The Doubting Analyst’s Facilitation of a Creative Analytic Space

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Abstract

Drawing inspiration from the film *Doubt*, the author attempts to illustrate how the doubting analyst is able to facilitate the development of a rich ambiguous and evocative context for change and emotional-mental development. The author describes how the doubting stance has been implicitly addressed and understood, by Freud, Klein and Winnicott, each in their own particular way. The capacity for doubt however, was most explicitly embodied in Bion’s notion of negative capability, that is, the capacity to tolerate the doubt and frustration of being without memory, understanding and desire. By invoking dialectical theory in relation
to doubt, the author attempts to provide a framework that allows for a deeper and more elaborate understanding of the transformative nature Bion’s negative capability.

**Shanley’s Doubt**

‘Doubting charms me not less than knowledge.’ — Dante

‘The believer is happy; the doubter is wise.’ — Hungarian Proverb

Sister Aloysius, the austere and formidable head nun at a Catholic school in the Bronx, has reason to believe that Father Flynn, the more casual and contemporary school parish priest, has sexually interfered with the school’s only African American child, Donald Miller. She peers accusingly and penetratingly at Father Flynn. Her words are as stark as her creaseless starched black and white habit. ‘I know what you have been up to with that boy!’

‘You haven’t the slightest proof of anything!’ retorts Father Flynn, with huge indignation.

‘I have my certainty!’ She darts back.

This is a pivotal scene in Shanley’s screen adaptation of his Pulitzer Prize play, ‘Doubt’, where certainty and uncertainty begin their jousting for the truth. As the play unfolds, the author’s brilliant writing holds the audience in an ongoing agonizing state of doubt. At one moment Flynn is a shameless, smooth-operating molester, at another he is victim to Sister Aloysius’s bigoted and cynical vengefulness. Sister James, the young, naïve, wide-eyed and idealistic nun, is shocked at Sister Aloysius accusing Father Flynn of paedophilic behavior. This is in spite of the fact that she was the first to report Father Flynn’s ‘suspicious’ behavior!

‘I don’t believe that Father Flynn did anything wrong. It is unsettling to look at people with suspicion,’ implored Sister James. ‘It makes me feel less close to God.’

Sister Aloysius replies in an all knowing and somewhat patronizing tone. ‘You want things to be resolved, so you can have simplicity back!’

Sister James, like Sister Aloysius, could tolerate no doubt, in this case though, she was certain that Flynn was innocent. They both knew with certainty that their perceptions were correct. At this stage however, things are not as simple for the audience. Shanley has cleverly planted the seeds of doubt. Was it that Sister Aloysius’s absolute belief was consistent with, and maintained, her jaded cynical world
view relating to her own bitterness and struggles? Or was it that Sister Aloysius, in spite of her ‘starched’ demeanor, was actually a lone, brave and just voice, badly needed in the early Sixties, when male patriarchy and sexual abuse was rampant within the church? Was it that Sister James’s belief fitted with her ’needed’ world view relating to man’s essential innocence? Was she placing her need for idealisation before truth? Is Father Flynn a well meaning and provocative revisionist who wants to popularise and modernise the church, or is he a predator who feeds off the vulnerable and innocent?

When Sister Aloysius turned to Sister James criticizing her of her need for ‘simplicity’, or when Sister Aloysius knew with absolute conviction of Father Flynn’s guilt, Shanley, I believe was expressing his understanding of our need, and indeed at times, our imperative, to know with absolute certainty, so as to ‘have our simplicity back.’ In his writing, he demonstrates his understanding of how difficult it is, yet how important it is for us to develop a capacity to ‘hold’ doubt. In this sense, Shanley is echoing Bion’s understanding of this dilemma: ‘The temptation is always to terminate prematurely the stage of uncertainty and doubt about what the patient is saying’ (Bion, 1992 p. 290).

Doubt and its productivity in the creation of new order out of old has been well embraced by thinkers of religion, science, philosophy, the arts and psychoanalysis. Isaac Basheva Singer (1978) alerts us to the understanding that the true religious thinkers were the doubters:

‘Doubt is part of all religions. All the religious thinkers were doubters.’

Buddhist teachings warn against the paralysing effect of certainty. They embrace and encourage doubting. The 17th Century Japanese Zen master Takasui taught: ‘You must doubt deeply, again and again … Pay no attention to the various illusory thoughts and ideas that may occur to you. Only doubt more and more deeply’ (Quoted in Epstein, 1995). Their meditative Koans such as ‘what is the sound of one hand clapping?’ are designed to leave the disciples pondering, perplexed, doubting and unresolved (Batchelor, 1990).

Doubt in philosophy has its greatest associations with Descartes. He had, as the cornerstone of his philosophical treaties, the notion of doubt. He invented a philosophical method that required him to cast doubt on all he believed, so that he could ultimately become able to develop a mind of his own. He wrote that ‘what was true at night in his dreams, was false by day, what was false by day was true by night.’ He wrote, (as would Bion centuries later) ‘I must seriously address myself to the general upheaval of all my former opinions (Descartes, 1641, quoted in Slavin 2002).
Doubt in science, only became possible and indeed safe, as the black clouds of medieval certainty and dogma began to disperse in 16th and 17th century Europe, opening the way for the light of doubt and uncertainty to become manifest. The Renaissance brought with it the freedom and indeed the imperative to validate and to question. It might be said now that true scientists feed off doubt, in that they discover through their attempt to disprove their most loved theories. They do this through careful observation and experimentation that continually test their hypotheses.

As much as we understand the virtues of uncertainty, we are, I believe, continually threatened by the invasion of ‘the black medieval clouds of certainty’ that accumulate and thrive in climates of extreme anxiety and uncertainty. Historically it is in times of most ignorance and instability that individuals become averse to uncertainty, and turn to rigid and fundamentalist certainty, ritual and beliefs. This process is mirrored in our human psyches when the mind becomes dominated by fears, anxieties and rigid beliefs. In this situation, there is a collapse of reflective symbolic thinking where oscillation is replaced by ossification (Israelstam, 2007). Healthy ecosystems, be they biological, social or individual, are characterized by a dialectically attuned oscillation between dialectically related entities (Israelstam, 2007).

The playwright/screenwriter Shanley leaves, I believe the doubting with the viewer, in doing so, he is creating a fertile potential space in which creative questioning and thought about the politics of power, corruption, race, and feminism can be explored, not only of those times, but in a universal sense as well. It is this doubting state of mind that is so generative of new, elaborative, reflective and symbolic thinking that I wish to now explore in a psychoanalytic context. I would like to illustrate how important, and indeed vital, this state of mind can be both for analyst and patient. I would like to emphasise that it could well be argued that the capacity to sustain doubt and its inevitable tensions and frustrations, of knowing and not knowing, could be seen to be a developmental achievement.

The quest to develop an ‘empty mind’, a state of ‘mind-less-ness’, ‘absent-mindedness’, a mind that is free of stifling predetermined prepackaged preconceptions is not new to psychoanalysis. Historically this started with Freud (1912) when he moved away from hypnosis as the window into the unconscious. He realized that the vital yet so elusive unconscious could be unleashed by developing a technique that might free us of our self consciousness, and our urge to establish order through knowing and rationality. He began to recommend to analysts that they attempt to establish a mind set of ‘evenly-suspended attention’. (We see here the seeds of Bion’s without memory, understanding and desire—see later).
The technique …, is a very simple one … It consists simply in not directing one’s notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same ‘evenly-suspended attention’ … As soon as anyone deliberately concentrates his attention to a certain degree, he begins to select from the material before him … and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations. This, however, is precisely what must not be done … If he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows (Freud, 1912, p. 112).

The rule for the doctor may be expressed: ‘He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his “unconscious memory”’. Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: ‘He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind’ (Freud, 1912, p. 112).

This rule for analysts dovetailed with his ‘fundamental rule’ for patients:

What you tell me must differ in one respect from an ordinary conversation. Ordinarily you rightly try to keep a connecting thread running through your remarks and you exclude any intrusive ideas that may occur to you and any side-issues, so as not to wander too far from the point. But in this case you must proceed differently … say whatever goes through your mind. Act as though, for instance, you were a traveler sitting next to the window of a railway carriage and describing to someone inside the carriage the changing views which you see outside (Freud, 1913, p. 135).

Freud cautioned that, if the analyst moved away from this ‘suspended’ state of mind, they would be: ‘Throwing away most of the advantage which results from the patient’s obeying the ‘fundamental rule of psychoanalysis’ i.e. to ‘free associate’ (Freud, 1912, p. 112).

Freud, (anticipating Bion’s ‘without desire’), understood well the dangers of the analyst’s analytic zeal and misguided ambition, when analysts ‘endeavour to make something specially excellent of a person.’ He strongly advises that: ‘The doctor should hold himself in check, and take the patient’s capacities rather than his own desires as guide’ (Freud, 1912, p. 119).

Freud was well aware of the tensions, deprivations and frustrations that his rules relating to the relinquishment of knowing, remembering and therapeutic ambition, imposed on both patient and analyst. Freud described yet another source of tension and frustration that arose in relation to his ‘Two principals of mental functioning.’ Freud described the emotional struggle that ensues in the conflict that
arises out of the two opposing mental functions i.e. the pleasure vs. the reality principle (1911). The pleasure principle involves the use of omnipotent and ‘hallucinatory’ mechanisms that provide instant relief and gratification from anxieties and tensions that arise threateningly from the realms of reality. Freud understood well, how the capacity to tolerate the intolerable frustration and anxiety relating to the reality principle, and his ‘rules,’ acts as a powerful impetus to thinking and emotional maturation (1911).

Freud could well be credited with paving the way to Bion’s understanding of projective identification and its associated reverie and containment that are inextricably linked to his understanding of the importance of the analyst’s capacity for doubt (see later).

To put it in a formula: He must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into sound waves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor’s unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient’s free associations.

(FREUD, 1912, p. 115).

Freud stresses, as we would today, how important it is for both analyst and patient, to aspire to a state of free-floating attention.

**Melanie Klein—‘*No mind*’ and Absence**

Klein remained true to the spirit of Freud’s pioneering work relating to the analysts’ and patients’ open, attentive and hovering stance. This unshackled mind, for Klein as for Freud, established the analytic climate that promoted a freeing up of unconscious elements in the patient, and increased the analyst’s receptivity to these unconscious elements—rich fodder from which their interpretations were made.

Klein’s major contribution in this realm though, was to recognize how the equivalent of freely floating associations and spontaneous expression were expressed by children in their play and drawings (1932). Like Freud, she understood well the tensions that inevitably emerge out of the pleasure-reality conflict and the importance of the infant’s capacity to tolerate the frustrations and anxieties inherent in early infantile anxiety. For Klein, the major source of the infants’ anxiety arose out of their destructive phantasies projected via projective identification onto and into
the mother. She understood the importance of these disturbing affects and how the successful management of these, give birth to symbolic function and thinking. ‘A sufficient quantity of anxiety is the necessary basis for abundance of symbol-formation and of phantasy’. (KLEIN, 1930, p. 25).

Klein understood that in order for symbolic function to develop, the infant had to ‘tolerate the pressure’ (we might add doubt and frustration), arising out of their infantile anxieties. As the ego develops, a true relation to reality is gradually established out of this unreal reality … the development of the ego and the relation to reality depend on the degree of the ego’s capacity at a very early period to tolerate the pressure of the earliest anxiety-situations’ (KLEIN, 1930, p. 25).

The role of absence and its inevitable frustration in the process of mental development and symbol formation was also elaborated on and developed by Klein’s colleagues, notably Hanna Segal (1978), and O’Shaughnessy (1964, p. 34), who in her classic paper ‘The Absent Object’ noted that: ‘The absent object is a spur to the development of thought. You can be asked to think of something that is absent—a painting, but you can’t be asked to think of a painting you are already looking at; perception shuts out thought’ (p. 34).

Although Melanie Klein and her colleagues did not make a direct reference to the doubting state of mind, I believe that this is strongly implied. When the baby reaches a stage where it is able to understand that the hated absent breast is the same breast that is loved and present, it can be said to have entered the depressive position. Developmentally, it could be said that the infant has reached the capacity to tolerate the frustrations, tensions and anxieties generated in being able to hold and embrace two dialectically related entities, without resorting to splitting and projection (KLEIN, 1946). The baby, in the depressive position, can be said to have developed a capacity to know and not know i.e. a capacity for doubt.

Winnicott and Formlessness

Of all the analytic thinkers, it could be argued the Winnicott had the most profound and intuitive understanding of the value of formlessness and uncertainty, and the consequent anxiety and frustrations that emerge in such situations. He could be talking in the voice of a Zen monk when he states: ‘My contribution is to ask for a paradox to be accepted and tolerated and respected, and for it not to be resolved.’ ‘The searching can come only from desultory formless functioning … It is only here, in this unintegrated stat … that which we can describe as creative can appear’ (WINNICOTT, 1971, p. 64).
Winnicott warns against the analyst’s temptation to organize the patient’s free associations i.e. ‘nonsense’.

Free association that reveals a coherent theme is already affected by anxiety, and the cohesion of ideas is a defense organization … An opportunity for rest has been missed because of the therapist’s need to find sense where nonsense is … Organized nonsense is already a defense, just as organized chaos is a denial of chao … The therapist who cannot take this communication becomes engaged in a futile attempt to find some organisation in the nonsense, as a result of which the patient leaves the nonsense area because of hopelessness about communicating nonsense (Winnicott, 1971, p. 64).

In his concepts of transitional phenomena and play, Winnicott took Freud’s ‘rules’ to new heights. For Winnicott (1971) ‘creativity’ and ‘play’ thrived in the rich humus of the in-between; in the dialectical spaces relating to me—not me, illusion—reality, subject—object and internal—external. He conceptualized this as a mental space (i.e. a potential space) in which transformational thought could come alive (Israelstam, 2007, p. 593; Ogden, 1992a). The notion of play and transitional phenomena were pivotal in Winnicott’s understanding of the development of the mind, and in particular symbolic function. Play and doubt, I believe, enjoy a mutually vital relationship. When a child smacks its doll saying ‘I don’t want you!’ she can relish the expression of her resentment toward her new sibling, while feeling safe knowing that this is make-believe. In order to indulge in this play without anxiety, the child needs to have developed a capacity to be in the in-between, in this case between illusion and reality, and knowing and not knowing, i.e. to have developed a capacity for doubt. When I describe later, the dialectical nature of doubt, I hope that this situation will become clearer.

Winnicott, (as did Bion, see later), emphasized the role and responsibility that the analyst/parent has in creating a safe and reliable relational context that will allow for ‘play’ and doubt. This is unlike Klein, who emphasized the child’s ego capacity in the tolerance of frustration and anxiety (1935, p. 25). He does this by stressing the importance of the maternal environment in the development of a creative play-space: ‘The potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence on the part of the baby, that is, confidence related to the dependability of the mother-figure or environment’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 100). He then goes on to stress, in no uncertain terms, the therapist’s accountability in the development of a creative analytic process: ‘The general principle seems to me to be valid that psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin’ (Winnicott, 1971, p. 54).
Bion and ‘No Mind’

Freud’s ‘rules’ recommending that analysts deprive their mind of its usual mental anchors and neat pigeon holes, were fully embraced by Bion, as they were by Klein. Bion, with Freud and Klein, emphasised the importance of absence and frustration in the development of thought.

‘Tolerance of frustration is essential for thought development … The absent object/breast gives the child his/her first opportunity to know reality through thought.’ (Bion, 1962, p. 30). ‘The link between intolerance of frustration and the development of thought is central to an understanding of thought and its disturbance’ (Bion, 1962, p. 29).

For Bion, the ‘mind-less’ state, as for Freud and Klein, played a major part in establishing a stance in the patient and analyst that was freeing of the unconscious. For Bion, however, these ‘rules’ for analyst and patient represented more than just the analyst’s approach to the unconscious. I believe it is safe to say that for Bion (as for Winnicott), this stance formed the very ‘bed-rock’ of his theory and practice. It encouraged a way of thinking and being, both in and out of the analytic session. (Symington, 1996).

Bion’s form of mind-less-ness was expressed in his recommendation that the analyst be without memory, desire and understanding (1962; 1970). I have noted above that for Klein (1935) as with Freud, (1911) the emphasis was on the patient’s ego to have the capacity to tolerate the anxiety, frustration and doubt associated with incompleteness, ambivalence and uncertainty. It took, with his notion of containment, to include the analyst as an active participant in this process. He, like Winnicott, emphasised the analyst’s role in the development of mental and symbolic function. This all became possible when Bion took Klein’s concept of projective identification into the interpersonal realm, by understanding it not only as a defense mechanism, but as a vehicle for understanding communication and empathy (1962). For Bion, analytic work and processing required that the analyst be in a particular state of mind that facilitates their capacity to receive unmentalised inchoate fragments of thought from the patient (beta elements). These elements once taken up into the analyst’s mind, are subjected to the analysts processing, synthesizing and meaning-making (alpha function). It is in this more coherent form, that the mental elements are then returned to the patient (Bion, 1962).

In order for this container-contained process to function, Bion required the analyst’s mind to be in a state of reverie (1962). This could be described as a mind free of dominant attachments to the known, a mind free to roam into the
unknown, a mind akin to a waking dream state (Ogden, 2007). The Symingtons (1996) describe reverie as being akin to the Buddhist quest to give up tana—the thirst for the sensual things in life. To facilitate this state of mind, Bion strongly recommends that the analyst disinvest himself of all memory, desire and understanding (1962; 1970). Bion was concerned that excessive dependence on memory and desire would, ‘intensify those aspects of the mind that derive from sensuous experience’ (1967). He believed that sensuous experience and the quest for closure and emotional relief was antithetical to the development of ‘intuition’ and ‘evolution,’ and the focus on the present moment of the analytic interaction (1967). He was concerned that sensual satisfaction through action would dominate over thinking and observation in the analytic relationship (De Bianchedi, 1991).

Bion recognized that for the analyst’s reverie to be sustained, though, the analyst would have to have the capacity to tolerate and bear the frustration and anxiety arising out of ambiguity, incompleteness and the unknown. For this he introduced the concept of negative capability (Bion, 1970). Bion identifies closely with John Keats’s description of Shakespeare described in his letters, written to his brothers George and Thomas in 1817. This quote (that includes the word doubt), captures well the spirit of Bion’s understanding of what an analyst’s capacity for negative capability should embrace. ‘Negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (my italics) (Bion, 1970, p. 125).

Bion in many ways then, instead of talking of negative capability, might just as well have spoken of the analyst’s capacity for doubt.

Doubt and Bion

I would like to return to that unsettled, incomplete yet so productive state of mind that Shanley in his film adaptation of his book ‘Doubt’ left me with, as it ended. At one moment I was convinced as was Sister Aloysius, of Father Flynn’s guilt, believing that his rather cool, suave and attentive rescuing of the scapegoated African American boy, served as a cover for more sinister paedophilic intentions. In another moment I saw Sister Aloysius as a rather jaded, suspicious, cynical and vengeful character, who dealt with her grievances with male hierarchy by framing Father Flynn. I was indeed left in a state of doubt. As unsettled and uncomfortable as this state was, it did leave my mind (as I believe Shanley intended) free to wander and to question not only the specific dilemma in question, but human nature itself.

Translating Shanley into Bion, he might be requesting his audience to be without memory and understanding (i.e. not to be biased by previous knowledge and
memories relating to sexual boundary violations in the church, but to come to the situation afresh), so as not to be biased by preconceived perceptions and beliefs; to be without desire, to temper the zeal and passion involved in wishing to punish those who use their position and influence to abuse innocent children. Finally Shanley might be suggesting, as does Bion, that we develop a capacity for negative capability (i.e. to tolerate the doubt that arises out of neither ‘knowing’ nor ‘not knowing’ the truth of Flynn’s guilt).

I have previously described how tensions evoked and generated in dialectically charged situations have the potential to open up creative spaces that are related to these mind-less states, that enhance mental development (Israelstam, 2007). I would like now to focus more sharply on the concept of doubt in mental development, by exploring the dialectics of doubt and mind-less-ness in relationship to Bion’s theory of mind.

Bion’s declared wish, for analysts to be without memory, desire and understanding, is known to cause much anxiety, consternation and confusion. It is often misunderstood. The recognition of the disturbance this state of mind can create in the analyst is poetically described in De Bianchedi’s (1983) climatic analogy. ‘Being in the air … suggesting dark nights, squalls, storms, clouds and turbulence.’ Grinberg (1975, p. 78) understood how Bion’s strong decrees could ‘give the erroneous impression … that it would be good for the analyst to mutilate his personality in suppressing his memory and desire!’ This ‘turbulence’ I believe, is especially experienced when the dialectical perspective is not fully appreciated (Israelstam, 2007). If we took Bion literally and applied his ideas to sailors, we might be instructing them to sail their ship in choppy waters, without sails hoisted to catch the wind (without desire), and to throw navigational equipment and maps overboard (without memory and understanding). The sailors would then be expected to tolerate their fears evoked by this decree (negative capability). This is hardly a context that would inspire curiosity, ‘playfulness’ and discovery in prospective adventurers!! Aspiring analysts, as yet not fully versed in Bion, may well misunderstand, and believe that they are expected to navigate the ‘squalls’ without the expected sailing equipment, or as Grinberg has put it, believe that they would indeed need to ‘mutilate’ their personalities!

There are, I believe, two reasons that fuel the misunderstanding. The one is to do with the air of certainty and conviction in which these ideas are conveyed. The other is to do with semantics. As to the first, it is not uncommon for all great thinkers who challenge the order of the day, to find themselves speaking with greater conviction and certainty than they might otherwise. They do this I believe, in order to counter the huge waves of skepticism and anxiety that their conceptual leaps generate in their critics and colleagues. Three of our most respected analytic pioneers are well known for their strongly stated convictions and ideas.
There are many examples of Freud’s willingness to express his ideas and recommendations with a strong air of authority and certainty: ‘The rule for the doctor may be expressed: ‘He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his unconscious memory’. (Freud, 1912, p. 112) (My italics). ‘Confusion with material brought up by other patients occurs very rarely. Where there is a dispute with the patient as to whether or how he has said some particular thing, the doctor is usually in the right. (Freud, 1912, p. 113) (my italics). Freud warns of the pitfalls of an ‘intimate attitude’ on the analyst’s part, and how this could ‘encourage the patient to be insatiable’ and interfere with the resolution of the transference. He declares with conviction that ‘I have no hesitation, therefore, in condemning this kind of technique as incorrect’. (1912, p. 118).

Melanie Klein had the special challenge of having to defend her ‘revolutionary’ ideas in relation to those of Anna Freud in the context of the British Society’s now famous controversial discussions (Segal, 1979, p. 171). Melanie Klein never received the approval that she longed from Freud, who showed a definite preference for his daughter Anna Freud’s work. ‘Mrs. Klein said once that compromise was necessary and useful in political matters within a psychoanalytical society … but there could be no compromise in scientific matters … Although she valued open-mindedness, she was thoroughly convinced of the rightness of her approach and found it disappointing when others did not agree with her’ (Segal, 1979, p. 171) (italics added).

Bion, a man well known for his humility, flexibility and willingness to revise his ideas (Symington, 1996) himself, was not without being forceful and sure. Bion was working against the lineal, rationalistic, tide of his day. In order for Bion to be able to wrest the pendulum, from the tight grip of the analyst’s preoccupation with ‘knowing’, I believe he had to speak with a strong sense of ‘knowing’ himself! ‘It is important that the analyst should avoid mental activity, memory and desire, which is as harmful to his mental fitness as some forms of physical activity are to physical fitness … To repeat: the capacity to forget, the ability to eschew desire and understanding, must be regarded as essential discipline for the psycho-analyst. Failure to practice this discipline will lead to a steady deterioration in the powers of observation whose maintenance is essential.’ (Bion, 1970, p. 50) (italics added).

In many ways both Freud and Bion have left us with that proverbial paradox of instructing us to be spontaneous! To have defined rules that structure our freedom and spontaneity, might indeed appear incompatible and inconsistent with what we know of these men as creative thinkers. If however, we were to take a dialectical perspective, we might understand that for creative thinkers, to have strong beliefs, convictions and certainties is vital at times, and not incompatible with ‘creative
free thought,’ as long as their ‘knowings’ are in dynamic relationship with their ‘not knowings.’

Although Bion did not explicitly draw on theories and explanations relating to dialectical phenomena, he did however (as did Winnicott) anticipate and imply this understanding strongly in his work (Israelstam, 2007)¹.

What Bion is asking of us in relation to negative capability, is to attempt to foster a capacity for doubt. He is also emphasizing that we should avoid turning to ‘fact and reason’ (understanding). When however Bion urges that we should attempt to ‘eschew’ ‘exclude,’ ‘be without’ memory desire and understanding, knowing and reason, he is in a dialectical sense, only addressing one pole of the dialectical phenomena of doubt. To make this clearer, we need to look more closely at the language and definitions of the relevant concepts. Before I do this I want to emphasize again, that I am certain that Bion did not actually want us literally to dispense entirely with reason, memory and desire, no more than the more contemporary Hofmann actually wanted us to ‘throw away the (analytic) book’ (1998).

This perspective is well stated by Grinberg (1985, p. 79)²: ‘Bion of course does not want the analyst … to mutilate his personality in suppressing memory and desire … the analyst can be sufficiently trained so as to retain his capacity to free himself temporarily of ‘memory’ and ‘desire’ whenever they appear as disturbing metal phenomena that threaten the profitable use of the analytic session’ (italics added).

In spite of understanding this, I believe, there is virtue in trying to emphasise the dialectical perspective of Bion’s work, certainly for those who are unfamiliar with Bion, and do not take his decrees in the spirit they were meant. I also wish to further elaborate more generally, on the notion of dialectical tension, and its value for psychoanalysis. (Israelstam, 2007).

1 Bion’s (1962) major dialectical contribution was of course, his understanding of the container-contained. He understood how vital adequate containment is, in the development of a creative dialectical space.

Ogden (1992b) noted that for Klein, the movement from paranoid-schizoid to depressive position occurred on a lineal sequential developmental line, and concluded that this was not truly dialectically coherent. He stated that it took Bion to bring about a more dialectically balanced understanding of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive position, where these dialectically related elements oscillated between one another in a circular, non lineal, non sequential manner throughout our lives.

² Christopher Bollas understands the spirit of Bion’s intentions well:

‘Perhaps Bion’s most pervasive influence was to create an intelligent language of uncertainty. The injunction to dispense with memory and desire … contributed to London analysts being able to be less bloody certain of everything and made it more possible for people to discuss doubts about their thinking. As such, in that way at least, he has had a profound effect on the way most analysts now discuss their work’ (Bollas, 1993, p. 419).
Firstly I would like to look at the various ways that doubt is defined. The common usages of the word as defined by the Oxford Dictionary (2004), are: ‘Feeling of uncertainty’; ‘undecided frame of mind.’ In this sense doubt conveys a sense of unsurence, insecurity and, indeed, weakness. These definitions do not appear to satisfy the very positive notion of doubt expressed by Shanley, and by our revered early analytic theorists.

I found two other definitions from less conventional sources that to me captured more accurately the dualistic essence of doubt. One was from the ‘peoples’ internet dictionary Wikipedia, which defines it thus: ‘Doubt lies between knowing and not knowing.’ The other is from a religiously based text, the Catholic Encyclopedia (Sharpe, 2008), that defines doubt as follows: ‘Doubt is a state in which the mind remains suspended between two contradicting propositions and is unable to ascend to either of them.’ Doubt then, unlike knowing/certainty and not knowing/uncertainty, is a dialectical phenomenon of which knowing and not knowing are dialectical participants. Doubt is neither the one nor the other, but a dynamic that involves the relationship between the two. These definitions I believe capture Shanley’s understanding of doubt, in that he develops a situation where the audience is left in a state of doubt, oscillating between knowing and not knowing whether Father Flynn was guilty or innocent.

I found Ogden’s definition of dialectic very helpful, in trying to understand the very complex, and apparently paradoxical relationship that dialectical elements, have with one another. ‘A dialectic is a process in which each of two opposing concepts creates, informs preserves and negates one another, each stands in a dynamic ever changing relationship with the other. The dialectical process moves toward integration, but integration is never complete. Each integration creates a new dialectical opposition and a new dynamic tension.’ (Ogden, 1992a, p. 208)

The ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ dialectical elements of doubt could hardly appear more opposite, yet are defined by one another. They are so close, sharing opposite sides of the same coin, yet they never fully integrate. In this sense, doubt is an incomplete gestalt, leaving us unsettled, unfinished and on edge.

I have indicated above, and in a previous publication, the potential that the frustration and unsettledness that arises out of these dialectical states have in the development of symbol formation and creativity (Israelstam, 2007). I have described how two important conditions need to be present in order to facilitate symbolic function and creativity:

1. Absence and frustration—this is inherent in doubt (i.e. an unresolved state of knowing and not knowing).

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2. Containment and holding—this is essentially provided by the analyst. This requires of the analyst, a capacity to be with the tensions and frustrations inherent in the in-between-ness of dialectical phenomena, so as not to prematurely foreclose on the valuable ambiguity of the analytic moment.

I have indicated previously that it might be said that the capacity to hold any two significant dialectically related entities, represents an important developmental milestone. This I have termed a capacity for dialectical attunement. (Israelstam, 2007). I have attempted to emphasise that we cannot rely on the patient’s ego strength alone. The analyst’s capacity for doubting needs to be present, in order for the processes of containment (Bion, 1962) and holding (Winnicott, 1965) to manifest productively in the analytic process. It is out of the dynamic interplay between the tensions of the ‘in-between’ and the analyst’s capacity for doubt that the development of symbolic thought emerges.

What then of being without memory, desire and understanding? Hopefully it is clear by now that ‘being without,’ only represents one part of the dialectic of doubt that more accurately would involve the capacity to be with and without memory, desire and knowing.

From a dialectical point of view it is not possible, at least for a healthy mind,³ only to be ‘without knowing.’ We can only be ‘without knowing’ in the presence of ‘knowing.’ We can of course have ‘without knowing’ sharply filling the foreground, while ‘with knowing’ positions itself in the background, and vice versa (much like a portrait photo with the background out of focus). I will try and make this clearer by turning to Winnicott. When Winnicott (1965), spoke of ‘a capacity to be alone’, in his now classic paper, he described how this capacity is only possible when there is an internal presence or representation of good holding objects. I would like to suggest that this positive internal state corresponds to the security that we as humans experience, in having a secure base of positive ‘understandings’, ‘memories’ and ‘desires’. Only under these circumstances can we, as Winnicott says, ‘play’ freely and ‘be alone’ or ‘be without’ (1971).

I will further illustrate my point with a musical example. Ravi Shankar is famous for his ornate and inventive improvisations when playing his sitar. I am sure that he would acknowledge that his spontaneous and virtuosic creations would not be

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³ Pathology can be said to occur when there is a breakdown of healthy foregrounding and backgrounding of dialectically related elements. (Ogden, 1992; Israelstam, 2007). For example extreme certainty unmediated by uncertainty, is characteristic of a ‘fundamentalist’ mind. Extreme uncertainty unmediated by some degree of certainty, is the stuff that persecutory anxiety is made of.
possible without his *desire* (devotion and passion), *memory* and *understanding* (theory, technique and historical background), that he acquired in his decade long association with his guru.

If Bion did not have to use his persuasive language to pry the pendulum out of the firm grip of his ‘knowing’ colleagues, he might have been able to, I believe, to have been able to afford to express his ideas in a more dialectically attuned manner. He might even have been able to encourage analysts; to *draw* on their ‘memories’ of their patients (and their own) internal narratives and phantasies; to draw on all they know and have ‘understood’ in the many years of study and analysis with their teachers and analysts; to draw on and to be driven and inspired by their curiosity to ‘understand’ know and discover, and finally to be driven by their reparative ‘desires’ to help.

What would possess Bion to extol the virtues of two apparently opposing mental states, you might ask? Would this not dilute or diminish his important message to encourage analysts to give up their preoccupation with their sensual addiction to knowing, desiring and remembering, in order for them to find their more intuitive spontaneous selves? I would like to suggest that the opposite could arise. I believe that in eschewing or abandoning memory, desire and understanding, without dialectic sensitivity, we might run the risk of generating too much anxiety, which would only then serve to inhibit creativity (*Winnicott*, 1971). I believe that this unabated anxiety relating to too much ‘without,’ (that I equate with abandonment) is paradoxically more likely to create an anxious attachment to knowing, remembering and desiring that Bion was so concerned about!

I will attempt to illustrate with a clinical example how my being without and with, memory, understanding and desire, helped to facilitate change.

In this example I found myself intensely caught up with the desire for a particular session to end. Firstly I will remind you of Bion cautioning against this very desire. ‘I think it a serious defect to allow oneself to desire the end of a session, or week, or term; it interferes with analytic work to permit desires for the patient’s cure, or well-being, or future to enter the mind. Such desires erode the analyst’s power to analyse and lead to progressive deterioration of his intuition’ (*Bion*, 1962, p. 55).

A female patient, Anne, the last child of five children, had a strongly felt sense that she was never wanted by her parents. She felt that her mother was ‘burnt out’ by the time she arrived, and related that her father traveled during the week, and slept most of the weekend. In the silences I was either the burnt out mother or the sleeping father. Breaks for her were perceived as my chance of getting away from her. When I returned from a two week holiday, Anne embarked on a flat toned

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tirade describing how friends, people at work, and relatives had let her down, how no one cared to contact her, how she could have been lying dead in a pool of blood and no one would have known until they smelt something! I found it hard to stay connected with her. I became irritated with her hardly audible tone, and with her ‘victim’ demeanor. I began to wish (desire) for the session to end. I found myself being particularly tired, unresponsive and relatively silent. I was unusually fixated on the clock. I ended the session ten minutes before the hour, ‘forgetting’ that this session of hers routinely finished on the hour!

I realized my error the minute she left, and observed myself becoming preoccupied with a powerful urge to put things right. I had a wild thought—I would call her on her cell phone suggesting that she come back for ten minutes! Such was my wish (desire) to ‘cure’ both hers and my pain and anxiety. In this vital clinical moment I was torn between my desire to act versus my capacity to think (to free myself of desire). Invoking ‘memories’ and ‘understandings’ relating to my countertransference (derived from personal analysis, literature and supervision etc.), helped me to start to steady myself. I began to ‘understand’ how I had been activated by her coercive projective identifications that were ‘designed’ to test my capacity to understand her deep pain. As I understood the complex process that ultimately led to this painful enactment, I was able to resist my impulsive desire to call her back. I believe that it was the very foregrounding of my memory and understanding that paradoxically allowed me to be more in the moment (i.e. without memory and desire).

When Anne returned the next day, she was bursting with rage. She stood hands on hips delivering an outpouring of criticisms and admonishments: ‘Your actions yesterday confirmed that you are not really interested in me! ‘You are cold and non-feeling and have damaged the trust that has taken me so long to build with you!’ I felt guilty and ashamed and again had the ‘desire’ to act impulsively and defensively, by reminding her of her pattern relating to pushing caring people away. Fortunately by invoking my ‘understanding,’ and ‘memories’ relating to the dynamics of the previous days enactment, I was able to curtail my defensive interpretation. Instead I quietly reflected to her, how much my sending her out early must have wounded her, especially after she had been trying to let me know how painful and thoughtless my going away had felt to her. She became tearful, saying that she felt relieved that I was finally beginning to understand her.

What I am trying to illustrate, is the importance of the relationship between the absence and presence of memory, understanding and desire. We need at times to be experiencing the fullness of our emotions, not suppressing them. Untamed desires arising out of our responsiveness to our patients’ coercive projective identifications, act as valuable fuel for the development of our countertransference feelings. It is these feelings and desires that propel us headlong into enactments,
which are now well understood to have enormous potential for change (Israelstam, 2007).

As illustrated in the example above, by ‘foregrounding’ memory, desire and understanding, I was able to ‘background’ my desires to enact. The dialectical art then lies in the capacity to titrate and hold in dynamic relationship, the ‘being with’, and ‘being without’ understanding, memory and desire. At one moment ‘to be with’ is foregrounded, while to ‘be without’ recedes. While ‘desire’ compels us toward action, ‘memory’ and ‘understanding’ compel us toward reflection. It is this very tension generated within the dialectic of knowing and not knowing, or as Hoffman puts it, ritual vs. spontaneity (1998), that has the potential to open up a creative space in which change can be initiated (Israelstam, 2007). This capacity to hold in tension two dialectically related entities such as to act versus to reflect, to ‘be with’ versus ‘be without’, is what Bion refers to as negative capability, or as indicated above, a capacity for doubt.

It might be then, if Bion were to be speaking in dialectical parlance, instead of recommending that we be without memory, understanding and desire, he might instead have been urging us to be with and without memory desire and understanding. He might have stated that although he urges us to ‘be without,’ as this provides a stance that is very generative of creative in-the-moment work, that there are times when to ‘be with’ may well facilitate our capacity to ‘be without’.

**Conclusion**

I have described how I believe that Shanley in his work ‘Doubt’ left the audience oscillating between knowing and not knowing, and how in doing this he opened up a potential space, that was evocative of new and creative thought. Using his work as a basis, I have attempted to illustrate how the notion of the doubting mind, starting with Freud, has been present implicitly or explicitly in the working models of our great analytic thinkers. I have tried to convey how Winnicott and Bion of all the analysts, have given the most centrality to this notion of the doubting analyst, in their practice and theories of mind. Winnicott, with his ideas on ‘formlessness’ and ‘play’, and Bion with his ‘negative capability,’ and notion of being ‘without memory, desire and understanding.’

Although we could consider Bion to be our most serious and profound ‘doubter’, I have indicated how his strongly worded decree to be ‘without memory desire and understanding’, may leave beginners and the less informed, with a dialectically imbalanced view of these pivotal concepts. An attempt to adhere rigidly to these ideas as absolute edicts, I believe could paradoxically lead to more anxiety, and therefore a greater addiction to certainty!
I hope that with the use of my clinical example, I have been able to bring a dialectical perspective to Bion’s work that I believe was clearly implied, but perhaps not articulated specifically enough.

References


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