

Enactive Fields: An Approach to Interaction in the Kleinian-Bionian Model: Commentary on Paper by Lawrence J. Brown

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In taking up the matter of intersubjectivity in Kleinian-Bionian theories Brown creatively reimagines the clinical situation, transcending demarcations of analytic schools to arrive (though never fully arrive) at new understandings of interaction. I discuss Brown's engaging paper from my own emerging concept of enactivity, drawing distinctions between this approach and Bion's approach and extending the enactive to a consideration of *enactive fields* that, like Brown's paper, draws on the seminal reinterpretation of Kleinian theory by the Barangers. In writing of the field as an emergent process of becoming I rely on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "singing the world" to illustrate my developing understanding of the possibilities for interaction in the Kleinian-Bionian tradition. My comments on Brown's clinical case material focus on what appears to me to be the intersubjective aspects of his approach.

One of the great charms of the exceptionally well-written paper "Klein, Bion, and Intersubjectivity: Becoming, Transforming, and Dreaming" by Larry Brown (this issue) is that he begins with a first sentence that reads: "I must make it clear that there is no organized Kleinian theory of intersubjectivity" (p. 669). Brown then goes on to investigate the intersubjective aspects of Kleinian, Bionian, post-Kleinian, and post-Bionian analytic theory. The paper has the rich feel of rereading classical object relations literature in the light of postobject relations developments in intersubjective theory. To my mind, that's a very worthwhile goal—to return to these classic texts and authors in order to interrogate them from our current interest in the topic of intersubjectivity. Brown provides a reading of these texts from a perspective that at times seems very innovative. For instance, when writing about Bion's treatment of the internalization of alpha function, the author seems to read Bion through Fairbairn, writing:

It is important to note that α function is the internalization of a complex intersubjective relationship between the mother and infant and not just the internalization of a maternal function. Put another way, it is the mother and infant thinking together as a couple that is installed in the psyche as α function. (p. 677)

This is a terrific read, and it presents a Bion unknown to me, a Bion, I believe, that is read uniquely by this author in elaborating the contours of an intersubjective process, a reading of Bion that clearly goes beyond the ways one may ordinarily understand his work with a focus on func-

tions and factors derived from mathematics and symbolic logic (see Ogden, 2004, for a description of Bion's use of such notational terms).

Similarly, Brown's study of interaction in the Kleinian tradition stands on its own as a scholarly review of the various conceptualizations of interpersonal exchange in this school. But it does more than that, too, in nicely setting the ground for Brown's introduction of less mechanistic, more fluid, process-oriented models that partially developed out of the Kleinian tradition. Thus we move from Klein and the London Kleinians to the work of the Barangers, Bion, and post-Bionian (e.g., Ogden, Ferro) understandings of clinical process in field-based conceptualizations.

Inspired by Brown's project of reading Klein and Bion intersubjectively, I have revisited my own ideas on interaction in these traditions (Reis, 1999a, 1999b, 2006) to take what the Baranger's would call "a second look" at some earlier assumptions I had made. Like any really satisfying dialogue, Brown's work has provoked in me thoughts that I feel I may never have articulated had it not been for the subtle erudition of his paper. Thus I respond neither from the position of a Kleinian-Bionian nor as a relationalist, but from my own emerging perspective of enactive therapeutic action.

FROM ISOLATED DATUM OF PERCEPTION TO NONREPRESENTATIONAL PHENOMENOLOGY

Bion's treatment of beta elements as the raw sense data that serve as the building blocks of internal perceptual representations (through the transformative operation of alpha functioning) follows in the empirical and intellectualist traditions of Locke and Kant, who themselves carried forward the Cartesian commitment that perception is an internal (mental) representation of an external material world built up out of sensations.¹ Thus Bion approached beta elements, as atomistic sense data, meaningless elements, the building blocks of complex internal perceptions constituted by the faculty of understanding. It is an approach which creates a theory of perception that is both abstract and dualistic—abstract because our representations are taken to be endlessly derivative experiences of an unknowable reality; dualistic because bodily sensation is split from the mental operations that are thought to yield experience and representation, and because a dramatic separation is assumed between mind and other.

I have previously argued (Reis, 2006) that such an approach paradoxically elevates the representational contents of the mind to a privileged status over perception, making what is in the mind even more "real" than the world as experienced, or immediate relations with others. Since Bion explicitly based his conception of proto-psychic beta elements, transformed into psychic elements on this Kantian philosophic platform, I argued his notion of intersubjectivity suffered greatly.

¹Consider by way of illustration the following passages from Locke and Kant, respectively: "Though the Qualities that affect our Senses are, in the things themselves, so united and blended ... yet 'tis plain, the Ideas they produce in the Mind, enter by the senses simple and unmixed. ... The coldness and hardness which a Man feels in a piece of Ice, being as distinct Ideas in the Mind, as the smell and Whiteness of a Lily. ... There is nothing can be plainer to a Man, than the clear and distinct Perception he has of those simple Ideas; which being each in it self uncompounded, contains in it nothing by one uniform Appearance, or Conception in the mind, and is not distinguishable into different Ideas" (Locke, 1975, p. 119). Or "While the matter of all appearance is given to us a posteriori only[as sensation], its form must lie ready ... a priori in the mind ... apart from all sensation. Thus, if I take away from the representation of a body that which the understanding thinks in regard to it, substance, force, divisibility, etc., and likewise what belongs to sensation, impenetrability, hardness, colour, etc., something still remains over from this empirical intuition, extension and figure" (Kant, 1965, p. 66).

Post-Bionian interpreters, such as Brown, have employed innovative solutions to the problem just mentioned. Brown, drawing on the writings of the Barangers finds a way of working clinically that seems to have less to do with the empiricist intellectualist tradition and more to do with the phenomenological tradition. As a philosophic foundation for his and other post-Bionian approaches, one might consider the work of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty (1945) devoted the first four chapters of his book *Phenomenology of Perception* to a detailed argument against the notion of atomistic sense data. Merleau-Ponty argued that although the type of approach Bion takes to the topic of sensation seems immediate and obvious, in fact “this notion corresponds to nothing in our experience” (p. 3). The idea of isolated datum of perception is inconceivable, he said, because “the perceptual ‘something’ is always in the middle of something else, it always forms part of a ‘field’” (p. 4). Even our most rudimentary perceptions, said Merleau-Ponty, are not atomistic, but *complex relational events*, always identified against a larger field. Drawing from the Gestalt psychologists, Merleau-Ponty asserted that perception is always a complex figure against a background, a relation embedded in a context. As such, one must be careful to avoid committing what Merleau-Ponty called the “experience error.” If one believes that one has found a pure, context-free sense datum, it has only been by conceptually isolating one aspect of the larger perceptual field and then forgetting the field. Seen this way, the sense-data ontology employed by Bion is abstract and fallacious: it is the result of taking sensibles perceived in context, intellectually isolating and fixing them, and then reifying those derivations as ontological objects, as the constitutive elements of perception. This is a fallacy of mistaking a second-order, conceptual process for the primary, experienced one (Hass, 2008).

“SINGING THE WORLD”

By contrast to the model of passive translation found in the type of analytic receptivity employed by Klein and Bion (e.g., projective identification or container contained) I have recently introduced the “enactive” approach to therapeutic action in psychoanalysis (Reis, 2009a, 2009b). This emerging perspective combines biological processes conceived of through nonlinear dynamic systems theory, with the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. The enactive approach understands the lived body as a special kind of autonomous system (an autopoietic system; Varela, Maturana, & Uribe, 1974) one whose sense-making brings forth, enacts, or constitutes a phenomenal world (Thompson, 2007). For Merleau-Ponty (1964) “the world which is given in perception ... is the concrete, intersubjectively constituted life-world of immediate experience” (p. xvi). Enactivists building on Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of embodiment thus argue, “The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world, and the subject is inseparable from the world, but from a world which the subject itself projects” (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991, p. 7). This is no dualistic separation between body and world, or body and cognition, or cognition and world. Perception and expression are not simply a description or construction of a real world out there, but rather an experience of the intersubjectively constituted life-world of immediate experience; they are a “singing of the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 187) not so very different from what Modell (2003) has described as corporeal imagination.

I think it would be interesting to extend the psychoanalytic notion of dreaming to this space as well, to broaden the conception of dreaming from one of a private, intrapsychic event to one that includes the body, and to think about how this sort of dreaming may disclose the world rather than

represent it. The British Independent analyst Flugel (1953) wrote that “as soon at least as we admit the existence of unconscious mental processes, the boundary between the physiological and the psychological is a vague and uncertain one” (p. 46). Doesn’t this idea free analysts up to think about a body dreaming the world, and a world dreaming a subject?

It is clear by this point that the enactive approach differs significantly from traditional Kleinian-Bionian approaches situated in an empiricist-intellectualist tradition. Despite sharing some similarities, the enactive approach also differs quite significantly from a social constructivist approach. I bring this up because of the enormous influence the latter approach has had on relational psychoanalysis, and to further emphasize what is unique to enactivism. While both social-constructivism and enactivism reject the idea that reality is independent of the knower, constructivists separate the knower from the known (world, others) in their assumption that reality is formed from the mind of the knower through his or her construction. By contrast, and consistent with the previous description, enactivism believes that reality is knower dependent, not because the knower constructs a mental version of the world that is contextually situated, but because she cannot be separated from the relevant world (Varela, 1999).

Where constructivists view experience as a process of organizing and interpreting one’s subjective experience, enactivists view experience as the complex, nonlinear, co-emergent process of the enactment of a world and a mind. Kleinian-Bionian as well as constructivist approaches to cognition rely on what philosopher Noe (2009) suggested is a digestive metaphor wherein consciousness happens inside us, as a metabolization or arrangement of experience. Enactivists see consciousness as an active process of embodied involvement in the world. Consciousness, wrote Noe (2009), “is not something that happens inside us. It is something we do or make” (p. xii). Moving past the passive image of the organism perceiving and then privately translating the world, enactivists such as Clark (1997) have stressed a model of continuous reciprocal causation—the way in which our actions may be continuously responsive to worldly events, which are at the same time being continuously responsive to our actions. The idea comes from Merleau-Ponty’s conception of “the intentional arc subtending the life of consciousness,” which is conceived as a complex loop between organism and world that seeks to move past the limitations of a model of stimulus and response. Merleau-Ponty (1963) stated,

Since all stimulations which the organism receives have in turn been possible only by its preceding movements which have culminated in exposing the receptor organ to the external influences, one could ... say that ... behavior is the first cause of the stimulations. Thus the form of the excitant is created by the organism itself, by its proper manner of offering itself to actions from outside. (p. 13)

The experience of consciousness is thereby embedded in action. One is not the passive recipient of external stimuli, or busily (socially) constructing stimuli mentally. Rather, meaning is created in the *interplay* between organism and world and relies on multiple contexts and dispositions. If psychoanalysts were to expound on this idea, moving past more mechanistic notions of interpersonal exchange located in stimulus and response (e.g., projective identification), it would, I think, come out with a rather complex notion regarding a field. Such a conception would be consistent with the Baranger’s (2008) post-Kleinian intersubjective conceptualization, wherein “the analytic situation should be formulated not only as a situation of one person who is confronted by an indefinite and neutral personage ... but as a situation between two persons ... involved in a single dynamic process” (p. 796) as well as Brown’s description of the way he works clinically.

THE FIELD, OR BECOMING AS EMERGENT PROCESS

Churcher (2008) described the evolution of the conception of the “field” as it arises first in physics, as a solution to the problem of action-at-a-distance (“how can two separate physical bodies influence each other across ‘empty’ space”; p. 786), then to its adoption by Gestalt psychology, and then its revision by Merleau-Ponty. Tubert-Oklander (2007) observed,

Field theories implied an epistemological revolution in science because they replaced linear causality, as an explanatory principle, by complex interdependence. They also had the characteristic of being atemporal because they explained the phenomena that took place in the field in terms of the latter’s organization and dynamics, without any reference to its previous history. (p. 116)

Introducing the work of the River Plate Group, Brown highlights the particular contributions of the Barangers, whose conception of the analytic situation as a dynamic field supplemented earlier notions of analytic interaction. Brown (this issue) identifies the Barangers’ efforts as a part of the “decidedly intersubjective interpretation of Kleinian concepts” (p. 673) that took root in South America. Indeed there was a very specific flavor to these intersubjective ideas, one that de Leon de Bernardi (2008) observed reflected an openness by the South Americans to emerging currents in phenomenological philosophy. In both Argentina and Uruguay, Klein and Bion were being read through the popular Gestalt and phenomenological thinking of the time. Thus when the Barangers explicitly locate their idea of the analytic field in Gestalt psychology and in the works of Merleau-Ponty, it is representative of an approach that was part of a highly innovative psychoanalytic synthesis occurring in the region (Tylim, 1996), one that Brown notes significantly predated many similar developments in North American psychoanalysis. Thus the Barangers’ very inventive conception of what took shape in the field was, according to Churcher (2008), to be understood as a function of the “total situation,” the historical past (and possible futures) existed only as structures in the here and now of the present field, and the local effect of the field on each of the participants at a given moment was experienced as an inclination to move or act or think in a particular way.

In addition to these conceptions, the Barangers did something truly ingenious. They used their reading of Bion’s (1952) work on groups to develop his idea that “an unconscious fantasy . . . does not exist in any of the participants outside this group situation” and extended this idea to their own conceptualization of the dyadic field: “This is what we mean by the basic unconscious fantasy in the field of the analytic situation” (Baranger, 1993, p. 17). By taking this small but crucial step, the Barangers effectively nested the Kleinian concept of unconscious fantasy within the field of the analytic situation, thus doing away with epistemic critiques (Mitchell, 1997; Reis, 2006) surrounding problems associated with the empiricist and intellectualist foundations of Kleinian innate fantasy structures. Thus Kleinian innate fantasies, or in Bion’s language “preconceptions,” become a function of the field, and transform into the “shared unconscious fantasy of the couple.”

This approach, combined with the Barangers’ (Gestaltist) focus on the here and now makes for a decidedly phenomenological understanding of clinical process. Indeed, the Barangers’ idea of the analytic field bears close resemblance to Merleau-Ponty’s choice to not oppose consciousness and the world as dichotomous terms. As a phenomenon that was neither subjective nor objective, but rather *entre-deux*, or in between the two, Merleau-Ponty (1963) cast behavior in a new light: “It is not a material reality and not a psychical one either, but a structure, which does not properly belong to the external world or to the internal life” (p. 197). This conception allies closely with the

Barangers' idea of a bi-personal field as a structure, a "single dynamic process," that as Brown observes is linked to a shared phenomenon produced in a couple relationship.² Brown (this issue) goes on to compare the Barangers' work on the field with Ogden's (1994) conception of the intersubjective analytic third, described as "an amalgam of both partners' unconscious, a relatively independent creation that has a life of its own: it is constantly being shaped, then reconfigured by input from patient and analyst and in turn affects the pair" (p. 675). This phenomenon extends, he tells us, "even to dreams," as dreaming, to quote Ogden (1996), "is no longer adequately described as being generated in a mental space that is exclusively that of the analysand" (pp. 892–893). It is, Brown tells us, "a special kind of intercourse" to dream in this way (p. 676).

They do this not simply to make representable that which had not quite been consciously grasped—they do this because it is *the singing itself* that enacts the experience of the analytic pair. Rather than represent some *other* reality, it is the becoming itself that can be conceived as a creative process of assembly in a nonlinear dynamic system that has no fixed endpoint. Heeding Merleau-Ponty's caution regarding the experience error, we wouldn't want to say that these songs were there, waiting to be sung, or that these songs were the joint symbolic constructions of two minds in relation. Rather, it is the engagement itself that is the song. This is an important distinction, because reading the case of Ms. C after the fact we may be tempted in the Kleinian-Bionian tradition to commit the experience error and suppose that the affective truth that was experienced was one that was there, waiting to be experienced if only it could be translated, formulated, released, or decoded. In the enactive approach, analyst and patient are not in search of truths already made. Neither are their enactments about linguistically making meaningful dissociated or unsymbolized mental experiences.

ENACTIVE FIELDS

Enactive fields, like Tronick's (2007) Relational Activation Patterns, are dynamically assembled and called forth by the unique relational configurations they partially constitute. For the individual, they operate on multiple interactive levels—perceptual, motoric, affective, dynamically unconscious, and conscious—each generating meaning inseparable from meaning making processes at the other levels of organization. Or, as Tronick (2007) described his perspective, the creation of meaning making in a dyad such as the analytic dyad:

holds that nonstatic, changing meanings exist in each level—in the body, in actions, in the dynamic unconscious, in the nonconscious, and in the conscious. These meanings are implicit and explicit, and

²It may help to think of the operation of mirror neuron assemblies when considering the action at a distance involved in the field, especially when such assemblies are regarded enactively, as perceptual rather than simulative (Reis, 2009b). Brown (this issue) states at the beginning of his paper that his view of intersubjectivity is "as an unconscious process between two communicating intrapsychic worlds, a process that is constantly at work in the analytic exchange of which, from time to time, the patient and analyst become aware" (p. 669). Conceptualizing the case of Ms. C from a position solidly within a perspective informed as much by Bion as the Barangers, Brown describes field phenomena of an emerging shared unknown emotional truth, and of shared unconscious phantasies. The longings and recriminations that were produced in this analytic couple, the palpable sense of great halting intimacy in the context of benign limit, their chaste performance of a special kind of intercourse that penetrates the most intimate parts of the other, the drawing nearer and drawing back, and the giving over of each other's dream worlds to the other's unexpressed emotion all represent the deep dynamic engagement of two persons experiencing one another, singing each other.

each of these forms of meaning brings the past into the present, makes sense of the individual's place in the world, and guides future actions and sense making. As meanings emerge from one level to the other, they take on new emergent properties. No level is fully privileged. Thus, even if one were to assume that fixed, fully formed unconscious meaning exists (an assumption we do not make because meanings are mainly fuzzy and messy), as the meaning is brought into consciousness it takes on emergent properties associated with the conscious level of the mind. These new properties, such as symbolic forms, represent a change from its unconscious form. In turn, the meaning is immediately acted upon by the patient-analyst dyad and changes further. Finally, the now dynamically changing conscious meaning transforms the still-in-flux unconscious meaning by downward causality (Freeman, 1994, 2000). (p. 503)

There are several important aspects of Tronick's description of meaning making. One is that meanings are not preformed, or formed only inside the individual. Shared unknown emotional truths and shared unconscious phantasies are, to paraphrase Noe, not something that happens inside of us, they are something we do or make. Another way to say this is that there is no place that meaning *is*—meaning is a constant process of becoming and transforming. The emergent properties of these truths and phantasies are a function of the enactive field, which as Tronick clearly states is in constant flux. Tronick's conception when applied to the analytic situation is consistent with a growing analytic perspective suggesting that much of what is important in the analytic process occurs outside of the awareness of patient and analyst. This perspective necessarily places lesser importance on mental contents, which Galatzer-Levy (2009) observed “until recently, constituted much of our theory and continue(s) to be the bread and butter of our communications to patients” (p. 998). Importantly, Brown refrains from making Kleinian interpretations having to do with the inferred contents of the patient's mind. This point needs emphasis, for when one considers what a different Kleinian might do with the patient's discussion of milk and breasts and a dream involving a small room filled with liquid, well, hats off to Brown. Instead, he tells us of his dreams, his anxieties, his history, and how he brings these to his conscious understanding of what is transpiring between Ms. C and himself.

Fonagy and Target (2007) have attempted to link both cognition and speech, to physical aspects of early infantile experiencing. Utilizing thinking from embodied cognition, they suggest, following Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) work that engagement in an analytic process is in part a *physical experience of action* that is described metaphorically as close, holding, containing, attuned, or attached. By extending a consideration of embodied enactive processes to fantasy, speech and cognition, Fonagy and Target link a psychoanalysis of the body, with a concentration on action as embedded in these modalities.³ Differing slightly from Galatzer-Levy's position in their retaining the importance of a conception of “buried” mental content, they write,

Irrespective of the content of our interpretation, the formal logical structure of our comments on our patient's thinking connects to deeply buried meanings pertaining to the bodily experiences of the first years of life, antedating language by months if not years. This happens in ways we neither understand nor can follow, no matter how hard we might try. (p. 998)

These comments from Tronick, Galatzer-Levy, and Fonagy and Target all suggest that psychoanalysis operates on nonconscious levels by continuously enacting (historical/infantile) experi-

³I would extend this link to dreaming as well.

encing, and that it is this enactive process that is the singing of each other, the *being understood*, rather than getting understanding, that Brown so importantly distinguishes.

One gets the feeling that Brown, too, believes that much of what is important in the analytic process occurs outside of the awareness of patient and analyst. The conversation between analyst and patient seems only one facet of a larger interactive process that includes the patient's body: her milk, her breasts, her sitting up; her ambivalent wishes to "move closer" to Brown (e.g., in her joke having to do with buying a home on his street); and her dream of being invited into Brown's home to interact with him and his family. In their work Brown has offered Ms. C a home for her mind (Spezzano, 2007) it is, not surprisingly, a "dream house."

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