Family of Love’ which had many followers—called ‘familists’—who ‘stressed the importance of love and held that absolute obedience was due to all governments’ (913).

Interesting, isn’t it?

Let us imagine that stressing love was a key psychic act in the formation of a family *in order to* establish a type

of mentality that could process conflict with one's family enemies. For the OED then provides us with the following meanings:

*happy families, family* see HAPPY a.  
*Holy Family*: see HOLY a. **in a family way** in a domestic manner; informally, **in the family way** *colloq.* pregnant, of (good family) descended from noble or worthy ancestors. *start a family*: see START v! **the family** *slang* the criminal community.

(OED 913)

The OED gives us a kind of free association which is of use to us. In the effort to solve the problem of rivalry within the household, then especially

within the family proper, love is stressed in order to create a good family.

And the Mafia family, the criminal community? Here then we have family not as an act of love, as such, but bonded together by *blood*. He is 'blood'. Indeed the Mafia family engages in war with other families and directs hate existent within its own household into the outside world. Under no circumstances must anyone within the family betray the blood relation that forms the group. In the

‘happy family’ the law is that one must *love* one another and a high ideal—the holy family—is invoked as an exemplar of sacrificial love that forms a divine family.

We come to a crossroads in family life. One group can only go so far as blood relations, admittedly a step on the road to forming a family. But the next step is to find in the concept of ‘love within the family’ a principle that will confront enemies within the group in a way that does not

necessarily lead to projecting the murderousness outside the group.

The OED tells us that *familiar* also means ‘informal, unceremonious’ and ‘known from long or close association, recognised by memory’ (913). So a family is a group who become intimate and informal and whose long associations together are ‘recognised by memory’. That’s an interesting way to word it. But let us imagine that memory now seems to do the recognising—memory as a slightly split off part of the self, so that it

seems to recognise the family, while the self is a bit behind.

This would allow us to insert the Freudian concept of the unconscious as memory. So our unconscious life recognises family even if we do not quite do so in ourselves. Perhaps this is why Freud played on the German word *unheimlich* which means both familiar and uncanny. In his essay on the uncanny, Freud (1919) found that the uncanny is actually the familiar. But it is the self's arrival in a situation

which is unconsciously known without being consciously comprehended.

When we think, then, of the group's construction of the number 4, we may come to an intermediate conclusion (a subtotal), that a group of people come together, face the common enemies intrinsic to group life by belief in the power of love as a form of law, which intermixes with the everydayness of this group to effect a type of informal intimacy with one another. This informal intimacy—the many shared moments together—evolves out of this

law of love and becomes a type of psychic structure that serves as the group's memory. A set is established in the system unconscious, in other words, that we could condense into the following word-cluster: group-sex-blood-rivalry-love-law-informality-intimacy-memory.

‘Time and intercourse have made us familiar’ wrote Samuel Johnson (OED 913). In the Freudian order, we should have it in reverse: sex and time have made a group familiar. The after-effects of sexuality: blood, rivalry,



love-law, intimacy, and the structure is in place.

Of course the meaning of this cluster has behind its evolution the entire dramaturgy of the family imagined in Aeschlyus and Sophocles and before that, in the imagining of the Old Testament. There one finds the group seeking to propagate itself yet torn by envy, rivalry, and the forces of the death instinct, seeking to impose a new law—the law of love—that would serve as the eroticism of the group as a whole.

Love-law is a vital part of the fourth object. The law that says ‘thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself’ is an edict issued a very long time ago which we may now look back upon as part of the history of the unconscious, an early stage in the formation of what we know as family.

Part of the structure of these dramas — whether Old Testament, Greek, or, looking ahead a bit, Shakespearean— is the decisive moment, whether it is a follower deciding to sacrifice his son to his God, whether it is a father

deciding between his daughter's survival and his duty as King, or even whether it is the decision to travel to a city on a certain day that one's father takes to the road. This structure is intrinsic to the formation of family, even if these examples seem so tragic and fated. We may say the structure is *the moment of decision* when the self must choose between two opposing elements, when in the extreme the self is torn between deep loyalties; in the terms of this essay, this would be the moment when two people come together to *decide* to form a family.

Why should this decision seem so ominous?

We are arguing that the formation of a family means to create a group that will unleash powerful internal forces that may tear it apart, unless a powerful law—the law of love—can impose itself sufficiently upon the group to see it safely through to the development of a new psychic structure, a memory-set, composed of good enough lived experience together.

But each couple presuming to form its own family does so in unconscious murder of the families of origin: blood is on the hands of the new couple. Out of this ordinary matricide and patricide, the new children assume themselves to sleep in the space of propagation; not the space of copulation, but the place from which the new family is to emerge and the symbolic fact of this murder is of course ritualised in the differing marital ceremonies, with the parents giving away the children to one another. The unconscious sense in

each couple that in marrying they have murdered their parents is, of course, yet another of the many after-effects of the Oedipus complex.

But it is merely a foretaste of many things to come. For this *decisive moment*, when each partner must make an impossible choice—one that results in the death of a loved object—is only the first of many murders at the crossroads. Each partner brings with him and with her the myths, legends, historical facts, laws, visions, and aesthetic drives of the family of origin.

Some of these elements will be conscious and can be discussed, but all of them will also be deeply rooted in the self's unconscious life, forming a thing-presentation that we would see as the self's unconscious relation to its fourth object. (From this point forward for a while I shall assume that this object has been constituted within the self and is there ready for marriage.)

Each partner in the couple brings, then, entirely differing sets of elements constituting fourth objects within. They feel that in marrying they are

killing the family of origin. In fact, this murdering as it were is a deeply essential act of destruction, as both participants dismantle prior fourth object structures in order to recombine a new fourth object, a psychic intercourse between family elements that is essential to fourth object reconstruction.

The homicidal element, then, that pervades the notion of family life is not simply the effort of the group to process rivalries emerging from its own actual formation, it is a psychic



after-effect of the decision to mate. This is the sexuality of homicide-propagation, of killing in order to give birth. As such, family life begins in the unconscious with a primitive homicide and a question is, 'can the couple survive what it has done?' In the weeks and months following the marriage there will be many crossroads. Where to live? In what type of house or flat? Furnished with what sorts of furniture? Decorated in what manner? Bathroom habits in what manner? Breakfasting in what way? Communicating during the day

over what in what style? Arranging the meal and dining in what idiom? And sexual life and the erotic in what differing elaborations? And the children that are coming: what names, what schools, what ideals, what visions, what ...? These are only a few of the many crossings of the new oedipal couple on the road to Thebes.

Each such unconscious negotiation remembers the murder of the families of origin. And yet they are memories of that time, memories laid down as unconscious structures. So how do

these structures deal with one another?  
Can there be a reintroduction of the families of origin, an after-copulation intercourse in which the two sets of fourth objects negotiate their new structures?

*Husband:* I like coffee first thing in the morning.

*Wife:* I like tea.

*Husband:* Well ... it's a bit much to make both at the same time ... we are too busy.

*Wife:* I agree. Why don't you try tea for a while.

*Husband:* Okay, no big deal.

In a year the husband has not only made the transition to tea, but now he prefers tea. In the years to come, when he is having breakfast with his sons and daughters, they will all be drinking tea.

This is no big deal, fortunately. Hardly the sort of thing to work its way into Sophocles or Shakespeare.

Yet at this crossroads the husband's and wife's fourth objects have met and one element in one set is killed off. The husband, whose father and mother and brothers and sisters always had

coffee in the morning, abandons this practice. The wife, in turn—in unknowing turn—agrees to his request that the toothbrushes be put in a glass next to the basin, brushes facing up. The wife has always had her toothbrush in a fitted slot in a rectangular container, she thinks of this as no big deal and soon she is no longer thinking consciously about this so when the children come along, she buys them a mug for their toothbrushes.

In countless acts of unconscious murder, each partner allows elements of his or her fourth object to be killed. Such sacrificial murder allows the self to *lose the familiar*. In time, the family of origin becomes a *holy family*, a set of memories of the way things were. The holy family—presided over by the holy ghost—is the original fourth object now simply a principle presiding over memories. What is now just memory *was* actually a deep unconscious structure, but the murderous work of marriage has resulted in a de-structuring of some

aspects of the original fourth object and its restructuring through the many years of its rebuilding. Of course, we know that nothing is lost on the system unconscious and the original fourth object is not abandoned as a thing-in-itself. But its status has been removed. From the only fourth object, from the primary fourth object, it has been displaced. It has been sent to a holy place in the mind. After its murder, which is associated with sacrificial necessity, it goes to mental heaven where the self feels that it shall forgive the self its murderousness.

Of course, the transition any two people face who make the momentous decision to marry is hazardous in the extreme. It is the most dangerous decision of a lifetime. For years and years both partners will be killing off each other's inner psychic structures in an act of rebuilding constituted out of sexual lust and love. For it shall be this primitive love between the two that becomes its own law, originally a narcissistic law, eventually transfiguring into a different type of law. Sex-love will metamorphose to love-law as the couple survive their



mutual destructions and find that self-sacrifice is a part of human intimacy, from which a higher principle derives and serves the couple as they proceed to bring forth children who shall be more primitive even than the sex-couple were and who will need 'guidance' from the parents, love guidance. The parents will convey the law of the family: that the love of family, or the family as love, must preside over any individual claimant's private rights to vengeance, or over any child's horror over the arrival of a newborn child.

If the parents have successfully formed their own new fourth objects, a matrix composed in the dialectic of difference, then they will have a psychic structure in place that can be communicated to the children. This object, which we may now term ‘the family’, is of course separately held in each person. Marital therapy alone illuminates how this object differs as a psychic structure within each partner —this object recognises that—indeed, the fourth object is a psychic space that opens out to the illusion that it is a shared internal object, one always

open to dialectics of difference, one operating according to an essential ruthlessness that nonetheless is not destructive of the rights of the other. The other is killed but the self accepts its own killing in that kind of essential ruthlessness of which Winnicott (1969) writes in his seminal essay 'The Use of an Object'. The fourth object is a principle of ruthless creativity in which the self seeks the unconscious communications of all the others in the group who are unconsciously negotiating in this field.

A family of five people chatting just  
before dinner:

*Father:* So ... ah ... John (15) are you  
playing football tomorrow?

*John:* Yeh, can you come?

*Father:* Ah ... I ...

*Mary (8):* Mom, I thought we were all going  
to the sea?

*Mother:* ... well ... John ... what time is the  
match?

*Peter (2):* What's a match?

*John:* It's football, Peter, remember ... I think  
it's at 1 or 2 or something.

*Peter:* Play? play football?

*Father:* That would split the day in two.

*Mother:* Well ... what's the weather like  
tomorrow?

*Mary:* I think it's fine ... I don't know ... can Sue-Ellen come to the sea too?

*Peter:* Ellen, Ellen, Ellen, Ellen ... yeah!

*Father:* What should we do (thinking out loud).

*Mother:* How about the sea on Sunday?

*John:* That would be good for me.

*Mary:* Oh no, Mom, I told Sue-Ellen Saturday!

*Mom:* You told her already?

*Mary:* Well ... I thought you said ...

*Father:* Well ... let's call her mother and ask if she can come on Sunday and if she can't then ... what's up for next weekend?

[and so it goes].

The family is engaged in trying to solve a simple spatial-temporal problem. All the members are taking part although with differing points of view and with unspoken conscious ideas not to mention countless unconscious 'disseminates'<sup>3</sup> evoked by this moment in time. The family does not break down into malignant discord because each member is now functioning not simply as a member of the group, although that is true, but each is involved in object relations structured by the fourth object.

Yet if Peter is clearly clueless about this object and Mary and John are still involved in their individual formations of it, how could we say that the family is functioning according to this psychic structure?

For a very long time, in the evolution at first of the new couple, and then for a long time during the psychic formations of the growing children, this object exists in primitive form as a law: the love-law. Because we love each other, this law goes, we get along. It does not mandate that we

must get along. That would be the law of the group, but not the law of the family. The family law asserts 'blood' or its psychic equivalent, to form a more primitive assertion: as blood has brought us together, so we love each other, and this love asserts its law over all of us. It is the law that derives out of the oedipal conflict, out of a set of murders that leaves each participant with blood on their hands, and blood-connected by intercourse.

It is an extremely primitive form of transitional order. But it often works.



In the domestic scene portrayed above, the family members know in differing ways that this law prevails. Even if one of the children had run off in tears to a room and refused to go along with the family's decision, it would not have destroyed the fourth object, a principle that governs forms of unconscious communication between the members.

We can see it in the above, although only in a glimpse: the fourth object is that psychic structure that receives and transmits at the level of unconscious

communication the differing unconscious interests of members of the family group. It is governed by a primitive law of love that serves to stave off primitive forms of hate in the children, long enough usually for the children to mature and then cultivate this inner structure that operates less primitively. In time the children will feel the inner benefit of such openness. They will derive inner nourishment from this object that has survived personal distress within the group—especially moments of intense hate towards one or another of the other

members of the group—and come to consciously appreciate the unconscious benefit of ‘knowing’ how to be open to the dialectics of difference in the group.

Of course, in the modern world we know that many families have other qualifying elements that further complicate matters. Second and third marriages often bring ready-made families or sets of previous families into a ‘new family’; much depends on the previous marriages and the status of the fourth object formation in the

children. If they have fourth object structures forming within them, then they have lived according to a law—not according to an affect—that suggests to them that love should prevail and this edict—the law of the family and the family as law—helps new members of prior families to ‘mesh’ together. Murder has always been a feature of marriage. The fact that former spouses may be active targets of hostility on the part of one or both members of the new family does not help, but equally it is not alien to

the overall act of murder that constitutes family life.

Implicit in the fourth object is its own eventual structural destruction. This knowledge also curiously informs its character as one knows that, however essential it is to one's self, eventually it will be displaced and the self will go on either to new fourth-object relations—if we refer now to the adolescent looking to his future—or the self will know that its own status as fourth-object progenitor will be eradicated by the new generation's

homicide and of course, and most tellingly, by death itself.

Indeed families know this, don't they? They meet at a generational intersection. The parents are walking down the hill toward their graves and the children are walking up the hill to the future crests of their life. They pass each other again and again on this hill, and repetition of this family hike increasingly informs the fourth object in each that something generationally prescient exists within and between them and in turn within and between

themselves and all the other families who have lived in the hundreds of generations that preceded them. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Old Testament* give ordinary humans incredibly long lives, so that one generation seems to live many generations, reaching far into the future, rather capturing ironically enough, the simple place of the single family, passing along a common route on the journey of man and woman kind.

So what makes up the number 4?  
We have played with the idea of a psychic numeracy available for psychoanalysts to count as they add things up when considering their patients or try to account for where they are. We have argued that  $1 + 1 = 3$ , but that an additional integer is needed to create 4. We have been intentionally illogical and maintained that the additional integer is supplied by the number when it arrives. We may now argue that the additional integer is 'love-law'. Only when the group of 3, the after-effects of



sexuality, have added a primitive element, is the fourth object now to be counted.

I have discussed in another essay the number 5 (Bollas 1999), which I use for the group.

It may seem odd that it is a ‘higher’ number, especially as I have already said that 3 is a group. I shall have to qualify this. Three is only ever the after-effects of intercourse. Three people may be present, but in fact they are lost in their collectivity until and/or unless they become a family. But

members of every family will find that, even after they have counted to 4, the addition of a new psychic number destroys the promise of the number 4 as a psychically efficacious container. For the additional integer I believe stands for the self inside the social group which obeys the laws of psychosis, not the love-law, and it is here that the self's attachment to the family is destroyed.

But let us remind ourselves of what we mean by destruction in psychoanalysis. All of the integers

remain in the unconscious, even if further additions destroy them. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 survive any combinations that would seem to add up to more. When the child goes off to school for the first time and discovers that he is inside a group that is not his family, that does not know the ways of his family, he is psychically shattered. As Bion teaches us, this group life follows basic laws operating along a psychotic axis, one certainly not processed by any self through his family. But the fecund life of any self's imaginary is *also* more than the fourth object can bear. As the

child discovers he has a mind, as he invents many mothers and fathers, he is no longer held within the comforting illusion that he is being looked after by his family of origin. Fortunately, however, we are not referring to figures, but to their functions. By the time the child is four or five he or she will have begun the structure that is the fourth object, that will communicate and receive communications made for family life. The fifth object will break the hegemony of this structure as a promise of all future mixtures of

people: the illusion of family as the only assembly will be dispelled. But the structure and its elements will remain and it shall be available for the self in the years to come as it processes the generational act of family life.

The fifth object—that is specifically life in the group—is 4 + 1, 4 plus that which is outside the family, the group within which one takes part. This is a very harrowing experience for all people and it is common enough for individuals to begin a secret

subtraction when they count to 5. They may pair up and form themselves up with another to complete a young couple: hence  $5 - 3 = 2$ , ridding the self even of the third object, to resume life in the more comforting arms of the dyad. They may even retreat into 1, seeking refuge in daydreaming or the like. Fortunately most keep on counting and though each new psychic integer destroys the former higher addition, and eradicates the seeming sanctity of its former structure(s), new structures, new numbers, also cure the self of the very damage inflicted. 6 is

the self's addition of his or her place in a 'universal order' when the self can find in universal assumptions and laws of civilisation a new unconscious set that indeed helps the self to survive difficulties in all the prior combinations, but especially when dealing with the madness of the group. During the Holocaust, when many lost their belief in man, others drew strength from the sixth object, from memory of and relation to the aims and aspirations of the human order—or man's humanity to man. At any one moment in time, the group (5), may

lose grasp of 6. The Nazis lost an integer. But in such moments our memory of 6—perhaps useless as an unconscious factor in the life of society—is crucial to our own psychic survival.

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[3] To coin a word, a 'disseminate' is a single particle of a dissemination. It would be a 'loose thread' from a former fabric, now constituting part of the self's disseminations of all prior psychic intensities that form an infinite 'meshwork' (cf. Freud) in the system unconscious. A disseminate is any particle out of the dissemination of mental contents that is evoked by any new psychic event and attaches itself to it.

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