

The Paradoxes of Wilfred Bion'S Convivial Union (♀♂) with Regard to Complex Thought

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Abstract

This work deals with the relationship between psychoanalysis and complexity theory, an epistemological horizon which has been developing in the last few decades. The author believes that the required theoretical component should be found in the study of the logic underlying the psychoanalytic field of study. In this way the non-linear, autopoietic and hologrammatic concepts of the analytic field, which must be considered to fully understand the real nature of the studied phenomena, can be identified. Psychoanalysis can thus contribute to the theory of complexity suggesting new meaningful developments. Psychoanalysis and complexity can thus enter into a convivial relationship which fuels both disciplines.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Complexity theory



Vincolo d'unione, Maurits Cornelis Escher, 1956

*So much the rather thou Celestial light
Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers irradiate.
J.Milton, Paradise Lost*

I have chosen to speak about Bion's theories instead of those of Mitchell, Aron, Sullivan, Benjamin, Goldner, Harris and Hoffman or even the more recent of Bromberg or other authors, all rightfully considered relational psychoanalysts, because I consider him, thanks to his notion of Container-Contained (♀♂), a more relevant promoter of the complex relational model than those authors; besides, I think that his theory can be combined with that of the analytical field and therefore, he is bearer of a deep epistemological revolution which is now necessary.

*This is already the future in the present.
A time when psychoanalytic thought
enters into resonance with the discoveries of science,
with the words of the poets, with the experiences of the mystics.
De Toffoli*

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The theories of the post-bionian analytical field and the relational one need a theoretical apparatus completely different from that which supports the linear determinism of traditional science; derived from complex theory; and capable of identifying the real nature of the analytical field.¹

According to this model, the analyst sees in the analytic pair not two separated subjects interacting, but a group. Every "fact" of analysis is felt as unconsciously co-created, as a group or field phenomenon. It is impossible to adopt a freely fluctuating mental focus, without those theoretical constructs which give a meaning to what analysts listen to; during a session. The mind is able to construct a meaning even when and just because it analyses; it looks for meanings and data according to patterns which have already been implemented by experience and theory. Therefore, theory, too, contributes from the start to the building of knowledge.²

The recursive loop between observation and theory has neither a point of origin nor of conclusion. We need a theoretical apparatus in any research, as the truth is quite often so improbable that it requires not only poets' sensitivity and audacity, but also a rigour which allows the expression of a common meaning.^{3,4}

Complexity is therefore a means for thinking which fulfills the demands of a sort of psychoanalysis which is constricted in a simplifying epistemological paradigm, and which expands the space of thought without claiming to be exhaustive.

We often wondered whether what you were saying was absolutely crazy or irrationally true.

Wilfred Bion

The attempt to synthesize the clinical experience of the analytical sessions, so that it could be expressed through an abstract system of notation, allowed Bion, then, and allows us, now, to base ourselves on a symbology suitable to a shared usage. Furthermore, it seems that this practice permits a good level of extraction of general rules describing the clinical process, which is otherwise defined by a multiplicity of infinitely complex variables.

In other words, it proves impossible not to apply the principles of the simplifying epistemological framework of *abstraction* and *disjunction*, as they allow working also on the descriptive-explicative concepts of unconscious processes. The paradigm of simplification has characterized the nature of positive science since its origins; essentially, it has established precise parameters in order to be able to think, even if not in a completely conscious way.

It has thus filtered the elements of knowledge through the principle of *disjunction* and *abstraction*, so that they could be distinguished and connected according to correlative or causal principles.

These principles are essential to any logical reasoning or experimental stratagem. In philosophical psychology, abstraction is a mental process through which new ideas are conceived by isolating a set of elements and considering their common properties. An abstract object is thus defined, since each concrete objects of the initial set is recognized as an abstract object, which is the carrier of the property which is in common to all the elements.

Classical science is also based on the principle of disjunction which is "an investigatory principle whereby objects are divided into more basic things and the specialized disciplines study objects at every level of separation without regard for the connection between them."⁵

Moreover, the principle of *reduction* can be another very useful simplifying means according to which phenomenal reality can be studied through an interpretation based on the factors of a functional system belonging to a lower level. Biology, for instance, can be explained using the laws of chemistry which, in turn, can be analyzed through the laws of physics and so on. Of course, psychoanalysis was involved too. Freud tried to legitimize his object of study according to the principle of reduction in order to gain the respectability granted to the sciences considered "solid" in the XIX century.⁶

Nowadays, however, it is not possible to study the functioning of the mind without considering that, besides the principles of reduction, there are also principles of the global functioning of the analytical field concerning phenomena which depend on a large number of variables. They are holistic principles such as the search for non-linear deterministic relationships, systemic emergences, auto- and allopoietic and hologrammatic; or self-similar-organizations of dynamic systems.

Modern research, therefore, requires the favoring of dialectic comprehension of phenomena to objectifying purification; a system must be studied according to its intrinsically interactive and contextual nature, to avoid losing the specific criterion which identifies it.

Understanding the nature of this process does not exempt us from combining reductionist and holistic paradigms to obtain a more advanced theoretical tool, complex thought. The analytical process must be studied in its entirety and in its particularity, permitting a degree of flexibility to avoid preconceptions and wrong conceptions which; would affect its development at every interpretative step. This flexibility can be maintained by applying variable functions which become constant only when a certain theory or analytical abstraction is considered effective.

As Bion suggests, flexibility is "the ability to remember what

the patient said which has to be linked with the ability to forget so that each session is a new session and therefore an unfamiliar situation which has to be examined psychoanalytically.⁷ It is important that the system of annotation deal with the deep emotional situations such as our specific field of knowledge and transformation *in* and *of* the ongoing process. Bion's concepts of love (L), hate (H) and knowledge (K) are, therefore, useful indexes, even if they are descriptions which do not reveal the specific contents of a certain analytical session; Bion himself proposes the unsaturated nature of concepts. Only if we insert elements such as dreams and free associations, we can know a particular constellation of instances of a certain patient.

The analytic relationship is always made of love, hate and knowledge links, thanks to the simplifying principle of abstraction. The participation of these factors as information circulating in the field makes it legitimate to consider the process as a dynamic system. There is no knowledge apart from that of the libidinal and hatred links; there is no hate and love without the knowledge link. The nature of psychoanalytic transformation allows us to say that "the welfare of the patient demands a constant supply of truth just as his physical survival demands food. (...) It is supposed at first that they cannot discover the truth about themselves without assistance from the analyst and others".⁸

The primitive truth of the individual and of the couple can be indirectly conceived only if the child-like part of the patient's personality projects stimuli which are not processed by the analyst and if the analyst metabolizes these elements making them available to knowledge. "I suggest that thinking is something forced on an apparatus; not suited to the purpose; by the demands of reality, and its enhancement coincides with, as Freud said, the reality principle"⁹ (The apparatus has to undergo adaptation to the new tasks involved in meeting the demands of reality by developing a capacity for thought).

The love, hate and knowledge which the analyst and the patient exchange are reciprocally dependent and are at the service of the principle of reality and truth, to ensure the survival of the individual and their needs of adaptation.

The patient gradually becomes capable of abstracting and containing, avoiding the purging of unprocessed contents. During just this transformation, the exchanged information can be intended as reciprocal, bidirectional interchanges, the result of a recursion between the analyst and the patient, which do not identify an active and a passive subject, but co-built emergences.

The convivial union is, therefore, the reiteration of projective-introjective identification and, generally speaking, of all exchanges of meaningful and possible information, interpreted and non-inter-

preted; that is to say a positive negotiation of transits between the analyst and the patient. The apparatus for thinking develops only in the life-giving and reciprocal relationship which searches for the truth. The analytic process is, therefore, a moving process of partial constructs, with the appearance of processed components, which are the elements of thought, or alpha (α) elements.

The patient, thus, becomes capable of abstracting, increasing their self-knowledge and getting close to being O, to experiencing O, as Bion called the absolute truth *in* and *of* any object. According to the British psycho-analyst O cannot be known, even if it can be known about; its presence can be recognized but O itself is unknowable. Thought evolves in this way, ensuring a connection between apparently distant facts.

Therefore, in normal conditions, we are facing a recursion, where negotiation and the evaluation of information between the analyst and the patient work as a convivial union (Bion) between the container and the contained.

Containment facilitates the transformation and mentalization of Truth; into truths which are tolerable and meaningful for the individual using (...) dreams, daydreams and symbolization to modify and codify the verdicts of truth into elements which can make possible the mental transcriptions for the following operations (...) In doing so, the finite man integrates with his infinite counterpart."¹⁰

In the normal operation of the convivial union the mother acts receiving the child's projected contents and activating dreamlike waking thought which provides metabolized meanings.

It is the concept of maternal reverie, a procedure adopted also by the analyst in session, during the receptive and restitutive moments of the process. Reverie is not always a happy event; that is to say, the convivial union can evolve leaving the child partially unsatisfied, who, if they do not feel an excessive envy, can also tolerate that the union does not lead to a perfect conviviality. That starts a search for meaning which is at the origin of thought.

All this can be inserted into a basically new concept, a model where relationships, as emerging qualities, originate new information, exchanged between container and contained. This process goes on until the psychotic part predominates. In this case destructivity acts at a primitive state, an emotion able to extract vital elements from the object, leaving it drained and depressed, according to what Christopher Bollas calls *extractive introjection*. Destructivity, in fact, attacks the K link and imposes a lie instead of the truth; in other words, this extraction is the opposite of any process of abstraction.

On the contrary, if the analytical process works, knowledge is achieved, that is to say, the deduction from the general case to the

particular one and the abstraction, the extension from the particular case to the general one.

When the psychotic link prevails, these operations are impossible, and the analytical process serves only to eliminate real elements or things in themselves. Due to the psychotic pathology, there is an intentional attack of falsity against objects because of their relational value; destructivity is directed against "connecting", a basic operation of thought.

Therefore, there are two different operations in projective identification: an evacuative function, where the release of non-metabolized elements takes place in the body, causing psychotic disorders and transformations into hallucinosis and a communicative function which allows the interpretation of projective identification as a universal mechanism of thought since it is a relational process. The container-contained model, that is to say the convivial relationship, is an abstraction, therefore, a simplification as well as a recursion which Bion introduces to explain a wide range of interactions; all those that are at the origin of thought.

In the emotional mother-child transactions there is, therefore, this kind of relationship, which is realized also between an individual and a group, ideas and systems of meaning, hypothesis and scientific theories.

The graphic sign (♀♂) is, thus, a symbol indicating the convivial union.

This is a fictitious account of psychoanalysis including an artificially constructed dream.

Wilfred Bion, Memoir del future

The analytical process or convivial union ends only at the ideal moment when all the transformable contents reach awareness and, more importantly, when the subject totally experiences O. The dynamic of the analytical elaboration itself does not stop unless, as we have seen above, destructive factors intervene, attacking the ability to think:

This circular-recursive process of information negotiations is autopoietic. Fantasies, defenses, complexes, internal objects and all that structures and organizes the mind is, that is, originated, by this process. It evolves through catastrophic transformations, that is through successive quantum leaps in evolution or mental growth. According to Melanie Klein, the term catastrophic refers to psychotic fragmentation; with Bion it took on the meaning of discontinuity and, in terms of the theory of complexity, of nonlinear phase transition.

Autopoiesis and recursion, which characterize all living systems, are a self-production with relative independence from input

external to the system and with a dependence on its own organization. Autopoiesis is, in particular, a topological concept, that is, its qualities are independent from the knowledge of the level of organization of phenomena. Remembering Maturana and Varela, we can say that an autopoietic system is a unity thanks to its organization.¹¹

This unity is, thus, a topological entity in the space-time in which the components have such an existence wherein they are able to interact and have relationships. This metaphorical space is the analytical field, for the convivial union. Without unity in some space an autopoietic system is not different from the background where it is supposed to exist and, therefore, it can be a system only in the space of our description, where its specificity is conceptually identified. Without unity in the physical space the convivial relationship lacks the dynamics of production relations which make it a real entity in that analytical field.

Thanks to its autopoietic nature, the coupling between the contained and container system ensures the unity of the analytical process. On the contrary, when the process is ruled by projective counter-identification, as Greemberg specified, and, generally, by mistakes in the handling of the analytical session, it tends to homeostasis.

However, this feature is not absolute and does not prevent the system from functioning; also as a dynamic process. The convivial union is also a system of allopoietic systems, open to new information coming from the environment, that is from the analytic field and its contexts; in this case the field is hologrammatically organized and therefore, the systems are connected recursively to the intrapsychic dimension:

In general, we are witnessing a real evolutive ontogeny, which originates innovative changes, through which the components themselves mutate. Simple fluctuations, which classical science considered effects destined to die down, are the driving forces amplifying to the extent of affecting the whole field of transformations.

The evolution of the dynamic systems increases the complexity of the system; that defines a paradox as the analyst-patient system becomes, at the same time, more and more free to evolve further towards new ideas, behaviors, emotions, even if it is increasingly limited by the novelty of emergences, that is, by the increase of in the organization of the system.

Order and disorder are related, one is the reason for the other to exist.

Therefore, there is a relation of complementarity and not of exclusion between order and disorder, psychic integration, and emotive turbulence. This is not about competition or hierarchy between opposite natures of separate processes; instead, it is a heterarchy,

a collaboration, a cooperation between different levels of functioning, parts of the same incremental process.¹²

The transferal dimension of the convivial union reveals paradoxical configurations, too.

↔ In this way, thought is moved to self-organization, thanks to the work in PS D.

This is the work obtained through the paranoid-schizoid and depressive oscillations. Furthermore, the contents of the convivial union of the transference-counter transference reciprocity are

We can understand these statements also using Bion's grid.

	1 definitory hypothesis	2 Ψ	3 notation	4 attention	5 inquiry	6 action	...n
A β elements	A1	A2				A6	
B α elements	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	...B _n
C Dream thoughts Myths Dreams	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	...C _n
D Pre-conception	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	...D _n
E Conception	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6E _n
F Concept	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6F _n
G Scientific Deductive System		G2					
H Algebraic Calculus							

As we know, this grid consists of a system of coordinate axes which permit to the representation of the evolution in complexity (or organization) of the analytic elements. On the horizontal axes the use of thought is represented through a progressive numeric order. On the vertical axes the genetic level is represented via an alphabetical progression. By crossing the axes we get how far thought has gone from O in the subsequent phases of the analysis passing from an organization of lower complexity to one of higher complexity.

Furthermore, it highlights how near thought has gone to O, in a progression from knowing to becoming from "learning to growth" becoming being, existence.¹³

Let us take an example

A patient brings a dream into a session. Let us imagine they do not intend to use it as analytic material. We are, thus, in row C of the genetic axe of the grid, in C1. The patient can also decide to say

emergences untraceable to the causes. They are expressions of the ultimate reality O at the moment *t* of the evolution of the analytic process, reality knowable only through its processing.

Hence another paradox: we approach the experience of the ultimate reality in O (Bion) at of every subsequent moment of the analytic process while we, irreversibly, move away from it. This is due to the effects of interpretations and other therapeutic factors, due to the non-linear nature of the transformations and systemic emergences. Love, hate and knowledge are, thus, dynamic information at the service of the paradox of the analytic link.

something untrue about the dream content. We are, therefore, in C2.

If the dream is, used, instead, to be recalled we are in C3. The level of complexity increases.

If the patient, through analytic exploration, C4, which uses myth, decides to try to understand the latent meaning of the dream we are in C5.

With the help of the analyst, they get to know something more about themselves and then—modify their experience, perhaps changing also the meaning of their cognitive-affective and emotional investments. We are in C6. It is the box that Bion indicates as the box of action. What progressively belongs to the more and more complex boxes of thought moves far from O, becoming more fully O, being O.

Often, while tracing this paradox, the phenomenon of the intersubjective analytic third is highlighted; it is an effect of the analyst's

reverie who, being able to dream the analysis in their undreamed contents, allows the extraction of the amount of knowledge we want to use.

Fractal geometry is a workable geometric middle ground between the excessive geometric order of Euclid and the geometric chaos of general mathematics.

B. Mandelbrot

The analytic field has another feature, too: it is organized such that the parts and the whole of the field of observation stand in a very particular relationship. The part is recognizable in the whole but also the whole is recognizable in the part. It is a phenomenon of self-similarity. As we would expect a different configuration of the intersubjectivity and the intrapsychic, is this a paradoxical phenomenon too?

The projective-introjective identifications are also projections between parts of the internal objects of every psychic organization. Every intrapsychic element, like a split, originates an intra-subjective projection, for which the internal objects are represented by the field. Furthermore, the projections intersubjectively exchanged act retroactively on the internal world and if, for instance, the psychoanalytic interpretation identifies a content of the analytic field, an intrapsychic resonance can be expected.

The analytic relationship suggests another paradox: it is a self-eco-organizing system, where the amount of variability is less than the sum of the variations of its parts. According to Morin, the self-organizing system is also a self-eco-organizing system because its environment participates in its organization. Therefore, the bi-personal field is a "unitas multiplex". From a complex perspective, singularity and multiplicity are founding characteristics of the interactive patient-analyst system.¹⁴

Finally, there is a further paradox according to which the set of interacting elements in the analyst-patient system leads to a behavior whose complexity is more than the sum of the complexity of its individual parts. The convivial union (♀♂) is thus confirmed as a psychoanalytic internal object wherein the container and the contained dynamically alternate always in an unbalanced symmetry on the object that mainly acts as a container. In conclusion, we can say that "in a complex view when one arrives via empirical-rational means at contradictions, this points not to an error but rather to the fact that we have reached a deep layer of reality that, precisely because of its depth, cannot be translated into our logic."¹⁵

Creative evolution progresses through a complex logic, that is to say, holistic and simplifying at the same time to give rise to new organizational emergences which affect the quality of psychic life. Everything is by nature unfinished, everything is relation; the patient

knows themselves; only through the relationship with the analyst; these ideas open horizons as new as the relationships that the fields of research maintain to give rise to emergences of meaning.¹⁶

The system of systems, made of analysand and analyst, becomes the basic unit of analysis. There are no simple, atomic, noumenal elements; the intra-psychic is the inter-psychic and viceversa.¹⁷

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Conflicts of Interest

The author confirms that this article content has no conflict of interest.

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