

**The Psychoanalyst and Mystic Bion:  
The influence of *Bhagavad-Gita* on his work**

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**ABSTRACT**

Although few authors have mentioned, in passing, the influence of Indian religious and philosophical thought on Bion's metapsychology and thinking in general, to my knowledge, no detailed study shading light on the relationship between Bion's basic concepts and these sources. The present study constitutes thus an attempt to fill this lack. Based on the hypothesis that Bion has been in contact, as a child and in later stages of his life, with the teachings and philosophical ideas constituting *Baghavat-Gita*, I have tried to trace some of Bion's concept of back to the latter. First, after briefly introducing, a comparison was made between Bion's concepts of "O", the analytic attitude of "no-memory no-desire" and faith. Like the *Baghavat-Gita*, Bion holds that there is an ultimate truth that is unknowable because beyond the scope of our five senses. In other words, this truth can not be sensually known, it can only be *intuited*; *intuition* is, for both *Baghavat-Gita* and Bion, the only means for knowing this truth. The capacity for intuition is possible only when the knower has reached a mental state characterized by "no-memory, no desire" and *faith* in O, the ultimate truth, and the possibility of being *at-one-ment* with it.

In conclusion the author argues that Bion is not only a mystic (as defined in the present paper), but is also a psychoanalyst, in search for the best way to convey "O" of the analysis to his patients and readers.

Psychoanalysis and mysticism seem to be two mutually exclusive domains. In fact most of the psychoanalysts think of themselves not only as overtly non-mystic but also anti-mysticism. Freud's (1927) ideas on religion, for instance, show clearly this trend. The latter

believed that that dependency on religion constitutes one the greatest obstacles to humankind's maturation. As a pioneer, Freud has, as one of his preoccupation, allying psychoanalysis with science.

However, this did not prevent a number of other psychoanalysts to be more receptive to mysticism and mystic ideas (Lacan, 1966, Eigen, 1998), to a point that they have made use of mystical experience to built models for psychoanalytic practice and experience in general. Even Freud has borrowed from mythology and religion terms to describe some mental states (e.g., the budhist term of *nirvana*). However, the most prominent representative of the mystical trend is the object relationist Wilfred Bion.

The mystical trend is already present in Bion's (1961) early work on groups, especially his description of the "basic assumption group" (in particular the "basic assumption of pairing" and its characteristic messianic hope, and the relationship of the group to the messiah and genius). The influence of mystical Western and Eastern ideas is even greater on his later work. Discussing all the influential sources from which Bion drew some of his concepts goes far from the capacity of the author and the scope of the present paper; therefore only one of the Eastern source, namely *Bhagavad-Gita*, will be discussed here.

### **Brief Introduction to *Bhagavad-Gita***

*Bhagavad-Gita* is a religious poem which is regarded by most Indians as a fundamental text constituting the essence or the philosophical basis of Hinduism, as the most popular religious poem of Sanskrit literature, and the most influential work in Indian thought (Radhakrishnan, 1922). Composed of 700 verses divided into

18 chapters, *Bhagavad-Gita* is also the most important segment, the sixth Book, of the longest great epic poem, *Mahabharata* which was composed between 400 BC and 400 AD. According to Radhakrishnan (1922), the date of *Bhagavad-Gita* cannot be clearly determined. However, it is presumed that, based on the analysis of its content, *Bhagavad-Gita* was composed in the fifth century, and added to *Mahabharata* at a later period.

*Bhagavad-Gita* draws from a number of previous texts and doctrines, such as the *Vedas*, the *Upanisads*, *Buddhism*, and *Bhagavata* religion (Radhakrishnan, 1922). According to *Bhagavad-Gita*, one can not reach perfection, without following the teachings of the *Vedas*. *Bhagavad-Gita* considers thus Vedic injunctions as quite valid for men of a particular high cultural status, but does not adopt the Vedic gods, and rites considering them as obstacles to the attainment of supreme perfection.

*Bhagavad-Gita* has for philosophic background the *Upanisads*; some of the *Gita's* verses are identical with those of the latter. According to Radhakrishnan (1922), the *Bhagavata* religion was the immediate stimulus to the synthesis of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, to a point that it is actually suggested that the latter's teaching is identical with the doctrine of the *Bhagavatas*.

Although there have been no mention of Buddhism in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, they share some views. Both, writes Radhakrishnan, are "against the absolute authority of the *Vedas* and attempt to relax the rigours of caste by basing it on a less untenable foundation" (p. 526). Moreover, *Bhagavad-Gita* shares also the ethical principle of Buddhism, while condemning its negative metaphysics as a source of all unbelief and

error.

*Bhagavad-Gita* makes use also of the teachings of the *Samkhya-Yoga* as a basis for its philosophical observations, and recommends also *yoga* practices as a means for senses control, freedom from material attachment, self-purification, and self realisation.

Hence, the *Bhagavad-Gita* is, like most of other ancient Hindu books, a result of a combination of previous doctrines which were subjected to modifications to meet the needs of its author and those of the circumstances and the historical characteristics of the period where it was formulated. For, as put by Radhakrishnan (1922), "*Bhagavad-Gita* was formulated in a period of ethical religion and so shared in the feeling of the age (p. 532)... the author of the *Gita* found that men could not be made to love logic. So he took his stand on the *Upanisads*, drew out their religious implications, galvanised them into a living system by incorporating with them popular mythology and national imagination" (p. 522).

Up to now, I have tried here to situate *Bhagavad-Gita* within the group of other related Hindu books and religions, defining briefly its relationship with each of them, but I have not provided yet the reader with a sufficient introduction to the content of *Bhagavad-Gita* itself.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* takes the form of a dialogue (or interrogatory) between the eighth incarnation of god *Vishnu*, *Krishna* and a human hero, Prince Arjuna, at a great crisis in his life. The latter is introduced as having come to the battle-fields to fight the enemy, armed with no desire to do it. For the enemy was not other than his cousin-brothers. He was forced to come to battle-fields by the obstinacy of Duryodhana, who opposed any peaceful negotiation (Prabhupada,

1968). The following is Arjuna's verbalization of his crisi-characterized mental state:

*My whole body is trembling, and my hairs are standing on end. My bow, gandiva, is slipping from my hand, and my skin is burning (chapter 1, verse 29). I am now unable to stand here any longer. I am forgetting myself, and my mind is reeling. I foresee only evil, O killer of the Kesi demon (chapter 1, verse 30). I do not see how any good can come from killing my own kinsmen in this battle. Nor can I, my dear Krishna, desire any consequent victory, kingdom or happiness (chapter 1, verse 31).* . .

It is under this mental state that Krishna addressed and initiated him to the teachings of *Bhagavad-Gita*. What *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches is simple and universal in its scope, within the reach of everybody, regardless of his/her racial, cultural, social and economical status. The narrator seems to be a sage who speaks based on his feelings and experience-based knowledge, not a philosopher applying methods and doctrines learnt by belonging to a given philosophical school. *Bhagavad-Gita* which was principally meant as remedy for situations characterized by conscience troubles and mental confusion, teaches how to be invulnerable to these states by reaching the supreme Godhead, through control of senses, desires, and renunciation of the fruits of one's activity. "One who does not grasp either pleasure or grief, who neither laments nor desires, and who renounces both auspicious and inauspicious things, is very dear to Me" (Chapter 12: verse 17, in Prabhupada, 1968, p. 202), says Krishna to his disciple Arjuna. Discussing further *Bhagavad-Gita* goes beyond the scope of the present

paper. Therefore, I will confine my self to this brief introduction, and turn now to the main topic, namely the relationship between Bion's work and *Bhagavad-Gita*.

### **Bion's work and *Bhagavad-Gita***

The hypothesis developed in the present paper is that, although Bion did not directly refer to *Bhagavad-Gita*, he was, as a psychoanalyst, deeply influenced by its teaching. With the exception of a rare reference to Krishna and Arjuna in *Cogitations* (Bion, 1992), there are no proofs that Bion read or studied deeply *Bhagavad-Gita*. However, I believe that, as he was a very learned person in many areas, especially history, religions, mythology, and literature, he may have studied it as deeply as as he studied Plato, Kant and Freud. In fact, answering a question, through internet, of whether Bion read the *Upanisads* and the *Mahabarata*, Nicola Bion (1999) confirmed that his father read these works extensively and "thought about them a great deal" certainly before the 50s. For an intellectual as Bion who was very active during the period between the early 50s and end of the 60s, this is not a surprise. For this period was marked by a considerable interest in Eastern philosophies, religions, and mysticism in general, especially among the intellectuals and younger generation.

In the case of Bion, I believe that it is possible that his first contact with *Upanisads*, the *Mahabarata*, and *Bhagavad-Gita* occurred much earlier. It was through his daily relationship with his *aya*, Indian nunny (Bléandonu, 1994) that he would have been first impregnated with the fundamental ideas of these doctrines and their teachings. Grotstein (1981) also wrote that Bion "was...raised by a maid and governess,

both Indian, who often spoke to him of tales from the *Mahabharata*, whose language he could not easily decipher but whose impact he was never to forget" (p. 2). Bennett's novel, *the Secret Garden*, is an example of how *aya* can transmit popular local beliefs and myths to the children under her protection.

Since there are no references, and Bion is no more among us to confirm or reject this hypothesis, let us suppose that Bion was really influenced by the teachings of *Bhagavad-Gita*, and see now how they are reflected in his work, especially in his ideas of "no-memory, no-desire", "the absolute truth, O", and "faith".

### **The unknowable truth O**

According to Bion (1965), the object of psychoanalysis is psychic reality, the ultimate truth, the "infinite" which he called "O" (for origin). O can be the ultimate truth of a session, of personality, of dyadic (patient-analyst) or group relationship; it is every reality of the here-and-now of any relationship. This O, by definition can not be known because unknowable, and can not be communicated to oneself and to others, because it is uncommunicable. In other words, according to Bion, it is possible only to know *about O*, and communicate *about it*, but we can not know O, since it is the realness of everything, is everything and everywhere.

As shown below, this bionic O bears a striking resemblance to the description *Bhagavad-Gita* gives of the *Absolute truth*, the *Godhead*, the *Supreme*, or *Krishna*. This is how the latter introduces himself to Arjuna.

*"I shall now declare unto you in full this knowledge both phenomenal*



*and noumenal, by knowing which there shall remain nothing further to be known (Ch. 7, V.2, in Prabhupada, 1968, p.122). Out of many thousands among men..., and those who have achieved perfection, hardly one knows Me in truth (Ch. 7, V. 3; p.123). Of all that is material and all that is spiritual in this world, know for certain that I am both the origin and dissolution (Ch. 7, V. 6; p.126)...there is no truth superior to Me. Everything rests upon Me, as pearls are strung on a thread (Ch. 7, V. 7; p.126)...I am the original seed of all existences, the intelligence of the intelligent, and the prowess of all powerful men (Ch. 7, V. 10; p.126). I am in everyone's heart as the Supersoul (Ch. 7, V. 21; 135). I am, in one sense, everything, but I am independent (Ch. 7, V. 12; 128)... I am the source of everything; from Me the entire creations flows (Ch. 10, V. 8; 166). I also know all living entities; but Me no one knows (Ch. 7, V. 26; 137)".*

## **Reaching the unknowable O**

The only way to be in contact with O is to *be it*, or *become it*. In Bion's (1965) words, "it is impossible to know (psychic) reality for the same reason that makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, or pulled, or eaten, but not sung. Reality has to be "been": there should be a transitive verb *to be* expressly for use with the term reality" (p.148).

The bionic O manifests itself through multiple transformations (Bion, 1965), and one can relate to it in two ways O: knowing about O, and being O. The former way implies establishing a knowledge link (K-link) and its opposite, -K (minus K) between the knower and his/her object. This way of knowing O involves, and is dependent on, our five

senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch), and memory. Knowing O consists in gathering direct informations about the object, which our senses provide us with. According to Bion these informations are mere transformations from, or sensual manifestations of O, not O itself, the ultimate psychic reality.

To illustrate what he means by O and its direct sensual manifestations, Bion gives the example of shame. Shame, as a psychic experience, has no form, no smell, and does not emit any sound; it corresponds to O. According to Bion, this psychic reality can not be known directly through our senses. One may see someone blushing and then deduce that he/she is feeling shame, but he/she cannot see shame itself. The latter can only be apprehended through intuition, or what may be called the *sixth sense*.

These bionic mystic ideas about the ultimateness and “unknownability” of O, the psychic truth through senses, reflect clearly, here also, the basic teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. As discussed by Radhakrishnan (1922), *Bhagavad-Gita* is a system of speculation as well as a set of rules of life, an intellectual search for the Godhead, the ultimate truth or reality. It approaches the problem of ultimate reality in a dualist way. There is the objective, manifested, and finite truth which is the result of senses activity, and the subjective, unmanifested, infinite truth that goes beyond the senses. The former corresponds to substance, is unreal, transitory, perishable, and illusory. On the opposit, the latter which corresponds to the supreme reality beyond the manifest substance, is permanent, unchanging, unperishable, eternal, and absolutely real. It is this latter truth that *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches and favours. However, this should not be understood as meaning that there

are two mutually exclusive truths, the finite and infinite truths. This distinction between the finite and infinite truths characterizes only loose thinking. According to *Bhagavad-Gita*, "there is only the infinite, and the finite is no more than the finitisation of the infinite" (Radhakrishnan, 1922; p. 537).

It is noteworthy that the expression "finitisation of the infinite" bears striking resemblance to what Bion (1965) calls "transformation from O". Both describes a process which consists in converting the ultimate truth into something limited in space and time. Bion drew our attention to the obvious fact that, as psychoanalysts, we are permanently *observing, feeling, and performing transformations* of the results of our sensual and emotional experiences of O. In other words, we are permanently transforming what our senses provides us with into finite products (words, pictures, thoughts, and so forth), depending on the required and available means, and on what Bion (1970) calls the *vertex* (stance). These transformed products are finite, because as soon as they are produced, they are retransformed in a further finite product if a new seer or knower is available.

Regarding the bionic dualistic approach to O, *knowing about* versus *being O*, discussed above, one can find it also, for instance, in verse 3 of the Third Chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Responding to Arjuna's demand for guidance, Krishna "said: O sinless Arjuna, I have already explained that in this world there are two classes of men...Some are inclined to understand Him (the absolute truth) by empirical philosophical speculation, and others are inclined to know Him by devotional service."

The formers, according to Prabhupada (1968), are those who

speculate and try to understand reality by experimental knowledge (through senses) and philosophy, resorting, as a procedure to carry their task, to *sankhya-yoga*. The latter work, following the principal of *buddhi-yoga* or *karma-yoga*, under entire dependence on the *Supreme*, or *Krishna* consciousness. In Bion's terminology, the first class includes those trying to know about O, and the second one those aiming at being "at-one-ment" with their object of knowledge (O). For both, Bion and *Bhagavad-Gita*, it is the second class of category of knowers that are likely to be in knowledge of the ultimate and infinite truth.

### **The state of 'no-memory, no-desire'**

Hence, both *Bhagavad-Gita* and Bion emphasizes the existence of an unknowable ultimate and infinite reality or truth. As discussed above, Bion (1970) holds that, although this truth (O) can not be known by definition, "it can be been" under favorable conditions. These conditions should be such that one can be in a mental state which allows a full use of *intuition*, the sole means to grasp O, and be *at-one-ment* with it. For *intuition* is conceived of by Bion as the mental counterpart of the sens organs, and referred to as "organ of consciousness".

According to Bion this mental state can be reached only if the knower was able to eschew memory and desire. For these are deeply rooted in the senses, and will interfere with or inhibit the knower's ability for intuition of O, which does not occur through sense perception, and is the result of an inner creative act of thought. What Bion recommends thus is a shift from a sensual (based on senses) to a mental state (Symington & Symington, 1996) which can be rendered possible only through what Bion calls *reverie* and a strict discipline, a discipline that

allows the person to detach him/herself from an additive dependency on memory, and free him/herself from any desire. Desire includes here the desire to obtain results from one's activity, and even the desire to understand. Bion (1967) goes further by arguing that even the desire to cure one's patient was an obstacle to the analysis. He wrote that "the tendency to equate psycho-analysis with 'treatment' and 'cure' with improvement is a warning that the psychoanalysis is becoming restricted. All such desires restrict the possibility of intuitive understanding (Bion, 1967; p. 157).

Besides eschewing memory and desires, Bion (1970) recommends also to strive after *negative capability* which he defined as a mental state characterizing a person "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (p. 125). In other words, a person with a negative capability can stand his/her ignorance or lack of understanding.

It is very easy for a person familiar with the teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita* to recognize them in the above discussed bionic concepts and recommendations. According to *Bhagavad-Gita*, one of the basic prescriptions for knowledge of the absolute reality is control of one's senses. A large part of the teachings of Krishna to Arjuna is dedicated to this topic. Here are some verses from Chapter 2 denouncing the evil of being dependent on senses and their gratification.

*"In the minds of those who are too attached to sense enjoyment and material opulence, and who are bewildered by such things, the resolute determination for devotional service to the Lord (Godhead, Absolute truth) does not take place (Ch. 2, verse 44). O Partha, when a man gives up all varieties of sense desire which arise of invention, and when*

*his mind finds satisfaction in the self alone, then he is said to be in pure transcendental consciousness (verse 55). One who is able to withdraw his senses from sense objects, as the tortoise draws his limbs within the shell, is to be understood as truly situated in knowledge (verse 58). When contemplating the objects of the senses, a person develops attachment for them, and from such attachment lust develops, and from lust anger arises (verse 62). From anger, delusion arises, and from delusion bewilderment of memory. When memory is bewildered, intelligence is lost (verse 63). A person who has given up all desires for sense gratification, who lives free from desires..., and is devoid of false ego, he alone can attain real peace (verse 71). That is the way of the spiritual...life, after attaining which a man is not bewildered" (verse 72).*

This repudation of senses and desire is discussed again in Chapter 3. Addressing Arjuna, Krishna says: "*O son of Kunti, a man's pure consciousness is covered by his eternal enemy in the form of lust, which is never satisfied and which burns like fire (Ch. 3, verse 39). The senses, the mind and the intelligence are sitting places of this lust, which veils the real knowledge of the living entity and bewilders him" (verse 40).*

The term desire includes all kinds of desire, even the desire of success, the desire to gain fruits from one's activity. "*There is no work that affects Me, nor do I aspire for the fruits of action. One who understands this truth about Me does not become entangled in the fruitive reaction of work" (Ch. 4, verse 14)...One who is unattached to the fruits of his work and who works as he is obligated is in the renounced order of life, and he is true mystic (verse 14). One who does not grasp either pleasure or grief, who neither lament nor desires, and who*

*renounces both auspicious and inauspicious things, is very dear to me*" (Ch. 6, verse 1), Krishna taught his disciple-friend Arjuna.

Like the author of *Bhagavad-Gita*, Bion is aware of the difficulty of being without without memory and desire. Both regards this mental state as the results of intensive, continuous and strict discipline. In his *Cogitations*, Bion (1992) reminds us that "what has not been recognized is the...need for the establishment of freedom from memory, desire and understanding as a permanent, durable and continuous discipline (p. 316).

Similarly, *Bhagavad-Gita* urges the *yogi* seeking the ultimate truth to be determined and to patiently prosecute the practice without deviation. The *yogi* is also urged to believe in his ability to succeed at the end, and pursue this course with great perseverance, not becoming discouraged. In the Chapter 6, it is written that "*one should engage oneself in the practice of yoga with undeviating determination and faith. One should abandon, without exception, all material desires born of false ego and thus control all the senses on all sides by the mind* (Ch. 6, verse 24)...*A true yogi observes Me in all beings, and also sees every being...everywhere*" (verse 29).

After hearing these recommendations, "*Arjuna said: O Madhusudana (Krishna), the system of yoga which You have summarized appears impractical and unendurable to me, for the mind is restless and unsteady* (verse 33). *For the mind is restless, turbulent, obstinate and very strong, O Krishna, and to subdue it is, it seems to me, more difficult than controlling the wind*" (verse 34).

Responding to the discouraged Arjuna, Krishna said: "*O mighty-armed son of Kunti, it is undoubtedly very difficult to curb the restless*

*mind, but it is possible by constant practice and by detachment” (verse 35).*

As discussed above, besides discarding memory and desire, Bion recommended also *negative capability* as a path to *intuition* and discovery. This is also one of the recommendations of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Krishna said: “*If one is able to tolerate the urges of the material senses and check the force of desire and anger (Ch. 5, verse 23)...One who is beyond duality and doubt, whose mind is engaged within... achieves liberation in the Supreme (verse 25). One who is not envious but is a kindly friend to all creatures, who does not think himself a proprietor, who is free from false ego (pretention)...One who is equal to friends and enemies, who is equipoised in honor and dishonor, heat and cold, happiness and distress, fame and infamy, who is always silent..., who is fixed in knowledge and engaged in devotional service,... is very dear to Me (Ch. 12, verse 13-14, 18-19).*

As shown by these verses, *Bhagavad-Gita* recommandest *tolerance* as a means leading to the supreme goal or truth. Hence, in spite of their difference in terminology, there is a striking resemblance between Bion's idea of *negative capability* and these verses from *Bhagavad-Gita*. It is likely thus that these verses, besides the work of Keats, served as a source for Bion's concept of *Negative capability*.

## **Faith in O**

Since a few decades ago, we have been witnessing the emergence in psychoanalysis of a number of concepts that have some aspects of what is usually called *faith* (Eigen, 1998). Ericson 's (1950) “basic trust”, Winnicott's (1971) “transitional space” and “use of the object”,



Kohut's (1977) "stress on positive aspects of idealization", Meltzer's (1973) "superego ideal" are among the most known of these concepts.

However, comparatively speaking, Bion's reference to faith is the most explicit. He argues that believing in the existence of an absolute truth unknowable by definition, and in the possibility of being it, or being *at-one-ment* with it, is a prerequisite for a real encounter with O. Bion (1970) discussed the concepts of *faith* (F) and *acts of faith*, in relation to the psychoanalytic attitude of "no-memory, no-desire". According to Bion (1965), by practicing the discipline of "no-memory, no-desire" while holding *faith* in O, the analyst can improve or increase his/her ability to exercise *acts of faith* by which alone the analyst can reach a state of mind characterized by *at-one-ment* with his/her patient's O. In other words, "F reveals and makes possible experiences that are often painful and difficult for the individual analyst and analysand to tolerate" (Bion, 1970, p. 46), and which could not, without the person's *faith* in them, emerge to the point at which they are recognized by the senses. The *act of faith* must evolve before it can be apprehended, and is apprehended only when expressed in and by thought, just like "the artist's "O" is apprehended when it has been transformed into a work of art" (Bion, 1970; p. 35). It is founded on the acceptance of the unknown and toleration of its unknowability. The *act of faith* corresponds to the hypothesis that an absolute truth exists and that it is possible to *be it*, or be at one with it. Although it is the mystic that is closer to the experience of absolute truth, the latter is also essential to scientist too. Bion argues that the act of faith derives from a scientific state of mind, and it should be distinguished from faith used in conversational usage, owing to the latter's strong religious

connotations.

In spite of this distinction, this concept of *faith* still constitutes the apogee in Bion's mysticism. The same emphasis on faith as a path to O is also one of the fundamental ideas in *Bhagavad-Gita*. According to the latter, transcendental knowledge can be achieved only by a faithful person, or person who is really convinced that it is only by acting in Krishna consciousness that one can attain the Absolute Truth and spiritual peace. The following verses are examples showing the importance *Bhagavad-Gita* attaches to faith.

*"A faithful man who is absorbed in transcendental knowledge and who subsues his senses quickly attains the supreme spiritual peace (Ch. 4, verse 39). But ignorant and faithless persons who doubt the revealed scriptures do not attain God consciousness (Ch. 4, verse 40). When one's intelligence, mind, faith, and refuge are all fixed in the Supreme, then one becomes fully cleansed of misgivings through complete knowledge and thus proceeds straight on the path of liberation (Ch. 5, verse 17). One should engage oneself in the practice of yoga with undeviating determination and faith" (Ch. 6, verse 24).*

In the sixth chapter of *Bhagavad-Gita*, Arjuna asked his lord *"What is the destination of the man of faith who does not persevere, who in the beginning takes to the process of self-realization but who later desists due to worldly-mindedness and thus does not attain perfection in mysticism? (verse, 37). O mighty-armed Krishna, does not such a man, being deviated from the path of transcendence, perish like a riven cloud, with no position in any sphere? (verse 38)"*. As if to dispel Arjuna's covert doubt, Krishna answered him saying: *"Son of Prtha, a transcendentalist engaged in auspicious activities does not meet with*

*destruction, either in this world or in the spiritual world (verse 40). And of all yogis, he who always abides in Me with great faith...is most intimately united with Me...(verse 47)".* Reminding again Arjuna of the importance of faith in chapter 12, Krishna said, *"The supreme Personality of Godhead said: He whose mind is fixed on my personal form...worshipping Me with great and transcendental faith, is considered My Me to be most perfect"* (verse 2).

As can be seen through the above mentioned verses, the similarity between Bhagavad-Gita's and Bion's conception of faith is, here also striking. In spite of their different vertices, both situate *faith* at the very heart of the possibility of experiencing the ultimate truth O.

### **Catastrophic consequence of O experience**

According to Bion (1970), the experience of being *at-one-ment* with O, or transformation in O, is associated with transformation and evolution as well as with dread, explosiveness, pain, disruptiveness, or *catastrophic change*.

By *catastrophic change*, Bion means an evolutionary phenomenon of mental growth. He compares it to an explosive emotional experience that transforms a "pre-catastrophic" moment into an emotionally richer "post-catastrophic" one. Unlike what the word "catastrophic" may suggest, this concept designates a starting point of a given evolutionary process. It is the result of a *constant conjunction* of elements and facts, the result of *correlation* between two different transformations from O, and of the resulting emotional experience of being O. However, it is also a catastrophe, a disaster in the sense that it leads to a violent disorganization and subversion, and turbulence of

the system prevailing before the change. It leads to awareness of unconscious desires, wishes (for instance, one's oedipal wishes and the resulting castration anxieties), unconscious tendencies and mental states (being mad, having murdering tendency, and so one). It is for this reason that becoming O is a dreadful and painful experience that is likely to give rise to strong resistance and evasion. This shows thus the paradox inherent in the experience of *being* O, the ultimate truth. It is at the same time indispensable for mental growth, but explosive and painful tool, to a point that it may be evaded and resisted.

*Bhagavad-Gita* also holds a similar point of view about the effect the knowledge of absolute truth has on the knower. For *Bhagavad-Gita*, like in the whole vedic literature (Prabhupada, 1968), this knowledge is accompanied by emotional unrest, explosion and destruction.

In *Bhagavad-Gita*, it is written that as Arjuna wanted to see the universal form of the absolute truth (Krishna), he asked the latter to display it. His lord said to him: "*But you can not see Me with your present eyes. Therefore I give you divine eyes, so that you can behold My mystic opulence*" (Ch. 11, verse 8). *Arjuna saw in that universal form unlimited mouths and unlimited eyes. it was all wondrous (verses 10-11). If hundreds of thousands of suns rose at once into the sky, they might resemble the effulgence of the Supreme Person (truth) in that universal form (verse 12). At that time, bewildered and astonished, his hairs standing on end, Arjuna began to pray with folded hands, offering obeissances to the Supreme Personality of Godhead*" (versese 41).

Sharing his experiencing with his lord, Arjuna said: "*O Lord, I see in Your universal body many, many forms...expended without limit.*"

*There is no end, there is no beginning, and there is no middle to all this (verse 16). All the demigods surrender unto You, entering into You. very much afraid (verse 20)...perturbed at seeing your many faces, eyes, arms,...and Your terrible teeth. And as they are perturbed, so am I...I am unable to keep the equilibrium of my mind! Seeing Your radiant color filling the skies and seeing Your mouths and eyes, I am afraid (verses 23-24)...Please be gracious toward me! I cannot keep my balance seeing thus Your blazing, deathlike faces and awful teeth. I am bewildered in all directions...(verse 25)... I see You devouring all people in Your blazing mouths and covering all the universe by Your immeasurable rays. Searching the worlds, You are manifest...Please be gracious to me. I do not know what Your mission is, and I desire to hear of it (verses 30-31)". Answering Arjuna's request, Krishna said: "Time I am, the destroyer of the worlds, and I have come to engage all people. Except for you, all...will be slain (verse 32)...you have seen this universal form of Mine. Your Mind has been perturbed...Now...be free from all disturbance. With a peaceful mind you can see My form as you have desired...My dear Arjuna, the form you are seeing now is very difficult to behold. Even the demigods are ever seeking the opportunity to see this form, which is so dear." (verses 48-49-52).*

As revealed by the above mentioned verses, the *Bhagavad-Gita* holds that there is an ultimate truth embodied by Krishna that can be known, through revelation, only to those that have reached Krishna consciousness, that is, the transcendentalists. In spite of being indispensable for reaching the supreme state of being in touch with the Godhead, that is change and growth, the ultimate truth is also a frightful, bewildering, and perturbing experience for the one who, thanks to his

undevided devotional service, came close to it.

Albeit their different vertices, Bion's conception of O share, here also, with *Bhagavad-Gita's* conception of Ultimate Truth, a number fundamental aspects, among which the dreadfulness and explosiveness of the Truth.

## CONCLUSION

With the exception of few references by some authors of the fact that Bion was influenced by some religious sources (especially, the *Mahabharata*) there is, to my knowledge, no detailed study shading light on the relationship between Bion's basic concepts and these sources. The present study constitutes thus an attempt to fill this lack.

Based on the hypothesis that Bion has been in contact, as a child and in later stages of his life, with the teachings and philosophical ideas constituting *Bhagavad-Gita*, I have tried to trace Bion's concept of "O", the analytic attitude of "no-memory no-desire" and faith, back to the latter. That is, like *Baghavad-Gita*, Bion holds that there is an ultimate truth that is unknowable because beyond the scope of our five senses. In other words, both, *Baghavad-Gita* and Bion hold that this truth can not be sensually known, it can only be *intuited*; *intuition* is the only means for knowing this truth. Like *Baghavad-Gita*, Bion distinguish between knowing about O – which involves the senses and is therefore a sensual experience –, and knowing O. The latter way of knowing the truth is independent of the senses, it is a spiritual, psychic or transcendental experience. It implies "being" the truth itself, or being *at-one-ment* with it, and in last analyst, re-being in touch with oneself or a part of it. Moreover, like it is for the devotee or the

true *yogi*, this ultimate truth is also the object of the analytic dyad (patient/analyst) in the session.

Without this ultimate truth, there is no growth, no full self-realization. However, like the *Baghavat-Gita*, Bion also points at the dreadful, painful, explosiveness, and destructive character of the emotional experience of “being-at-one” with the absolute truth O. In other words, both holds that this sense-transcending experience will lead to, in bionic terminology, a *catastrophic change*.

That is why it is not within anybody’s reach. *Baghavat-Gita*, as well as Bion, preserve the privilege of the knowledge of the absolute truth to the true devotee, the one, who is following a strict discipline so that he is able of tolerating one’s inability to know, or negative *capability*, and the one who has reached a mental state where he is in control of his desires and memory in relation to the object of knowledge. According to both, *Baghavat-Gita* and Bion, acceding to this mental state prerequisites *faith* in the existence of an ultimate truth independent of its knower.

What does this similarity between *Baghavat-Gita* and some of Bion’s ideas mean? Does it mean that the latter has deviating from psychoanalysis to mysticism? Paraphrasing Grostein (1981), if mysticism implies being the closest possible to “O” and able to transform (O→K), communicate and “publicate” from it, “then Bion is indeed one of the rare mystics of our or any time. But if mystic is identified with mystery in order to preserve his mystique, then Bion is certainly not of this order” (p. 33).

Unlike the impression the reader may have, the purpose of the present article is not to demonstrate Bion’s mysticism, but to point at one of

the numerous vertices, namely the religious vertex, from which Bion has tried to apprehend, and transform the experience or O (Grotstein, 1997). In fact, Bion has always tried to convey this experience, borrowing concepts and ideas from various fields, namely mathematics, literature, and physics, because of the lack of satisfactory psychoanalytic terminology to describe it. Therefore, his reference to *Baghavad-Gita* should be understood also as an example of this tendency to borrow concepts only, and not as a shift from psychoanalysis to mysticism.

Although Bion would accept any criticism that depicts him as being non-scientifically minded, he would negatively react to any criticism denying him being psychoanalytically-minded. In other words, Bion would not mind the criticism that psychoanalysis is non-scientific, because psychoanalysis is psychoanalysis, and should not be something else. For him, criticizing psychoanalysis as non-scientific is absurd; it is like criticizing it for not being religious or artistic. Bion was dissatisfied with the very narrow definition of science, and suggested that one does not need to think whether what he/she is doing is scientific or not; most of his work suggests that the analyst should rather try to explore and make use of the artist in him/herself by simply being psychoanalyst.



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