

8.

CONTAINER AND CONTAINED

Wilfred Bion

An advantage of believing that observations are the foundation of scientific method is that the conditions in which they are made can be stated and then produced. The simplicity of this has its appeal for the psychoanalyst: an analytic situation is presumed to exist and interpretations of the observations made in that situation are then reported. It is possible to believe that the analysis has a location in time and space: for example, the hours arranged for the sessions and the four walls of the consulting room; that at such times and in such a place the analyst can make observations that he cannot do if the domain has not these limitations, or if 'psychoanalytic observations' do not conform to the conventional view of an observation. If I pictorialize the statement 'the conventional view of an observation' to be a container, like a sphere, and the 'psychoanalytic observation' as something that cannot be contained within it, I have a model that will do very well not only for the 'conventional view,' to represent my feelings about a 'psychoanalytic situation,' but also for the 'psychoanalysis' that it cannot contain. It will also serve as a model for my feelings about certain patients: I cannot observe Mr. X because he will not remain 'inside' the analytic situation or even 'within' Mr. X himself.

I have found theories of acting-out enlightening, but not enlightening enough; none of the theories known to me 'contains' the 'facts' by which I seek to be enlightened. My 'facts' gird against the framework of definition and theory that I seek to erect around them. The patient who is acting out cannot be 'contained' within existing formulations.

This is a characteristic of the mental domain: it cannot be contained within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. Is this a sign of defective theory, or a sign that psychoanalysts do not understand that psychoanalysis cannot be contained permanently within the definitions they use? It would be a valid observation to say that psychoanalysis cannot 'contain' the mental domain because it is not a 'container' but a 'probe'; the formulation that I have tried to further by using the symbols ♀ and ♂ minimizes this difficulty by leaving ♀ and ♂ as unknowns whose value is to be determined.

I would pursue this train of thought further by discussing something more practical and particular. It is a matter where action¹ seems to be called for, namely, the institutionalization of psychoanalysis comprising publication, selection, training, and qualification.

In recent years, there has grown up the use of the term Establishment; it seems to refer to that body of persons in the State who may be expected usually to exercise power and responsibility by virtue of their social position, wealth, and intellectual and emotional endowment. (This list is not an order of priority of attainments.) I propose to borrow this term to denote everything from the penumbra of associations generally evoked, to the predominating and ruling characteristics of an individual, and the characteristics of a ruling caste in a group (such as a psychoanalytical institute, or a nation or group of nations). Because of my choice of subject it will usually be used for talking about the ruling 'caste' in psychoanalytical institutes.

The Establishment has to find and provide a substitute for genius. One of its more controversial activities is to promulgate rules (known in religious activities as dogmas, in scientific groups as 'laws,' e.g. of nature or perspective) for the benefit of those who are not by nature fitted to have direct experience of *being* psychoanalytic (or religious, or scientific, or artistic) so that they may, as it were by proxy, have and impart knowledge of psychoanalysis. Group members will not through incapacity be denied a sense of participation in an experience from which they would otherwise feel forever excluded. At the same time these rules (or dogmas) must be such that they attract rather than repel, help rather than hinder, the membership of genius, which is essential to the group's continued existence and vitality. A Freud can discover and establish psychoanalysis, but it must be maintained by a continued supply of 'genius.' This cannot be ordered; but if it comes the Establishment must be able to stand the shock. Failing genius, and clearly it may not materialize for a very long period, the group must have its rules and a structure to preserve them. Thus an environment exists ready, as Nietzsche said of the nation, to fulfill its proper function, namely, to produce a genius. Similarly, it may be said of the individual that he should be ready to produce a 'flash of genius.' Let us therefore consider this phenomenon.

The term 'genius' does not carry the associations I want, so I propose to use the term 'mystic,' leaving it to be supposed that the mystic has characteristics usually associated with genius and that the person represented by the term 'genius' or 'mystic' may with equal propriety be described by the term 'messiah.'

The mystic is both creative and destructive. I make a distinction between two extremes that coexist in the same person. The extreme formulations represent two types: the 'creative' mystic, who formally claims to conform to or even fulfill the conventions of the Establishment that governs his group; and the mystic nihilist, who appears to destroy his own creations. I mean the terms to be used only when there is outstanding creativeness or destructiveness, and the terms 'mystic,' 'genius,' 'messiah' could be interchangeable.

The problem posed by the relationship between the mystic and the institution has an emotional pattern that repeats itself in history and in a variety of forms. The pattern may appear in the relationship of a new phenomenon to the formulation that has to represent it. It appears in the

relationship of widely dissimilar groups to their mystics; it reveals itself in the history of the Christian heresies, the heliocentric theories, the relationship of the rabbinical directorate of the Kabbalah to revolutionary mystics such as Isaac Luria, the political reformer, and the Establishment.

My object is to show that certain elements in the development of psychoanalysis are not new or peculiar to analysis, but have in fact a history that suggests that they transcend barriers of race, time and discipline, and are inherent in the relationship of the mystic to the group. The Establishment cannot be dispensed with (though this may appear to be approximately achieved in Sufism and in the theory of Marxism) because the institutionalized group, the Work group (see Bion, 1961), is as essential to the development of the individual, including the mystic, as he is to it. Homeric psychology indicates a stage of mental development in which the distinction between man and god is ill defined; in the individual psyche, little distinction between ego and superego is recognized. The Work group, under the religious vertex, must differentiate between man and god. Institutionalized religion must make man conscious of this gulf in himself and in the counterparts of himself in the group of which he is a member.

The institutionalization of psychoanalysis requires a psychoanalytic group that has 'Establishment' as one of its functions. It is itself a replica, in the external world, of an object in which the desired separation has been effected. But its function is then to effect this separation in the personalities of its members. It is thus both a model of a state that is desired and an institution whose function it is to make the individual aware of the gap between himself (his idealized, super-egoized self) and himself (his unregenerate, unpsychoanalyzed self).

One result of separation is no direct access of the individual to the god with whom he used formerly to be on familiar terms. But the god has undergone a change as a part of the process of discrimination. The god with whom he was familiar was finite; the god from whom he is now separated is transcendent and infinite.

To restate the above in terms appropriate to a background of human experience: Freud and his associates mix on terms of equality such as exist between any human colleagues in a common venture. Freud, merely by being a person of outstanding stature, stimulates the tensions and emotional drives appropriate to a primitive group and stimulates them still further by his work. The primitive stages of the analytic group contribute to the obtrusion of tensions and emotional drives appropriate to the primitive group, as Freud observed through his study of the individual. I doubt that he appreciated the force of the messianic hopes aroused. The primitive stage makes way for the stage of discrimination described in the religious group: a distinction is made, otherwise there will not be recognition of the real distinction that exists between a mystic (in my sense) and ordinary human beings.

This distinction cannot be achieved adequately by saying that it is inseparable from idealization. Idealization in the group is a reality-based activity that is essential for the growth of discrimination in the individual. The individual himself must be able to distinguish between himself as an

ordinary person and his view that he is omniscient and omnipotent. It is a step towards recognition of a distinction between the group as it really is and its idealization as an embodiment of the omnipotence of the individuals who compose it. Sometimes the separation fails and the group is not only seen to be ideally omnipotent and omniscient but believed to be so in actuality. The individual's realization of a gulf between his view of himself as omnipotent and his view of himself as an ordinary human being must be achieved as the result of a task of the group itself as well as in individual analysis. Otherwise there is a danger that a state of mind is transferred (by projective identification) to the group and *acted out* there—not altered. Some details of this situation must be described.

In the first stage, there is no real confrontation between the god and the man because there is really no such distinction. In the second stage, the infinite and transcendent god is confronted by the infinite man. When the function of the group is to *establish* the separation there is no question of reunion. In the third stage the individual, or at least a particular individual—the mystic—needs to reassert a direct experience of god of which he has been, and is, deprived by the institutionalized group. Before I turn to this it is necessary to glance at some peculiarities of the group that has been institutionalized and of life in it.

The individuals show signs of their divine origin (just as the gods of the previous stage show signs of human origin). The individuals may be regarded as being incarnations of the deity; each individual retains an inalienable element that is a part of the deity himself that resides in the individual. He can be regarded as constantly attempting to achieve union with the deity, or he can be regarded as divine in a somewhat low-grade way. This last shows signs of being related genetically to the stage where no real distinction exists between god-like human beings on the one hand and very human gods on the other. Finally, the individual strives for reunion with the god from whom he feels consciously separated. This is reflected in the actualities of the human relationship and contributes to the hatred of the group for a state in which individuals cannot have direct access, or even a sense of direct access, to the great man (as they might once have had to Freud). Individuals cannot reconcile themselves to a discrimination that means conscious separation of themselves from a belief in their Freud-like qualities and recognition that Freud, a genius (mystic), no longer exists. Another Freud cannot be created no matter how essential he may be.

The group and mystic are essential to each other; it is therefore important to consider how or why the group can destroy the mystic on whom its future depends and how or why the mystic may destroy the group. I shall indicate the nature of the questions at issue since it is vital that the problem should be seen to exist. It is inherent both in the nature of man as a political animal and in the nature of psychoanalysis as the explosive force.

The relationship between group and mystic may belong to one of three categories. It may be commensal, symbiotic or parasitic. The same categorization may be applied to the relationship of one group with another. I shall not trouble with the commensal relationship: the two sides coexist

and the existence of each can be seen to be harmless to the other. In the symbiotic relationship there is a confrontation and the result is growth-producing though that growth may not be discerned without some difficulty. In the parasitic relationship, the product of the association is something that destroys both parties to the association. The realization that approximates most closely to my formulation is the group-individual setting dominated by envy. Envy begets envy, and this self-perpetuating emotion finally destroys host and parasite alike. The envy cannot be satisfactorily ascribed to one or other party; in fact it is a function of the relationship.

In a symbiotic relationship the group is capable of hostility and benevolence and the mystic contribution is subject to close scrutiny. From this scrutiny the group grows in stature and the mystic likewise. In the parasitic association even friendliness is deadly. An easily seen example of this is the group's promotion of the individual to a position in the Establishment where his energies are deflected from his creative-destructive role and absorbed in administrative functions. His epitaph might be 'He was loaded with honours and sank without a trace.' Eissler (1965), without mentioning the general principle involved, shows the dangers of the invitation to group or individual to become respectable, to be medically qualified, to be a university department, to be a therapeutic group, to be anything in short, but *not* explosive. The reciprocal attitude in the mystic is that the group should thrive or disintegrate but must *not* be indifferent. The attitudes are not conscious and deliberate; they are essential. Without them the group is not a group nor the 'mystic' a mystic. An analytic parallel is the psychoanalytic interpretation that is death to the existing state of mind, the state of mind that is being interpreted. Worse than being right or wrong is the failure of an interpretation to be significant, though to be significant is not enough; it merely ensures that it exists. It must also be true. The parasitic group can be primarily concerned to destroy the mystic, or mystic (messianic) ideas, but if it fails to do so it must 'establish' his or their truth.

Eissler discusses 'applied' psychoanalysis. I suspect that applied psychoanalysis, even if 'applied' to curing people, is a method of bringing psychoanalysis under control and rendering it harmless to the Establishment. I have expressed this in another context and in a different approach by a rule that the analyst should not permit himself to harbour desires, even the desire to cure, since to do so is inimical to psychoanalytical development. Development itself is not an object that can be 'desired.' The painful nature of the dilemma is essential.

The recurrent configuration is of an explosive force with a restraining framework. For example, the mystic in conflict with the Establishment; the new idea constrained within a formulation not intended to express it; the art form outmoded by new forces requiring representation.

It is essential that the language should be preserved. To this end, rules are produced under which words and definitions are to be used. The *Oxford Dictionary*, linguistic philosophy, mathematical logic, are tributes to the work that is incessantly proceeding for this purpose. On this work ordinary men and women with ordinary ability depend to do work that otherwise

would be done only by exceptional people. Thanks to Faraday and other scientists ordinary people can illuminate a room by the touch of a switch; thanks to Freud and his co-workers ordinary people hope by psychoanalysis to be able to illuminate the mind. The fact that the world's work has to be done by ordinary people makes this work of scientification (or vulgarization, or simplification, or communication, or all together) imperative. There are not enough mystics and those that there are must not be wasted.

The more successfully the word and its use can be 'established,' the more its precision becomes an obstructive rigidity; the more imprecise it is, the more it is a stumbling block to comprehension. The new idea 'explodes' the formulation designed to express it. Sometimes the emotion is powerful but the idea weak. If the formulation survives it can be repeated. If it can be repeated under severe conditions it becomes stronger until it communicates meaning without disintegration. Conversely, the formulation may destroy its content. In his play *Major Barbara*, George Bernard Shaw describes the apotheosis of the dictum 'No man is good enough to be another man's master' as a method of rendering the emotional content ineffectual.

It may be that the distinction between creative and nihilistic mystic is no more than a temporary expedient depending on the need to express one view of the mystic rather than the other. The most powerful emotional explosion known so far, spreading to many cultures and over many centuries, has been that produced by the formulations of Jesus. The effects are still felt and present grave problems of containment even now, though some measure of control has been established. Jesus at first expressly disavowed any aim other than fulfillment of the laws of his group. The rabbinical directorate failed to solve the problem of containment, a failure associated with disastrous consequences for the Jewish group. The disaster attributed to Christian teachings did not terminate at any finite point, as for example at the crucifixion; after Alaric had sacked Rome four hundred years later St. Augustine felt the reproaches against the Christians to be sufficiently serious to require refutation in his 'City of God.'

The problems of mystical revelation that centre on having, or claiming to have, a direct relationship with the deity remain. The need for the Establishment to do what the rabbinical directorate had failed to do soon became evident. Complaints by the disciples that miracles were being done by unauthorized or, as we might say, 'lay,' people, suggest awareness that we expect to find associated with an Establishment. That, and evidence of a need to establish a structured hierarchy ('who shall sit at the right hand'), is too slender to be more than a starting point for conjecture. Something must have contributed to the efflorescence of structure, hierarchy and institution. The institution is evidence of the need for the function that the rabbinical directorate had failed to provide. Although in many respects the Church was more successful, the long history of heresy (see Knox, 1950) shows that the structure required to contain the teaching of Jesus was, and still is, subjected to a great strain. It has not, however, been without its successes, and even today complaints can be heard, which

are really a tribute to the success of the institutionalizing process, of the lack of enthusiasm, drive and 'spirituality' of the Church.

Though we may contrast the success of the Church favourably with the failure of the rabbinical directorate, the force of the mystical revelation has not yet spent itself. There are signs that the Oedipus myth, and the elements that in the Christian religion touch on paternity and sonship, both have a configuration suggesting an underlying group of which these elements are representative. I have used the sign O to denote this 'ultimate reality.' Any formulation felt to approximate to illumination of O is certain to produce an institutionalizing reaction. The institution may flourish at the expense of the mystic or idea, or it may be so feeble that it fails to contain the mystical revelation.

A formulation may approximate to 'illumination' of O. Many mystics express their experience of direct access to the deity in terms of light, but light is not the only model used. Jewish mystics in particular find the voice a telling representation of the experience. St. Paul found light *and* voice necessary to represent the experience. It is significant that psychoanalysts seeking direct access to an aspect of O, thought it is not only to that part of O that informs god-like characteristics, conduct their affairs through language. To be confined to one medium of communication only is too restrictive even if it has the flexibility and capacity for development of language. Psychoanalytical observation certainly cannot afford to be confined to perception of what is verbalized only: what of more primitive uses of the tongue?

The suspension of memory and desire promotes exercise of aspects of the psyche that have no background of sensuous experiences. Paradoxically, the release of these aspects of the psyche enables them to reveal elements such as the nonverbal muscular movements of the tongue, as in stammer. The dominance of sensuous experience promotes expressions such as 'seeing' or 'hearing'; the falseness introduced by such formulation contributes to those differences that seem so significant but are in fact unimportant. Intuitive power cannot develop because it is hindered by such obtrusions of 'sense.' The institutionalizing of words, religions, psychoanalysis—all are special instances of institutionalizing memory so that it may 'contain' the mystical revelation and its creative and destructive force. The function of the group is to produce a genius; the function of the Establishment is to take up and absorb the consequences so that the group is not destroyed.

PART TWO

METHOD

Section Editors: Harold Bernard
Barton Evans III
Margaret J. Rioch

There have been substantial advances in methodology since the first *Group Relations Reader* was published in 1975. The Tavistock method is ten years older now and the papers included in this section illustrate some significant areas in which growth and change have occurred.

The Gustafson and Cooper paper could have as easily been placed in the Theory Section. We chose to include it in the Method Section to emphasize technique issues in taking up the role of a small group consultant. Gustafson and Cooper believe that the basic assumption described by Bion results from the abandonment and intrusion fostered by the technique typical "Tavistock Group" consultant. They suggest that an entirely different kind of small group (collaborative in nature) emerges when the consultant is neither abandoning nor intrusive, but is available when needed.

The remaining five papers represent a cross-section of thinking that advances the method by which work in the Tavistock tradition is carried out. Gosling's paper on Very Small Groups (VSG) explicates the unique features of this new conference event. He describes how the VSG compares and contrasts with other conference events, especially the small group.

Gould's paper describes the "special theme" conferences that have been offered most often in recent years: namely, those that focus on issues of gender. He describes the unique features of these conferences, which have been the progenitors of a burgeoning variety of special theme conferences including role relations and the impact of age.

Rioch describes a unique model that she and her colleagues have developed to train experienced conference participants in small group consultancy. The paper conveys the flavor of these training experiences, as well as some of their complexities. Baxter and Heimburger trace the evolution of a training model they have developed, in which the trainees constitute a junior staff group separate and distinct from the senior staff, the administrative staff and the "regular" membership. The issue of how to train people for conference staff roles and consultation in this model continues to evolve.

Finally, Alderfer and Klein describe the analysis of a particular organization by a team of consultants from the Tavistock and National Training Lab "schools" in order to compare these models of organizational analysis.

H.B.
B.E.
M.J.R.

Part Two—Method

Collaboration in Small Groups: Theory and Technique for the Study of Small-Group Processes	139
<i>James P. Gustafson and Lowell Cooper</i>	
A Study of Very Small Groups	151
<i>R. Gosling</i>	
Men and Women at Work: A Group Relations Conference on Person and Role	163
<i>Laurence J. Gould</i>	
Advanced Learning in a Small Group	173
<i>Margaret J. Rioch</i>	
An Advanced Training Group Within the Group Relations Conference: Evolution, Design and Outcome	185
<i>Robert F. Baxter and Elizabeth Morgan Heimbarger</i>	
Affect, Leadership and Organizational Boundaries	197
<i>Clayton P. Alderfer and Edward B. Klein</i>	