

**Beyond Group Inhibition and Irrationality:
Bion's Contribution to the
Understanding of the Group**

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ABSTRACT

Wilfred Bion has gained wide recognition as one of the most creative psychoanalyst of our time. His contribution to the field of psychoanalysis is usually described in terms of two facets: one facet pertains to individual psychoanalysis, and the other to group dynamics, group psychoanalysis, and group psychotherapy. The present article deals solely with Bion's contribution concerning groups. Owing to Bion's difficult and highly compact writing style, most of the researchers who have tried to introduce or review his work have failed to come with a comprehensible introduction. The aim of the present article is thus to try to provide the reader with an easy and brief introduction to Bion's theory on group, hoping that it will serve, for him/her, as a stimulus for further and deeper reading of the original work. The main concepts discussed here are those of "basic assumption group", "work group", "group mentality", and "group culture". In order to help the reader understand these concepts and their clinical manifestations, the author provides also examples and clinical vignettes extracted from a large number of group sessions he has conducted.

Since my first reading of Bion's *Experiences in groups*, I have always wanted to write a comprehensible introduction to his work. However, each time I have tried to undertake this task, I was discouraged by my inability to discuss his theory using my own words, and by the fact that each time I re-read it, I discover new things. I also looked for how other readers of Bion (James, 1981; Pines, 1985; Ganzarain, 1989) have introduced these ideas,

and I discovered that my inability was shared by most of them, including Grinberg et al. (1993). As a matter of fact, in their preface to the First Edition of *Introduction to the Work of Bion*, the authors write that *Bion's language contains what appears as doubts, half-truths, mysteries, uncertainties; conveying these aspects of his ideas is in practice an impossible task*". (p. xv). The same difficulty is reexpressed in the preface to the Third Edition in the following :
 "Reflecting on the moments before we decided to write the book, we recall our doubts and concerns about whether we would be capable of expressing and conserving the force, the great power, and the ambiguities of the original text. Could we conserve something of its spirit ?" (p. xx). This is to say that undertaking the task of introducing a part of Bion's work is still a real *tour de force*, owing to the difficulty and risk involved in it.

As put by Pines (1985), Bion is famous for his incomprehensible and highly compact writing style, and a relative failure to provide his readers with enough examples and explanations. However, for those gifted enough to read between the lines, Bion's *Experiences in Groups* is the most compact and influential work in group psychoanalysis written after Freud (1921)'s *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. After pointing out at the difficulty and the risk involved in undertaking the task of introducing Bion's ideas, I will try now to describe as briefly and as clearly as possible his contribution to the study and understanding of group dynamics.

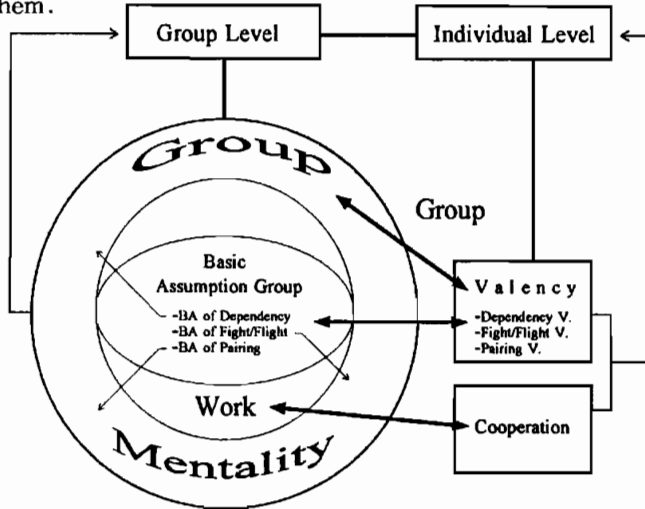
THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE GROUP

As suggested by his work, Bion (1961) shares the Freudian

belief that any psychology is in the last analysis a social psychology. In other words, both Freud and Bion have emphasized through their psychoanalytic studies that individual psychology and group psychology are not two distinct fields but a same field of study. Moreover, like Freud, Bion rejects also the idea of the existence of a herd instinct. For the human being is a gregarious animal by nature; he/she cannot avoid belonging to a group, and free him/herself from the dilemma of being "*at war with the group and with those forces in him that determine his groupishness*" (Sutherland, 1985; p. 67). According to Bion, Man's groupishness is in no way the product of the group, but to be activated and became thus an object of observation, the group situation is indispensable. That is, without the presence of a group the individual's groupishness would not be noticed.

In his review of *Group Dynamics*, Bion (1961) always referred to Freud's view on groups, comparing them to his own. Rather than refuting Freud's views, Bion has tried, whenever possible, to complete them. According to Freud (1921), the relationships present in the group have for prototype the relationships characterizing the developmental stage of the Oedipus Complex. The emotional features found in the group are neurotic in character, and the anxiety experienced within the group is thus that of the fear of castration and loss of love. Whereas Bion saw these relationships as deriving from much earlier phases of the infant's development described by Melanie Klein (1955). To put it concretely, the group experience leads the participants to a massive regression to what Klein has called the psychotic (paranoid and depressive)

positions and their characteristic anxieties and fears (of annihilation and disintegration), and the primitive defense mechanisms (splitting, projective identification, denial, idealization, etc.,) mobilized against them.



*Source: Hafsi (1998)

Figure 1. Schematic Representation of Bion's Group Theory

Therefore, Bion argued that, unlike what Freud thought, group members are not always bound to each other and to the leader through libidinal ties. The latter kind of ties characterizes solely the group operating under what Bion called the *basic assumption of pairing*, discussed later. According to Bion (1961), the *messianic hope* (discussed later) is an expression of this libidinal bound. The bound, or “*the cement, so to speak, that joined them (the group members) to each other is guilt and depression in the dependent group, anger and hate in the fight/flight group*” (p.166). Moreover, Bion disagrees also with Freud's conception that the members-leader

relation is always the result of the fact that the members introject the leader and put him/her at the place of their ego-ideals. He considers this kind of bonding as only a part of the members-leader relationship. For it does not include the more potentially primitive and destructive bonding characterizing the *basic assumption group*. As discussed latter, in the latter group, the leader is not introjected by the members to carry for them power through his/her contact with reality. Here the leader is not free to be him/herself; he/she is the product of the basic assumption group, and as such is prey to phantasy more than reality, undistinguishable from other members. Bion attributes the difference between his views and those of Freud to the fact that the latter's thoughts about group were based on his analysis of only two specific groups, namely the Army and the Church. For Bion, these two structured groups correspond to what he calls *specialized groups*.

THE WORK GROUP AND BASIC ASSUMPTION GROUP

Any group, whatever its nature, size (large or small), constitution, structure and aim, has a *basic task* that members are expected to perform when they get together. For the task to be performed, each individual is expected, depending on his/her capacity and skill, to cooperate; *cooperation* is regarded thus as a prerequisite for the group activity. On the other hand, participation in the group activity requires a given period of "*training and a capacity for experience*" (Bion, 1961; p. 143). Another indispensable characteristic of a group engaged in its task is the fact of being in touch with reality by using rational and, however rudimentary, scientific

methods. Therefore, time and development, as elements of the task reality, play also a considerable role in the group activity. It is this way of functioning that Bion calls the *work group*, emphasizing that the term *group embraces only mental activity of a particular kind, not the people who indulge in it*" (p. 144). To summary, a group is described as functioning as a work group if it is characterized by a mental activity which involves focusing on the group's basic task, utilization of scientific and reality-based methods to perform this task, and evaluation of time and development. In order to provide the reader with further details about what he meant by *work group*, Bion contrasts it with what he called the basic assumption group.

According to Bion (1961), although work group activity is indispensable for the group development, it is often "*obstructed, diverted, and on occasion assisted, by certain other mental activities that have in common the attribute of powerful emotional drives. These activities, at first sight chaotic, are given a certain cohesion if it is assumed that they spring from basic assumptions common to all the group.*" (p. 146). These basic assumptions color all the group's activity, and are therefore reflected in the group's (or only in some members') beliefs about most of the group aspects (leadership, organization, planning, etc.).

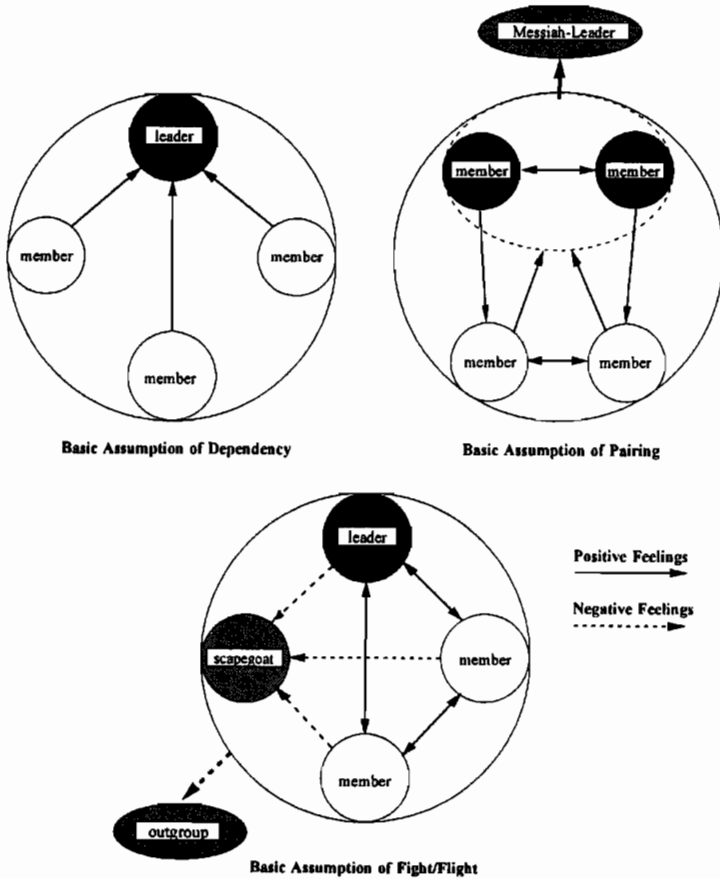


Figure 2. Interpersonal Relationships in Each Basic Assumption

The mental activity characterized by a basic assumption is called *basic assumption group*. Based on his work with groups, Bion adumbrated three types of basic assumptions which he named respectively *basic assumption of dependence*, *basic assumption of fight/flight*, and *basic assumption of pairing*.

Basic Assumption of Dependence (baD): The basic assumption shared by the whole group here is the belief and impression that 1) the outside world is unfriendly, and cold, and that 2) the group “*is met in order to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection.*” (Bion, 1961; p.147). Therefore, the group behaves “as if” the leader is omnipotent and omniscient, and themselves immature, needful, helpless, and unable to do anything by themselves. The group’s idealization of the leader (therapist or another group member) results in desperate attempts to get knowledge, help and solutions for their problems in a greedy and never-satisfied way. When the leader fails to meet their needs and expectancy, the group reacts with denial and devaluation of the latter, and search for a new leader who will take the group in charge. This “simple” form of baD has also a reverse situation where it is the leader who is taken in charge and sustained by the group. Bion (1961) refers to this situation using the term “dual of baD”. In this case it is always “the most psychiatrically disturbed” members that emerges as the group leader. Bion describes this situation in the following:

“...the group, when left to spontaneous behaviour, chooses as its leader, in baD, its most ill member. It has always been well recognized that this is so; so much so in fact that the great religious leader —and the religious group for obvious reasons is a group in which baD is active and vital —is commonly assumed to be mad or possessed of a devil, exactly as if members of a group with baD in the ascendant felt that if they were not led by a madman, then they ought to be. Indeed one could say that, just

as they reject all facts that run encounter to the belief that they are all individually looked after by the person or deity on whom they depend, so they reject all facts that might indicate that the leader or deity was sane...all indicate this same tendency of the group to choose, when left unstructured, its most ill member as its leader." (pp. 121-122).

The group dominated by the baD is characterized thus by primitive idealization, greed, denial, envy, and other defence processes described by Melanie Klein as characterizing the early psychotic (especially the paranoid-schizoid) positions. The leader (trainer, therapist) is target to group's envy for his/her knowledge, skill, awareness of the unconscious processes experienced by the group, and his/her capacity to tolerate these processes. The leader's effective interpretations are envied, and attempts to devaluate and destroy them are thus made, very often in a form of resistance, by the group when the latter reacts negatively to their dependency demands.

As indicated in Figure 1, the baD group structure is also characterized by the fact that there is little overt interaction between the individuals and, on the other hand, a belief that each individual has an exclusive relationship with the leader. As put by Bion (1961), the "*leader need not be identified with any individual in the group; it need not be a person at all but may be identified with an idea or an inanimate object*" (p. 155), such as the group's history, recorded by the group, and made into a bible to which appeal is made. The group's resort to history (past experience) and bible-making (rules, regulations) is observed especially when

the leader has already proved his/her human inability to meet in a satisfactory way the group's needs for care and nurturance. Here is an illustrative excerpt from a session wherein the baD was active.

Clinical vignette

This session is from a group composed of ten female and six male students, gathered to learn about group dynamics and group psychotherapy once a week, as a part of the curriculum for psychology students. The aim here was to provide the students with an opportunity to experience group phenomena before attending theoretical course on group psychology, especially the work of Bion (see Hafsi, 1990, for further discussion of the methodological aspect of this kind of group experience.). The session, which was videotaped, began with a long silence which lasted thirty minutes. With the exception of some whispered remarks exchanged between neighbours, there was an absolute silence which the therapist interrupted by interpreting to the group their dependency. He remarked that the group was waiting for his suggestions and advices, behaving as if he was an omnipotent machine that can provide them with ideas, and even think instead of them. He also interpreted the group silence as due to the fact that the group's phantastic belief that the group is immature, unable to think and work alone without the therapist's help. He thus expressed clearly his disagreement with this phantasy, saying that he is not as omniscient as the group thinks, so he has nothing to contribute to the group here-and-now. While speaking

the therapist had the impression that the group was like a sleepy child listening attentively to his mother singing to him/her a lullaby. As a matter of fact, few minutes after the therapist (T.) intervention, O., a male participant interrupted the silence saying to his neighbour:

O.: (Yawning)...I felt asleep...(smilingly) I was waked up by my saliva (slavering)...it was cold.

B.: (Reacting as if he didn't noticed that)...Really ? (with a smile that didn't hide B's envy of O.).

T.: You seemed enjoying it, did' nt you ?.

B.: (smilingly)...Yes, that was good...but I feel a little embarrassed.

T.: I think that O. is speaking for the whole group. His embarrassment is also the group's one, isn't it ? The group does not slaver but, it has been behaving like a child sleeping peacefully under the protection of its mother.

P.: (He rose his hand to express his desire to speak, as if he was trying to change the subject.)...Hum...Eh...Let's do like we did in the last session...let's talk about something that concerns everybody here as a student...I want to ask the group what they think about living alone (not without one's parents), because there are some who are already living alone and others not.

E.: (He rose his hand) I am living alone, so the other day I caught cold, and it was terrible.

P.: I understand that...me too, last thursday (the day of

the group meeting) it was terrible, I was nearly sick..

E.: When you live alone, nobody will help you. If you die nobody will notice that. (laughter).

P.: You're right, it is terrible to live alone.

O.: I don't live alone; I live with my family, so I envy my friends who live alone. When you live with your parents, you have to be home at specified time, there are also a lot of restrictions and rules..., but you are free when you live alone. I really sometimes envy my friends, they don't seem to have these problems.

T.: It is just like the group, there are regulations that you have to respect, isn't it ?.

E.: (Ignoring my intervention, and addressing O.) I don't think so. I was completely free when I was living with my parents..I didn't have to be at home at a specified time, but since I started to live alone, I have to do everything alone, so, I don't have enough free time for myself to go out, and enjoy myself...Living alone is not as easy as you imagine.

P.: Yes that's true, it is not that ideal.

D.: (He rose his hand) I live alone...in April (the beginning of school), I was very lonely, I used to call home three or four times a day. I had to pay more than 20,000 yen for the telephon bill. Now I pay only around 5000 yen a month (laughter)...I started now to get accustomed to my loneliness.

P.: When you live alone, you start talking to yourself very

often, don't you think so ?

E.: Yes, I even speak to my notebook sometimes.

K.: Is it true that when you live alone, you learn a lot of things, and become more mature ?

E.: No, I don't think so. (The group laugh). I don't do anything, I don't cook. When I moved to my place, my parent bought me a lot of kitchen goods (knife, chopping board, etc.) although they knew I was not able to use them. As a matter of fact, I eat only already prepared food. I have tried the lunch box of all the convenient stores, but I got fed up recently... I can't eat those lunch boxes now, they are too cold... I have discovered recently the "hot lunch box" (hokaben), I enjoy it very much (laughter). It's very delicious (laughter).

P.: It is very difficult to live alone, and do everything alone. You have to do alone all what your mother used to do for you... It's exhausting.

E.: I have never thought, for example, that cloth washing was so difficult and tiresome... Now that I think of it, I want to go back home at least once, to relax and enjoy my self. My parents always ask me to come back... If I don't go back, I am afraid they will forget me.

As can be seen from this excerpt, the main theme dealt with and around which the group was centered is dependency. The

group's basic assumption consisted in believing that being independent (living alone) is a difficult and exhausting experience. Independency involves also the fear of being unable to tolerate loneliness, and the fear of being abandoned. Therefore, the group has opted for dependency to avoid facing these fears and anxiety whose prototype are found in early psychotic positions described by Melanie Klein. In other words, the group has tried to demonstrate that it is only by being dependent that one can relax, enjoy himself, and, therefore, avoid all the troubles and difficulties characterizing the work group.

Basic Assumption of Fight/Flight (baF): Although fight and flight are usually understood as two opposite behaviors, Bion has joined them together conceiving them as two sides of the same coin, or assumption. The group displaying a baF *mentality* (this term will be defined later), functions under the assumption that the group has met to fight or flee someone or something perceived as a threat to the group's preservation. Therefore, whether for fighting or for fleeing, action is indispensable for the baF group. The group sessions are thus more animated; the group atmosphere is characterized alternately by 1) suspicion, criticism, verbal aggression (fight), and 2) passive resistance towards the therapist, (or the phantastic enemy), or withdrawal from the group task in form of long silence (flight), or by engaging in activities unrelated to the group's basic task. Depending on whether it is observed in the baD or baF, the silence has different meanings. In the former case, it is an expression of the group dependency and belief that they have nothing to contribute to the group whose whole functioning

should be taken in charge by the leader; *"we don't know anything, we are unable to function by ourselves without help"* constitutes the rational behind the silence. Whereas in the baF group, silence fulfils a resistance function; *"why do we need (or why are we obliged) to cooperate"* is the common emotional reaction in the group.

In the baF, the importance of the individual is secondary compared with that of the whole group. Unlike in the baD where the sickest is valued, in the baF the individual may be sacrificed for the group survival. There is pressure on the individual to confirm; deviance from the group is perceived as a threat, and may be counteracted by the group resorting to aggressive control and scapegoating of the deviant member. Similarly, Kernberg (1980) writes that the group *"cannot tolerate any opposition to the ideology shared by the majority of its members"* (p. 213), which leads often to the emergence of antagonist subgroups.

The need for and the presence of a leader is more important than in any other ba group. For action, to be carried out, requires leadership. Therefore, leaders are thus selected for their ability to direct and mobilize the group in their fight with or flight from the vaguely perceived external or internal "enemies". They are thus expected to recognize the danger and enemies, or create them if they are not available in the here-and-now of the group. As a matter of fact, the leader is expected, 1) to be devoted to the preservation of the group as a whole by ignoring individual reactions, 2) to represent and promote courage and self-sacrifice, and be hateful of the enemy. Any leader who does not match this group image will be ignored and replaced by a

more suitable one. The most prevailing defense mechanisms are splitting (the we-good-group, and the bad-others), and projective identification as described by Melanie Klein (1955). The following excerpt from a group session may help the reader to develop a picture of what is meant by a baF, and how this basic assumption is expressed in a psychoanalytically-oriented T-group, or diagnostic group (D-group).

Clinical vignette

The present clinical material is from a group composed of eight male and eight female students. The aim of the group was to study group psychotherapy, and D-groups through direct participation and experience. The excerpt discussed here is from the third session of a number of six sessions of 90 minutes each. As usual, when I came to the session, the group was already gathered, and engaged in a very animated and pleasant discussion which suddenly ended with my appearance. I looked for my chair, but I could not find it. Therefore, I brought in a chair and managed to find a place in the circle constituted by the group. The impression I had was that the group came to the session to fight me, and anyone who would stand in their way. Thus, I metaphorically interpreted that I was perceived today "like a hair in a soup bowl", that is, I was spoiling and disturbing the group by my presence. That is why the group did not prepare, as they use to do, a chair for me, excluding me, and functioning without me. The interpretation was, of course, strongly denied. The then-leader counteracted arguing that it was not the group's intention, but

only my imagination, and that I was "a little paranoiac". My countertransferential reaction was to shut up, contributing thus to the group silence that followed this incident. Moreover, I began to feel that the leader was disturbing the group preventing it from progressing. It was clear that I was made, through projective identification, to play an active role in the group's phantasy or basic assumption of fight/flight, by experiencing negative feelings (paranoid tendency) towards the leader (the group representative). The group's ambivalence towards me was obvious. Although they did not want me in the group, my presence was still considered as indispensable for the preservation of the group. The group atmosphere become tense; characterized by guilt resulting from their choice of the therapist as an object of their fight/flight basic assumption. In an attempt to protect me, the group started to put pressure on the leader to find or create another target or scapegoat for their manifest aggressivity. The first attempt was made by N. who reported an accident which involved him and a middle-aged women. He described in details the accident, and the resulting damages to his bicycle. The lady was described as arrogant and aggressive. The group discussion turned then to the difference and conflict between generations, providing many examples of damages caused by this conflict. I thus took the opportunity to interpret that the group was feeling guilty because they have tried to isolate me, so they have found a substitute to fight with. I had the feeling that the group was listening but not hearing my interpretation. For, the group continued its search for out-group targets without paying attention to my intervention.

After the story of the middle-aged lady, the group turned to railway companies (especially Japan Railway) criticizing them for not taking into consideration their customers' needs, and for not being enough customer-oriented. When the group have verbalized all their dissatisfaction, they turned to high school students, criticizing them for a number of aspects. I waited until I was sure that the group was ready enough to, not only, listen, but also, hear my interpretation, before addressing them. I interpreted again that since the beginning of the session the group has been looking for scapegoats or enemies to flee (me and the middle-aged lady), or to fight with (high school students), as a way to avoid talking about the differences, conflicts, and hostility (latent in the group), in order to preserve the group. This time, I felt that I was really listened to and heard; for the group did not deny it as they did before; however, that was just few minutes before the end of the session.

Basic Assumption of Pairing (baP): The third basic assumption, or baP, is the least understood one. One of the reasons for that is the ambiguous and misleading term used by Bion to refer to it. That is, the term "pairing" puts emphasis more on the pair than on the content of the group phantasy. For it is not the pair that is important, but the phantasy that had led to its emergence. This emphasis on the pair has misled, for instance, the Japanese translator(s) of Bion's work to a point that "pairing" was translated as "pair", or *tsugai*. The ambiguity of this term has led Kets de Vries and Miller (1984), for instance, to use the more widely spread concept of "utopian" to describe Bion's basic assumption of

pairing.

The assumption shared by the group here is that survival and preservation depends on whether the group is able of self-reproduction by "giving birth" to a new, and as yet unborn leader, a Messiah. This hoped-for-Messiah which need not be a person — it can be an idea, a plan, a proposition, an utopia, etc.— is expected to save the group from their anxieties and fears related to the baD and baF. Therefore, when the group is experiencing the baP, one has the impression that the group behaves "as if" it has met for purposes of reproduction. The creation of the *Messiah* is assigned by the group to two of its members, a pair (not necessary heterosexual). The group focus thus on this pair, hoping that their magical "sexual" union will give birth to the hoped-for-Messiah or savor-leader.

Therefore, unlike in the baD and baF, the group atmosphere is pervaded by an air of hopeful expectation, euphoria, optimism, intimacy, and soft and agreeable feelings. According to Bion (1961), the group hopeful expectation is verbally expressed, for instance, in

"ideas that marriage would put an end to neurotic disabilities; that group therapy would revolutionarize society when it had spread sufficiently; that the coming season, spring, summer, autumn, or winter, as the case may be, will be more agreeable; that some new kind of community — an improved group— should be developed, and so on." (p. 151)

This focus on future events by having hopes should be interpreted

as an indicator of the presence of the baP, even if other elements are absent, it should not be mistaken with the future-oriented behavior and activity observed also in the case of the work group. For the messianic hope in itself, not its realization, is the aim of the group. Moreover, since the aim of the baP group is the messianic hope, this hope should not be satisfied. For if this hope is satisfied and the hoped-for-leader is born, there would not be hope. For if born, the hoped-for-leader will inevitably fail in his salvation task, leaving the group with their anxieties and fears, and, consequently, without hope. As put by Bion (1961) "*only by remaining a hope does hope exist*" (p.151). The fears of and for the *Messiah* characterizing the baP group can be easily understood, if one considers the number of examples in human history that show how new leaders are persecuted, and rejected by their environment. Becket's famous play *godot* is also an excellent illustration of the baP.

Clinically speaking, a pairing group with all the characteristics described by Bion is rarely observed. However, as mentioned above, what principally characterized the pairing group is not necessarily the pair, but rather the messianic hope. The pair, which needs not be present in the group (in the here-and-now), is only the vehicle for this messianic hope. The following example describes a group wherein one of the pair does not belong to the group, and has never been in contact with the whole group but with only one member.

Clinical vignette

The following material is from a group of sixteen (eight male, and eight female) students, gathered for the same reasons described above. After the group had spent more than seventy minutes operating under the basic assumptions of dependency, flight, and fight, one girl reported an episode she experienced a week before. Because of typhoon, she was obliged to spend a night in a friend's (a boy) house. The following day she had to meet a classmate to accompany her to school because they had an examination that morning. She went to the place where she was supposed to meet her friend, waited for twenty minutes, but the latter did not show up. She was so confused that she did not know what to do to get to school at time and enter the examination. Besides this, she was running of time, and was getting nervous and afraid of missing her examination. She saw a boy hanging around on his bicycle, and asked him to give her a ride to school. He accepted, helping her thus to get to school at time and enter the examination. Without the boy's help she would not have made it, and consequently, would have to retake the same examination the next year. She was thus very gratefully to her "savior-prince", although she did not ask him his name or address. The group listened very attentively to her story; and were relieved to hear that she could enter the examination. They were also very curious about the identity of the "boy", and her feelings about him. This episode had a considerable influence on the group, it brought joy, intimacy (neighbours exchanging glances, smiles, words, etc.) to the group, and enhanced its self-confidence. As she told them that she wanted to

meet the boy again to thank him, the group tried to help her find a way to do it, asking her questions about his school, and uniform. However, as she was not able to provide them with any further information, the group had a temporary feeling of disappointment which was “magically” erased by a “*don't worry, you will surely meet him one day*” of one of the participant.

As shown by this episode, the pair needs not to exist in the group's here-and-now to carry the messianic hope. For the pair here is composed by a participant and a person unknown to the group. This unidentified person seems to play a double role: he is one of the pair (one of the would-be-creators of the *Messiah*), and, at the same time, the hoped-for-*Messiah*, which will save the group from self-destruction that may result from the latent hostility and aggressivity prevailing within the group. As a *Messiah*, he should, thus, not be born, or recognized (he has no name, no school name, and no uniform), because this is the only way to protect him and the hope he carries for the group.

Besides their differences the basic assumptions have some characteristics in common. In contrast to work group, the basic assumption group, with its three variations (baD, baF, and BaP), is not based on or oriented toward reality, but on and toward fantasy which the group uncritically acts out. There is therefore no room for reality-testing, or experimentation in the basic assumption group. Moreover, the basic assumption group is also characterized by 1) the fact that the group does not consider the consequences of its behavior, 2) a lack of toleration of scientific or inquiring attitude; 3) an inability to learn from experience, 4)

a great insistence on emotions (anxiety, fear, hate, love and the like), 5) a disturbed relationship to time, and 6) a lack of any process of development. Concerning the two latter characteristics, Bion (1961) writes that:

“Time plays no part in it (ba group); it is a dimension of mental function that is not recognized... The second characteristics... is the absence of any process of development.. stimuli to development meet with a hostile response... If a group wishes to prevent development, the simplest way to do so is to allow itself to be overwhelmed by basic assumption mentality and thus become approximated to the one kind of mental life in which a capacity for development is not required...” (p. 159).

Furthermore, the three basic assumptions share another feature, namely, an hypotrophied capacity for verbal communication. As put by Bion (1961), the more the group is overwhelmed by the basic assumption group, the less it is unable to make any rational use of verbal communication. Words become a mere *vehicle for sound*. Unlike in the work group, the language in the ba group lacks precision and coherence, and is full of *clichés*, unfinished and repetitive and phrases. The impression one has, when observing a group operating under the basic assumption group, is that people speak to say nothing or anything. Individual interventions are often made only to interrupt the silence, and ‘inflate’ the group to ‘explode’ it (see Hafsi, 1999).

THE "PROTOMENTAL SYSTEM" HYPOTHESIS

As discussed by Bion (1961), work group coexists with only one basic assumption at one time. He wrote that "*though he work group function may remain unaltered, the contemporary basic assumption that pervades its activities can be changing frequently; there may be two or three changes in an hour or the same basic assumption may be dominant for months on end*" (p. 154). This alternation of the basic assumptions is due to the fact that no one of these helps the group to, satisfactorily, override their fears and anxieties stirred up by the work group.

To account for what will become of the two basic assumptions that are not active, Bion (1961) postulated the presence of a *protomental system* which he considered as "*a concept that transcends experience.*" (p. 101).

To begin with, he explains that a basic assumption can be apprehended as such only when it became psychologically manifest. Before it exists as a psychological phenomenon, the basic assumption is preceded by its corresponding emotional state which is also preceded by a certain protomental phenomenon of which the visible basic assumption is an expression. The *protomental system* constitutes a matrix—where physical and mental are not differentiated—from which spring those protomental phenomena, and the emotions associated with the basic assumption. Those protomental phenomena correspond to the basic assumptions that are not active or inoperative. For as previously mentioned only one basic assumption can coexist with the work group at one time. Owing to a "conspiracy" between the work group and the then-operating basic assumption,

the two inoperative basic assumptions are thus confined to this *protomental system* in a form of undifferentiated states, or prototypes. The *protomental system* contains thus prototypes of the three basic assumptions. When, for instance, it is the baD that is operative with the work group, it is the baF and baP that are confined to a protomental existence. Bion uses the letters *pmDP* to describe the case when the basic assumptions of dependency (baD), and pairing (baP) are inoperative, that is confined to within the *protomental system* as psychologically unrecognizable states. The same principle applies also to the cases of *pmPF*, and *pmDF*. In the former case, it is the baP and baF, and in the latter the baD and baF that are confined within the *protomental system*.

Moreover, Bion (1961) applies the concepts of *protomental system* and basic assumption to provide a new understanding of the causes of psychosomatic illnesses, and a method for their classification. He thus proposes to apprehend physical diseases, such for instance tuberculosis, in terms of *cause*, *affiliation*, and *matrix*. He argued that the *cause* of tuberculosis is the baF, and its *affiliation* is the baD, and its *matrix* is the pmDP. Bion extended further his speculation, applying these concepts also to explain the fluctuations experienced by the value of money. Discussing further his ideas about this topic goes far beyond the scope of the present introductory chapter. I will, therefore, confine myself to this brief introduction, and turn to another important Bionian concept, namely, the *specialized work group*.

SPECIALIZED WORK GROUP

Bion argues that for a group to be able to display characteristics of the *work group* activity, it is indispensable to neutralize the basic assumption groups, that is preventing them from obstructing the work function within the group. He attributes this neutralization of the basic assumption groups to subgroups (within the main group) which he called *specialized work groups*. The *specialized work group* consists in undertaking the basic assumption activity in a way that this activity is neither completely inhibited nor strong enough to overwhelm and hinder the work group functioning within the main group. As put by Bion (1961), "*it must be regarded as a failure in the specialized work group if the dependent or fight/flight (or pairing) group activity either cease to manifest itself within the specialized work groups or else grows to overwhelming strength.*" (p. 157). If the *specialized work group* fails in its function of neutralizing the basic assumption group of its province, the main group will take over its function while continuing to fulfil the work group function. Since the latter function consists essentially in translating thoughts and feelings into action, the main group would attempt to translate also the basic assumptions into action, making them even more dangerous in proportion. The role of the specialized work group is to carry out the opposite task, that is, translating the action into basic assumption mentality or spirit. This constitutes a much safer method to neutralize the prevailing basic assumption.

Applying this theory to society, Bion considers Church, or Army, to which Freud (1921) has drawn our attention, as subgroups

fulfilling the function of specialized groups. That is, specialized in the baD, the Army takes in charge the baF; and, specialized in the baD, the Church, with its organization and structure, embodies the baD. The group which takes in charge the baP is the Aristocracy, a group to which Freud did not pay attention. Owing to the fact that one of the main preoccupations of this social class is race survival, birth, and hope for continuity and eternity, it makes an ideal specialized group for the baP.

To illustrate further his idea of the translation (by the specialized group) of action into basic assumption mentality, Bion (1961) writes that, as a specialized group, the

“Church, when presented with some notable achievement of work group function, will adjure the group to give thanks to its deity and not to its capacity of realistic hard work... The prosperous and successful Church, from the point of view of easing work group function, must combine fortification of religious belief with the insistence that it must never be acted on. The successful fighting service (the Army) must encourage the belief that anything can be done by force provided always it is never used. In both cases it comes to this —basic assumption mentality does not lend itself to translation into action, since action requires work group function to maintain contact with reality... The function of [the Aristocracy].. is to provided an outlet for feelings centered on the ideas of breeding and birth, that is to say for the messianic hope... without ever arousing the fear that such feelings will give rise to an event that will demand development.” (pp. 157–158).

Specialized work groups are often observed in therapeutic groups. When the group is under the influence of baD, the group tends to “*create a subgroup to take the function of interpreting the dependent-group leader —usually located in the analyst— to the group.*” (p. 158). The fight-flight specialized group fulfil the function of fighting the therapist, and his interventions in forms of interpretations. As to the pairing specialized work group, it will usually, as put by Bion, help the group to believe that the new idea is not new, but quite familiar to them, in other words it is not the hoped-for -messianic idea.

ABERRANT FORMS OF CHANGE IN THE GROUP

One of the least discussed and understood Bionian concept is the one of *aberrant forms*. As discussed above, basic assumptions are not permanent phenomena; the group changes from one to the other as soon as the prevailing basic assumption is no more effective in helping the group to deal with the fear and anxieties stirred up by the work group. However, the change observed is not always the results of the emergence of a new basic assumption; it can be only an *aberrant form* of change.

The *aberrant form* of change is the result of the group reaction to the emergence of a new idea that puts emphasis on development, and, as such, is opposed to the then-prevailing basic assumption. The *aberrant form* consists in producing a new form of organization of the group and a new strategy in order to counteract the new idea. It is noteworthy that the group resorts to aberrant forms of change only when reality and evolution are forced on the group

in a form of new idea which can not stir up the work group, or neutralize the basic assumption.

The content of the *aberrant form* depends on what basic assumption is active. However, the characteristic common to all the *aberrant forms* is the resort to an extraneous person or group. When the dependence basic assumption is active, the new idea and the threat it implicates is countered by 1) depending on an extraneous group and subjecting themselves to its influence, or 2) by putting pressure on it so that it exercises its power and influence on the source of the new idea. Bion gives the example of a group writing to a president to solicitate his help.

If the fight/flight basic assumption is dominant in the group, the reaction to the new idea will be to try to take possession, or "absorb" an external group, or let themselves be absorbed by the group, by identifying to the ideas it holds. The aim here is to get support for the group's fight/flight or resistance to the new idea. This will decrease the group's fear and enhance its self-evaluation, and will thus allows the group to continue operating under the influence of the basic assumption.

When the group is experiencing the basic assumption of pairing, and the threat of the messianic idea (which is different from the messianic hope) is felt by the group, the *aberrant form* observed will consist in the group splitting in subgroups, a phenomenon Bion called *schism*. When resorting to *schism*, the group splits into two subgroups: A conservative subgroup which will continue operating as a pairing group and holding the messianic hope, and a dissident subgroup which will set out to reach the same aim

using a different method. The latter subgroup will become “*so exacting in its demands that it ceases to recruit itself*” (p. 128) and, therefore, like the first group, will not develop, as a result of a restricted membership. The tendency of the latter subgroup is thus to isolate the new idea so that it does not influence the group process. Since this is also originally the aim of the conservative group, we can say that the two subgroups have disagreed to agree, by achieving the same aim of keeping in “quarantine” the messianic idea in order that it does not contaminate the group and put an end to the messianic hope.

VALENCY AND COOPERATION

The concept of *valency* is probably one of Bion’s most original concept in the field of group dynamics and group psychotherapy. The findings of group dynamics research has taught us that the group is not the sum of its constituting members. However, little has been written about the mechanisms involved in this passage from the individual level to the group level. In other words, what links the individual to the group has not been fully investigated by researchers in the field of group dynamics; this passage mechanism, is still a “missing link”.

Freud (1921) was among the rare researchers that have attempted to shed light on this “missing link” from a psychoanalytic standpoint. He argued that group members are bound together and to the group through libidinal ties, without making difference between the different types of groups and group functioning.

Although Bion did not reject the freudian theory, he approached

the problem from a different vertex. He postulates that for the individual to play a part in the group basic assumption, he/she must have a *valency*, a word he borrowed from physics. He defines *valency* as “*the individual's readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting the basic assumptions*” (see Figure 1). Being an inherent part of human behavior, *valency* is spontaneous and instinctive, requiring no effort, and no training.

There are as much *valency* types as basic assumptions. Individuals have not only different levels of valency (from high to low), but also different types of valency. For some, their principal *valency* is for fight/flight, for others dependency, or pairing. It is noteworthy that this does not mean that one has only one *valency*. Every human is capable of displaying all the types of valency, but one is usually at ease with only one type of *valency*. Metaphorically speaking, one can wear cloths of any size, but there is only one size that fits, and makes him/her feel comfortable. As put by Rioch (1976), it is therefore useful to know one's principal valency for better selection of groups and adjustment to them. Moreover, society has also always tried to find a way to make use of individual valencies for multiple purposes (war, education, for instance) motivated by the desire to assign “the right person to the right task, or place”.

Since *valency* applies only to the case of the basic assumption group, what about the relationship of the individual to the work group? Answering this question, Bion argues that the counterpart of *valency* is the capacity for *cooperation*. In other words, like having a valency is indispensable for participating and contributing

to the corresponding basic assumption, having a capacity for *cooperation* is also indispensable for the work group activity (this is represented in Figure 1). The difference between *valency* and *cooperation* is that the latter requires individual maturity, thought, training, and the former requires, as mentioned above, none of these characteristics. Bion (1961) concludes that

“organization and structure are weapons of the work group. They are the product of cooperation between members of the group, and their effect once established in the group is to demand still further cooperation from the individuals in the group... A group acting on basic assumption needs no organization or cooperation... [whose] counterpart is valency, a spontaneous, unconscious quality in the personality of man.” (p. 136).

GROUP MENTALITY AND GROUP CULTURE

It is very difficult to grasp the meaning of what Bion (1961) has called *group mentality* and *group culture*. This difficulty is due to the fact that neither Bion nor his followers have written in length about these concepts. Nevertheless, according to Bion, individual contributions or expressions (verbal or non-verbal) within a group serve as indicators of the person's own personality, and also the conception he/she has of the group, and of how the group should function. Some contributions are made overtly and recognized, and are meant to reflect the contributor's one feeling, and opinion. Some others (which include hostility and aggression) are made anonymously, with each member refusing consciously to personally identify with them. The group provides its members

with means by which these anonymous contributions are made, laying the foundations for a system that makes possible individual evasion and denial. Only a close examination of the group's mental life can lead to the discovery of the means allowing these anonymous contributions.

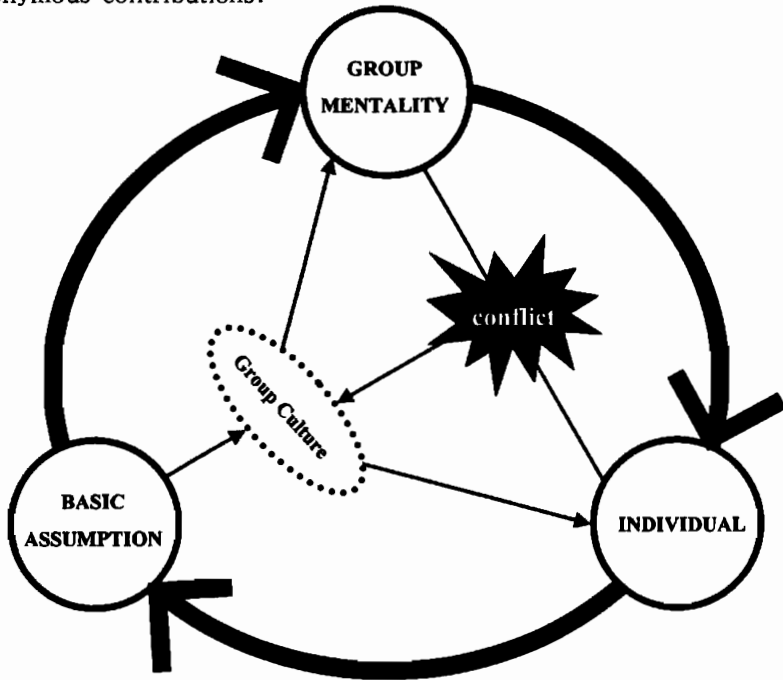


Figure 3. The Relationship between Basic Assumption, Group Mentality, Individual, and Group Culture

Bion (1961) postulates the existence of a *group mentality*, defining it “as the pool to which the anonymous contributions are made, and through which the impulses and desires implicit in these contributions are gratified.” (p. 50). However, each contribution, to be accepted as such, must conform to other anonymous contributions (basic

assumptions) of the group. Moreover, the *group mentality* is characterized by “conformity” which is opposed to “diversity” of thought characterizing the mentality of the group members whose contributions have led to its formation. Bion summarizes what he means by *group mentality* in the following:

“Group mentality is the unanimous expression of the will of the group, contributed to by the individual in ways of which he is unaware, influencing him disagreeably whenever he thinks or behaves in a manner at variance with the basic assumptions. It is thus a machinery of intercommunication that is designed to ensure that the group life is in accordance with the basic assumptions.”
(p. 65).

The *group mentality* may thus oppose the desires and aims of the group members, leading therefore to an ovoidable paradoxical situation. Bion explains that this paradoxical situation is due to the fact that the group is expected to be potentially capable of providing satisfaction for a number of the individual’s needs, but this power of the group is challenged by the *group mentality*.

In order to meet this challenge, the group resorts to the elaboration of a characteristic group culture. Bion (1961) uses the term of group culture including “*in it the structure which the group achieves at any given moment, the occupations it pursues, and the organization it adopts.*” (p. 55), and regards it as “*a function of the conflict between the individual’s desires and the group mentality.*” (p. 66). In other words, *group culture* can be understood as a means for the mediation between the individual within the group and the group as a whole, reducing the conflict between them.

As indicated in Figure 3, both, *group mentality* and *group culture* reflect the underlying basic assumption to which the individual contributes through his/her valency. That is, *group mentality* and *group culture* can be thus of a fight/flight, dependency, or pairing type. To conclude, it is noteworthy that, as put by Bion, these group phenomena are only occasionally observed in a clear way, and the fact that the observer is emotionally involved in the group makes their recognition even more difficult.

CATASTROPHIC CHANGE, THE MYSTIC AND THE ESTABLISHMENT

Besides the above-discussed two triads (namely, the basic assumption group, work group and specialized work group, and the triad individual, group mentality, and group culture,) there is another important triad constituted by what Bion calls *catastrophic change*, the *mystic*, and the *establishment*.

What Bion (1970) calls *catastrophic change* refers to a constant conjunction of elements and observable facts that are present in various fields (the mind, the group, the psychoanalytic session, and society, for example). This conjunction involves violence, subversion of the system and "invariance" in the relation container-contained. As a term closely related to the concept of *transformation*, the term "invariance" refers to the aspects which remains unaltered by the transformation process (Bion, 1961). Furthermore, the *catastrophic change* is, according to Bion an evolutionary phenomenon characterizing mental growth. It is like "an explosion that transforms a pre-catastrophic moment into a post-catastrophic one, rich in

emotions ” (Grinberg et al., 1993, p.77). The term “catastrophic” does not mean here that *catastrophic change* is a disaster, but rather a commencement of evolution.

Catastrophic change, or the constant conjunction of facts, can be observed when a new idea emerges. This new idea may have a disruptive effect on the pre-existing structure and organization of the group. The reaction of the group to the new idea depends on how it has been perceived. The group may react with friendliness, or with hostility and denial.

When confronted with the disruptive aspect of the new idea, the group will try to preserve its coherence and identity through conventions laws, culture and language.

The new idea is brought by exceptional individual to whom Bion refers using the term genius, messiah, or *mystic*. The mystic may be both creative and destructive for the group. Bion (1970) writes that the creative *mystic*, in his relation to the group, claims that his ideas conform to the existing general belief, quoting Jesus’ saying: “*Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfil*”. Of course, the *mystic* does not always claim conformity with the group, he may also appear, from within or without, in the guise of a nihilistic or destroyer, claiming no peaceable intentions or means. This applies to the revolutionary leader who claims to bring change by destroying the preexisting socio-political system.

The group reacts always with hostility to the nihilistic *mystic* and his/her disruptive ideas through what Bion calls the *establishment*. As put by Grinberg (1985), the term *establishment*, originally used

to designate those who exercise power and responsibility in state or other institutions, refers to whatever fulfils these functions within the personality or within the group. One of the principal tasks of the *establishment* is to protect the group from the nihilistic *mystic* and his/her new idea, and prevent disruption, by containing, expressing, and institutionalizing the creative idea. The function of containment is used by Bion "*with its militaristic of one force containing another*". Once contained the new creative idea is neutralized by making it less disruptive and frightening for the group, and at same time vulgarizing and making it accessible to the whole group.

The relationship between the *mystic* and the group may be of a *commensal*, *symbiotic*, or *parasitic* type. In the *commensal* type of relationship, the coexistence of *mystic* and the group is characterized by a lack of harm to each other and confrontation. On the contrary the *symbiotic* relationship is characterized by confrontation, and as a result, by growth that may not be always discerned without difficulty. The emotions predominantly involved in this type of relationship are love, hate and knowledge as discussed by Bion. Dominated by envy, the parasitic relationship has for result the destruction or impoverishment of both the *mystic* and the group. Bion (1970) writes that in this kind of relationship, where even friendliness is deadly, "*envy begets envy, and this self-perpetuating emotion finally destroys host and parasite alike.*" (p. 77). To give an example of this kind of relationship, Bion mentions the case of "*the group's promotion of the individual (the mystic) to a position in the establishment where his energies are deflected from his creative-destructive*

role and absorbed in administrative functions." (p. 78) in order to make him less dangerous and less explosive to the group. On the other hand, the attitude of the mystic towards the group (in the parasitic relationship) is that the latter "*should thrive or disintegrate but must not be indifferent*" (p. 78) to him or her. As a conclusion, Bion writes that *the function of the group is to produce a genius (mystic); the function of the establishment is to take up and absorb the consequences so that the group is not destroyed.*" (p. 82).

CONCLUSION

Wilfred R. Bion has gained wide recognition as one of the most creative psychoanalyst of our time. Following and refining some of the contributions of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, he has enriched psychoanalysis with original concepts, and new ways of psychoanalytic thinking about the individual and the group which were welcomed and acclaimed by social scientists and group therapists (Ganzarain, 1989) in general.

As discussed in the beginning of the present paper, writing an introduction to Bion's work is a real *tour de force*. Most of those who have tried to undertake this difficult task have ended up with either 1) simplifying his ideas by avoiding all the details that may obstruct this task, providing thus the reader with only a *cliche*, or a negative, which remains to be developed to grasp the content of the picture (see Pines, 1985, for example.), or 2) paraphrasing, or even reproducing Bion's own confusing and vague expressions to describe his ideas; which also does not help the reader to have a comprehensible picture of Bion's thinking either.

In the present paper, I have tried, bearing in mind the above-mentioned difficulties, to introduce some aspects of Bion's theory on groups. I have discussed mainly the duality of the group's functioning (the basic assumption group *versus* the work group), and what Bion calls the *triad* of the individual (with his needs, and valency), the group mentality, and the group culture. Using clinical vignettes as illustrations whenever possible, I have tried to be as clear as possible when discussing a concept. However, I think that this introduction, like all the other introductions of Bion, should not lure the reader into depriving oneself of the pleasure and enriching experience of reading Bion's works. This introduction is merely meant to be only a stimulus for further reading. The author does not pretend nor wish to answer all the questions about the work of Bion the reader may have. For, as put by Bion, quoting Maurice Blanchot, "*la réponse est le malheur de la question*", meaning that the answer is the misfortune of the question (curiosity), it kills it, especially for those who believe in the existence of a one *ever-right answer*.

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