

**A summary of doctoral dissertation written by Joanna Szkudlarek
(MA), titled:**

**“Thinking and Sign: Epistemological and Semiotic Context of Wilfred
Bion’s Psychoanalytic Theory”**

Introduction

In the introduction, Polish and foreign literature on Bion’s theory is presented. Also, the dissertation’s structure is outlined. Its first part is contextual and has been divided into two main chapters: an analysis of psychoanalytical contexts, of which Bion’s theory stems, and an analysis of philosophical context. In the latter chapter there has also been developed an original extension of Bion’s theory of concepts’ formation, and two new terms have been introduced 1) the first refers to meaning-related content, which can become included in the scope of a specific sign, and 2) the second one refers to signs, which can begin to contain meanings. These terms are “*insignifiant*” and “*insignifié*”.

The introductory part also includes an argumentation concerning the significance of the dissertation’s topic. Bion’s theory philosophical significance is explained in terms of his original formulations (such as the “thoughts without the thinker” theory), and the fact, that he was the first to develop a full theory (and lead a full clinical practice) regarding psychotic patients, that is people suffering from disturbances originated in earlier stages of development, than other psychoanalysts reached to. This aspect is of a tremendous philosophical significance: psychosis, understood as a state in which a subject cannot cope with thoughts that surround him or her, is also a borderline case for philosophy, as in terms of this discipline, it is still very common to understand the subject predominantly as a rational being. This paves the way for questions about the general status of subjectivity: Is a subject unable to think still a subject? If we answer positively, the classical philosophical understanding of subjectivity needs a thorough re-thinking. If, however, we answer negatively, we deny the status of subjectivity to people suffering of cognitive disturbances (or any disorders connected with thought-processes).

The introduction also includes a discussion of methodological issues connected with the relation of psychoanalytic theory to philosophy. Psychoanalytic theory’s subject matter is human mind, which is usually understood as the subject matter of psychology. The author postulates to differentiate the analyzed subject (which has no impact on the discipline in terms of which it is being analyzed) from the method of analysis (which has a decisive impact on whether the subject belongs to philosophy or psychology). The same problem is also discussed in a more general perspective: there is a postulate for “philosophical psychology”, that is: creating (or re-creating) a possibility of a scientific investigation on human mind in philosophical methodology.

There is also an explication of the dissertation’s methodology (reaching mainly to the assumptions of hermeneutic theory), and sources used in the dissertation – which include not

only literature on the subject matter, but also a vast number of consultations with experts in the field of psychoanalytical theory and practice.

Part one: Contexts

In this part a theoretical background of original Bion's theory of subjectivity is presented. This theoretical environment has been divided into two main sectors: preceding psychoanalytical thought (analysed in chapter I "Psychoanalytical sources") and philosophical concepts (discussed in chapter II, "Philosophical sources").

Bion's main predecessors in terms of psychoanalytical thought, were Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. The reconstructions of parts of their psychoanalytical theories demonstrate how original Bion's theory has been developed on that foundation. The main analytical aspect of this part of dissertation is an attempt to decide whether it is possible to indicate the most important influence of one of the abovementioned psychoanalysts, or is it rather appropriate to think of Bion's theory as a synthesis of these influences and their creative transgression.

Chapter II, referring to philosophical influences, is focused on the question of Bion's vision of subjectivity: has it been established on the foundation of modern philosophical understanding of subjectivity (as demonstrated in Descartes and Kant's theories), or is there a greater resemblance to a contemporary, poststructuralist perspective regarding subjectivity.

The aim of both abovementioned contexts is not only the classification of Bion's theory and an "archival" attempt to locate it in a specific trend. Analysis presented in this part of dissertation are aimed at creating a Bion's "portrait" as a thinker, whose creative work can be seen from a number of differing perspectives. Conclusions gained from this analysis show Bion as a thinker full of "syncretic wishes", who tries to align together different visions on subjectivity. Bion's subjectivity is thus heterogenic, and a characteristic of this heterogeneity is the subject of the second part of the dissertation.

Part two: Reconstructions

Concepts and theoretical contexts discussed in the first part of the dissertation, allow for gaining an insight into the theory of Bion himself. Its language is often based on Freudian dictionary, and partly reaches to the concepts of Klein, although there are a lot of terms taken over from philosophical discourse. Intellectual environments described in the first part of dissertation are now joined and allow for a better understanding of Bion's theory.

The major subject of analysis are the foundations of Bion's theory of thinking, and the contents of one of his most important works: *Learning From Experience*. The title "Reconstructions" can be a little misleading, as reconstructive work is in this case so strictly joined with an interpretative approach. For a better understanding of the use Bion has made of philosophical assumptions based on existing philosophical theories, there are still presented some contexts stemming from philosophy, humanities in general, and the world of art.

The most important elements of this part of the dissertation is a presentation of Bion's theory of thought-creation process and the differentiation made between thoughts (as a subject of a process) and the very process of their creation. This differentiation is the origin of Bion's philosophically significant theory of "thoughts without a thinker". There is also an outline on how Bion understands thought development and thinking process, and the influence of these

elements on personality creation. The ability to think is, for Bion, a function that each subject needs to learn in the course of development. Without it the subject might “starve” psychically. According to Bion, the necessary condition for gaining the ability to think is a relationship with another thinking subject. If, for any reason, a natural child-parent relationship is disturbed and this ability is not founded, there is a chance to re-built it in a therapeutic process. It is important to note, that Bion understands thinking broadly. As a consequence, there is no equivalence between thinking and rationality: it is possible to be rational and completely thoughtless. In this perspective, “insanity” can no longer be equated with the lack of rationality. Bion’s understanding of subject paves the way for new questions on subjectivity, insanity, rationality, human’s relational nature and the development of personality. It also provides a dictionary with a great potential for further use in philosophical investigations.

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