

Hilmar Schmiedl-Neuburg

Jaspers and Bion

Existential elucidation and ontological transformation

1 Introduction

Jaspers (1883–1969) is a paramount figure in existential philosophy, enriching existential thought with ideas on existence and freedom, transcendence and the encompassing, existential elucidation, and boundary situations, as well as reason and existential communication (Thornhill & Miron 2024; Miron 2012). Bion (1897–1979) became one of the towering figures of psychoanalysis, developing object relations theory in new ways, and establishing one of the paradigms of contemporary psychoanalysis, characterised by his theory of thinking, conceptions of container-contained, of transformation in knowledge (K) and being in O, original reality (Grotstein 2007; Vermote 2018).

At first, the themes, approaches, and vocabularies of both thinkers seem to have little overlap, at closer inspection, several curious correlations reveal themselves. Jaspers trained as a psychiatrist before turning to philosophy, and his psychiatric background stayed present in his existential philosophical writings. Wilfred Bion is one of the most philosophical minds in psychoanalytic history, and his early philosophical studies of Kant shaped his thought to a similar profound degree as Kant influenced Jaspers. Both shared a passion for a phenomenological approach to philosophy and the human mind and experience. In their clinical work, this focus on the phenomenological study of subjective experience shows most clearly, be it in the case presentations of Bion (Bion 2013; Aguayo et al. 2017) or in the psychiatric works of Jaspers, e.g., his article on the phenomenological method in psychiatry (Bion 2012) or his “*Allgemeine Psychopathologie*” (AP), which share Bion’s stress on the formal phenomenological structures of experience (Fuchs et al. 2013). Their more existential and metaphysical thought, e.g., Jaspers’ conceptualisation of boundary situations and Bion’s conceptualising of therapeutic negative capability, show their phenomenological orientation, too. Further, Bion and Jaspers employ in their clinical work forms of translational hermeneutics, rendering symptoms, sensations, emotions, and thoughts of patients understandable (Jaspers’ ‘*Verstehende Psychologie*’).

A further parallel is Jaspers’ and Bion’s critique of the human tendency to seek safety in dogmatic forms of thought. In “*Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*” (PW) Jaspers explicates the dangers of solidified world views, into which the

human mind flees to escape the vast possibilities and unknown of human existence. These world views, based on false certainty, become pathological defensive cages (*‘Weltanschauungsgehäuse’*), incarcerating the mind, preventing it from learning from experience (Bion 1962). For Bion, theories and knowledge, though helpful in many ways, can become obstacles to transformation, blinding the mind and making human beings unable to perceive the phenomena as such. Resistance by knowledge, or resistance in K as he puts it, for Bion is one of the most difficult defence mechanisms, hindering the human being from being in O (Bion 1970). Instead, he values, like Jaspers, a profound openness for doubt. Thus, he exhorts the analyst to develop a negative capability of enduring doubt and unknowing and to enter every therapy session, epoché-like, without memory, knowledge, or desire, allowing learning from experience (Bion 1967b). For this reason, Jaspers’ critique of psychoanalysis, to a large degree, seems not to apply to Bionian analysis, as it centres around Jaspers’ understanding of psychoanalysis as a defensive worldview (Bormuth 2002). Bion agreed that psychoanalytic knowledge can have such an incarcerating, defensive and finally stultifying effect if used as resistance, which is why he stressed in his later works the central importance of negative capability for psychoanalysis, to endure the not knowing, the doubt and uncertainty (Bion 1967b; Bion 1973/1974/1990).

A final similarity is the transformative aim of both approaches. Bion speaks of transformations (Bion 1965) in knowledge, but more importantly in being, whereas Jaspers talks about existential elucidation (*‘Existenzerhellung’*) (PhII), though both bring existential subjectivity in contact with the transcending beyond and encompassing, to be transformed in this encounter. This transformative impetus is felt even in the writings of Jaspers and Bion, as both write in a way that allows reading itself to be a transformative and illuminating experience (Vermote 2018).

Of course, there are significant differences: Bion highlights the unconscious dimension, though not Jaspers, and Jaspers, in his mapping of existence, has a less clinical framework than Bion. Despite these differences, this article will centre around the points of contact between both approaches to exploring overlapping regions.

In the following, I will bring Jaspers’ and Bion’s conceptions of existence and subjectivity and of transcendence and O into dialogue, which will lay the ground for comparing their conceptions of existential elucidation and transformation, from the vertices of experience, especially in boundary situations, of thought and reason, and of communication.

2 Existence and subjectivity

Jaspers differentiates our being and subjectivity into four different aspects: '*Da-sein*' (being), '*Bewusstsein überhaupt*' (consciousness), '*Geist*' (spirit) and '*Existenz*' (existence). '*Dasein*' combines ontological notions of Heidegger's '*Dasein*' (Heidegger 2006) with vitalist notions of Nietzsche's '*Leben*' (life) and '*Wille zur Macht*' (will to power, Nietzsche 1999). Here, thinking and truth are pragmatic in nature, serving vitalist interests of '*Dasein*'. '*Bewusstsein überhaupt*' has a more Cartesian flair. It is the realm of rationality (*Verstand*) and thus of scientific, logical, mathematical, disinterested, and objective thought. '*Geist*' on the other hand, is the domain of reason (*Vernunft*), Hegelian in its holism and integration of opposites, bringing unity and connection to knowledge and reflection, and allowing for meaning-making. Finally, '*Existenz*' plays the most important role (VE; E), but before delving into existence, I want to weave in some corresponding ideas of Bion.

Bion does not, as Jaspers, differentiate between aspects of our being, though his theory of drives provides a rough parallel. He distinguishes three drives: love (L) and hate (H) are roughly equivalent to Freud's '*eros*' and '*thanatos*', but Bion adds a third drive, the knowledge-drive (K), striving for truth, independent of love and hate, leaving dualistic drive conceptions of Freud and Klein behind (Bion 1967a). Compared with Jaspers, L and H serve '*Dasein*' whereas Bionian K supports consciousness and spirit (and even existence). In contrast to Jaspers, Bion does not postulate a qualitative difference between consciousness and spirit and '*Verstand*' and '*Vernunft*', but rather assumes, as in his theory of the grid (Bion 1963), continuing degrees of rising complexity of thought.

Existence, in Jaspersian thought, a deeply personal, subjective mode of being, signifies our true, authentic self-being ('*Selbstsein*'). It weaves together themes of Heidegger's authentic (*eigentliches*) '*Dasein*' (Heidegger 2006), Sartre's '*être-pour-soi*', being-for-oneself (Sartre 1993), and Kierkegaard's idea of subjectivity as truth (Kierkegaard 2005). Existence is our being and self-being in its possibility, our '*Seinkönnen*' and '*Selbstseinkönnen*' (PhII; E). Existence transcends and encompasses its, to use Sartrean jargon, facticity as '*Dasein*', consciousness and spirit, and experiences self as a possibility. Self-being is always in the mode of potentiality and, hence, of freedom. Self-being and radical, existential freedom, for Jaspers, are inseparable, existence is freedom, and in our free choices and free deeds we realise our self-being as a continuous self-becoming ('*Selbstwerden*'), a continuous, originary self-transcendence. Though, self-being does not manifest only in our freedom, our possibility, but also in being self. As self we are radical subjectivity, able to reflect on ourselves from within this subjectivity, elucidating our existence. In this self-reflexiveness, aided by reason, we recognise not only the limits of our

world-orienting modes, i.e., '*Dasein*', consciousness, and spirit, including the inescapable limitations of knowing the world, but also the limitations of our own human condition. For Jaspers, we are not only unfinished but unfinishable, due to our being free self-becoming. Further, we are, as existential experience shows, fundamentally limited, marked by impotence, weakness, failure, subject to suffering, struggle, guilt, contingency, and death. According to Jaspers' Christian-inspired, though secular anthropology, we are broken in our very foundation (W). These anthropological limitations imply epistemological limitations as well, not only of knowing the world, but also of knowing ourselves existentially, which is why Jaspers speaks of existential elucidation since the certainty of existential knowledge is withheld from us. Though even this existential elucidation, in which we face up to our existential truth, we cannot accomplish in isolation, but in true, existential communication with others, a loving struggle guided by reason, as a limited way of overcoming our subjective limitations together (VE).

If we compare this characterisation of human existence with Bionian thoughts on the human condition, we can identify a range of parallels. Like Jaspers, Bion is stressing the uniqueness and subjectivity of the human being, in the clinical context, the uniqueness and radical subjectivity of both the patient and the therapist. For Bion, subjective, 1st person perspective has always primacy in clinical situations, relegating 3rd person, objective, e.g., theoretical, explanatory, or diagnostic perspectives, to later times of reflection. His instruction (Bion 1967b) to enter each therapeutic session without memory, knowledge or desire takes seriously not only the subjectivity of patient and analyst, potentially violated when confronted with 'objective' knowledge about the patient or the analyst, changing, in Sartrean terminology, their being-for-themselves into being-for-others, but also their freedom. Proceeding without memory, knowledge, and desire and using negative capability prevent the patient's and analyst's freedom from being constricted by memories of former sessions, by objective knowledge, e.g., diagnoses or degrees, or by desires in the form of therapy plans or goals. The analytic pair meeting in each session and even moment to moment is always new, taking seriously our freedom and self-being as possibility and unfinished self-becoming. This epoché-like proceeding, in conjunction with Bion's insistence on the paramount importance of negative capability in therapy and theory, further gives testimony to Bion's insight into our existential limitations. In tune with Freudian thoughts on castration as a human limitation (Freud 1938/2010), Lacanian concepts of foundational barredness, lack, incompleteness, and dividedness of our subjectivity (Lacan 2016), and Kleinian ideas of fundamental brokenness of the earliest self in the infantile paranoid-schizoid position (Klein 2018), Bion stresses the anthropological and epistemological limitations of the human condition. Bravely facing up to our boundaries and enduring steadfastly our inescapable un-

knowing, foregoing the defensive pretence of omniscience, cultivating doubt and resilience to ambiguity, are, for Bion, manifestations of our negative capability, a sign of mature humanity. Though, negative capability, therapeutic epoché, respect for subjectivity and freedom, and acceptance of human limitation for Bion, as for Jaspers, grow and unfold only in communication, in Bion's words, in the container-contained relation (Bion 1932; Bion 1967a).

For Bion, our subjectivity develops in a container-contained relationship, but, although this concept mostly refers to human communication where we encompass each other, it also alludes to being contained and encompassed by something larger than us, transcending us, something utterly beyond. Because for Bion, we become truly ourselves only when we engage with O, his symbol for true, ultimate reality, beyond description, while founding and encompassing us. The terms 'being in O' and 'becoming in O' describe in Bionian analysis this state of engaging and communing with the ultimate container, signified by O, in which the analytic path comes to its end. In Jaspers' existential philosophy (PhIII), the terms 'transcendence' (*Transzendenz*) and the 'encompassing' (*Umgreifendes*) signify that reality which Bion names O (Bion 1965; Bion 1970) and which can only be alluded to in ciphers of transcendence (CH). Existence can only illumine and become itself in the face of transcendence, transcending itself, reaching out to the encompassing. Existence can unfold only in awareness of transcendence; subjectivity only flourishes by being in O (Bion 1973/1974/1990).

3 Transcendence and O

In the following we will explore transcendence and O and their relationship with existence and subjectivity. For Jaspers, the human being can only realise its existence in conjunction with coming to terms with transcendence as existence is embedded in and encompassed by transcendence. Transcendence, or the encompassing, or, more precisely, the transcendence of all transcendences and the encompassing absolutely, for Jaspers refers to what the religions call God, the Divine, or ultimate reality (PhIII; PG), and philosophers might describe as the Absolute, the unconditioned, the one, or the ground of being. Only in contact with the divine beyond, true reality, Jaspers insists in a Kierkegaardian manner, can the human being truly become self.

Though, pure transcendence, beyond all its names, descriptions, concepts, metaphors, and images, like Kant's thing-in-itself, escapes us nearly entirely. Transcendence discloses itself almost only in ciphers, and we experience it almost always only in mediated forms. In the 7th lecture of his last lecture series, dedicated to the ciphers of transcendence (CH), Jaspers compares the Christian and the

Buddhist way of approaching transcendence, stating that, by and large, only the Eastern meditative traditions have successfully moved beyond the ciphers, leaving the names, concepts, and images of transcendence behind to commune with unmediated transcendence. But for Jaspers, this unifying path entails the loss of existence in transcendence and the dissolving of our subjectivity in the encompassing, and, in any way, can only be treaded after a lifetime of meditative exertion.

Jaspers advocates instead for an approach modelled on Christian ideas (PGO). Here, we do not attempt the merger with unmediated Divinity, instead we retain our separate subjectivity and existence, though in the face of, in contact with and responsible to the Divine. We are aware of the teachings of negative theology that the names, and concepts, and images of the Divine do not capture its essence or truth. But, since we forego the unifying path, unmediated experience of the Divine is not open to us. The Divine only discloses itself to us in ciphers of transcendence, like the cipher of the triune God, or the cipher of the Godman Jesus Christ, or other ciphers of the different religions, art, nature, or metaphysical philosophy. Though we cannot, but for the price of idolatry and delusion, take these ciphers literally and realistically (CH). They provide (like Heidegger's *Winke* or Wittgenstein's *Zeigen*) hints and pointers towards transcendence, allude to it, accentuate, perhaps even disclose and unconceal some of its dimensions, while withholding any firm knowledge of the transcendent. The ciphers only mediate between us as existence and pure encompassing transcendence. Existential elucidation is thoroughly intertwined with our understanding of the ciphers of transcendence. Theologically, they provide a middle way between negative and positive theology, tempering both by providing a positive theology which has been humbled and deliteralised by negative theology. The ciphers of transcendence can only function as mediators between existence and transcendence if they are '*in der Schwebe*', in suspension, speaking positively of Divine transcendence while negating any literality of the ciphers. In Paul Tillich's related thought (Tillich 1991), the ciphers must be broken myths, myths aware of their non-literal nature. In Hans Blumenberg's metaphorology (Blumenberg 1997), the ciphers are absolute metaphors, absolute but metaphors, nevertheless. Being of such a mediating, symbolic nature ciphers allow existence the symbolic interpretation of Divine transcendence and existential self-reflection in the face thereof. Self-reflection will differ according to the specific ciphers we use to symbolically interpret transcendence, e.g., whether we see us faced by the triune God, or by the Godman, by the unicity of Allah or by the Tetragrammaton. Ciphers can only fulfil this function if they retain their symbolic, mythic, and metaphorical quality, which allows for multiplicity of interpretation, alluding to the infinity of Divinity, and for an engagement not just of the mind but the heart as well. Like poetry, literature, and art, the ciphers engage our emotions and imagination as well as our cognition. This is the reason

for Jaspers' refutation of Rudolf Bultmann's attempt of demythologising scripture (Jaspers & Bultmann 1954) which, despite Bultmann's intention of clarifying the existential dimension of scripture and ciphers of transcendence therein, would have deprived ciphers of their indispensable poetic, mythico-metaphorical, and symbolic quality, condemning them to existential literalism. Theologically, Jaspers thus provides a devastating critique of dogmatic, literalist, and doctrinal orthodox theologies which rely on literalist, realist interpretations of ciphers of transcendence. Instead, his philosophical faith (*'philosophischer Glaube'*) takes all images, conceptions, and names of Divinity as ciphers in suspension, hinting at, pointing towards, and, possibly, even partially unconcealing and disclosing transcendence, while being open to different and plural interpretations, open to doubt and to accepting awareness of our terminal unknowing and uncertainty regarding pure transcendence, open to critique by reason in free dialogue and communication (PG; PGO; CH).

Bion's cipher of transcendence is O (Bion 1965; Bion 1970), open to manifold interpretations, as it connotes the word 'origin', the number zero as the ineffable axis of all numbers, the origin and zero point of every coordinate system, in its visual appearance nothingness and everything, a coincidence of opposites. O is Bion's cipher for the ineffable, for true reality cannot be known. O unites notions of ultimate reality derived from Kant's thing-in-itself, with notions of Divinity familiar from Hindu, particularly Vedantic theology – maybe not by chance, given Bion's childhood in India. Being-in-itself, true being, divinity in O are undifferentiated, whereas in Jaspers, being and transcendence are related but not necessarily coinciding. O for Bion, taking cues from negative theology, cannot be grasped, known, or conceived, though we may allude to it in metaphors, images, paradoxical concepts, or myth-like narratives. For these Bion gives many an example in his writings by using paradoxical metaphors pointing towards Divinity taken from the Christian mystics, especially Juan de la Cruz and Nicolaus of Cusa (Bion 1965; Bion 1970; Bion 1973/1974/1990). In the latter's work, we also find a similar penchant, as in Bion, for using mathematical metaphor to describe Divinity. Nevertheless, despite its ultimate indescribability, O is the ground of our experience and being, it is the container encompassing human existence. As in Kant, where knowledge of the world depends on the thing-in-itself, despite its ineffability, Bion thinks of O as the ground of all knowledge (K) of the world, without K being able to capture O conceptually. Descriptions of O can only be lightly held, always limited and preliminary, like Jaspers' ciphers of transcendence.

This understanding of O allows for two approaches, akin to the Christian and Buddhist-inspired approaches Jaspers discussed. For Bion, we must engage with O to grow and mature in our psyche, though this happens in two different ways, either by transformations of O into K or by being or becoming in O. Transforma-

tions of O into K ($O \Rightarrow K$) entail the creation of ciphers of transcendence, or in Bion's more detailed terminology, the transformation of original, unmediated experience O into mediated experience, so called alpha-elements (Bion 1963; Bion 1965), which in turn are building blocks of dreams and dream images, metaphoric pre-conceptions, concepts, narratives, theories, including ciphers of the encompassing. Thus, we create in K metaphors and narratives and through these we make sense of our existence contained by the encompassing O. Binocular vision, i. e., opening up towards O on the conscious and unconscious level, when dwelling in rêverie in our negative capability, allows for the arising of fitting metaphors in contact with O. Bion speaks of flashing insights (selected facts) which suddenly allow making of connections, links, and thus sense. Hence, transformations of O into K provide a crucial way of engaging with ultimate, transcendent reality. Though Bion does not only walk this Jaspersian path of creating and engaging with ciphers of transcendence. In his last works, especially his "*Memoirs of the Future*" (Bion 1975/1977/1979/2018), transformations of O into K give way to transformations in O, being or becoming in O. With these, Bion enters the mystic path rejected by Jaspers, the unifying path into pure, unmediated transcendence beyond the ciphers on which we merge, setting out from within reverie and negative capability, into experiencing becoming in O, a conception earning Bion the name 'mystic of psychoanalysis' (Wiedemann 2007).

4 Existential elucidation and transformation

These different ways of engaging with transcendence form an aspect of the ensuing considerations centring on Jaspers' existential elucidation and transmutation and Bion's transformations and psychic growth as their respective paths towards true humanity.

In Jaspers, the fitting mode to come to terms with our existence encompassed by transcendence is by way of existential elucidation (PhII). First, we attempt to orient ourselves within the world, the realm of objects and objectively verifiable knowledge, through our '*Dasein*', consciousness, and spirit, and with the help of common sense, the sciences, and humanities (PhI). Though this world orientation is indispensable for human beings, soon we realise the limitations of this mode of being when the fundamental limitations, inescapable boundaries, and unsolvable antinomies of our knowledge become evident. E. g., Jaspers describes in the first lecture of "*Ciphers of Transcendence*" (CH) how it is precisely our increasing scientific knowledge, measured in the number of publications, which makes an overview of the knowledge of even one discipline increasingly impossible. In addition, this mode, in principle, cannot answer fundamental questions regarding being in

its totality and regarding ourselves and our meaning and destiny, as encapsulated in the four Kantian questions. Therefore, we turn from world orientation towards existence encompassed by transcendence.

Given the epistemological limitations of our existence, this attempt at existential understanding ourselves cannot take the form of existential knowledge but only of more limited existential elucidation, more an awakening to our existence and less a knowing grasp of it (PhII). It is characterized by letting go of objectifying ways of self-understanding. Instead, it embraces radical subjectivity and existentially concrete selfhood and committedly engages in deep and open-ended existential self-reflection and self-questioning. Though aware of the boundaries of our knowledge about ourselves and the totality of being, existential elucidation nevertheless enters a path of continuous searching, wondering, questioning, doubting, thinking, pondering, raising metaphysical and existential problems and questions, struggling with antinomies of existence, philosophising in search of truth, awakening to our existence as potential self-becoming (*'Selbstwerden'*).

Existential elucidation gives testimony to authentic existence as a possibility (*'Seinkönnen'*), potentiality, and freedom which prevents us from being objectified, identified simply with factual being, and pinned down conceptually (PhII). We are disclosed to ourselves as freedom, in Kantian terms as *'homo noumenon'*. Realising ourselves as freedom requires courage, and the personal, unconditional will to take responsibility for ourselves, our lives, our open-ended ponderings, as well as for our free choices, our free deeds, and our existential reversals and personal transmutations (*'Wandel, Wandlung'*). As free self-becoming, we can choose ourselves as self-becoming and possibility or lose ourselves, we can change, transform, and reverse on an existential level to live a truer and more authentic life.

Part of our existential truth disclosed by existential elucidation are our weaknesses, brokenness, and limitations becoming evident when we as free, possible existence face the transcendence encompassing and grounding us (PhIII; PGO). Especially, in boundary situations, i.e., when confronted by transcendence with death, contingency, inescapable suffering, struggle, and guilt, situations in which we must founder, our limitations become glaringly obvious, asking us not to overcome but to accept them in the face of transcendence, and by engagement with its ciphers.

For Bion, the psychoanalytic path is a path of transformation (Bion 1965). Our psyche matures and grows by transformations, with psychological growth (Y) being the goal of the analytic path. Bion distinguishes epistemological transformations in knowledge (K) from ontological transformations in being (O). Transformations in K refer to what in Freudian analysis was the result of analytic interpretation and insight, of cognitive and emotional remembering, repeating, and working through (*'Erinnern'*, *'Wiederholen'*, *'Durcharbeiten'*). Bion sees transfor-

mations in K as crucial for analytic work as they allow for digesting and learning from experience, as expounded in his theory of thinking. They make it possible for us to transcend the vitalist preoccupations of the drives of love (L) and hate (H) which force us to conceive all experience through their lens. Transformations in K are fuelled by the drive of knowledge (K) which for Bion is not a scion of *eros*, like for Freud, but instead a drive more fundamental than love and hate, a drive striving for truth and reality – an idea which might evoke echoes of Hindu, especially Vedantic, and Buddhist thought on the origin of love and hate in ontological ignorance. For Bion, reminiscent of Platonic themes, our psyche grows if nurtured with reality and truth. Insight in and acceptance of our anthropological and epistemological limitations, brokenness and lack, our castration, is part of this transformational diet of truth (Bion 1965), as is the realisation of the primacy of our subjectivity (including the subjectivity of the analyst) and facing up to our possibility, freedom, and being as ongoing change and becoming – existential phenomena we will encounter if we enter the analytic session without memory, knowledge, and desire, employing our negative capability (Bion 1967b). Transformations in K enable us to create links within our experience, allowing learning from experience (Bion 1962) and psychic growth. The great opponent of K is -K, the drive of not wanting to know. (It is interesting that Jaspers gives a lot of thought to our not being able to know, but not to our not wanting to know.) -K is the ‘diabolic’ counterpart to the ‘symbolic’ K, trying to destroy knowledge, understanding, and insight out of fear, and it is a central task of K to counteract -K, in therapy as in life (Bion 1967a).

But even transformations in K can function as a defence against psychic growth if they preclude our encounter with the transcendence of O (Bion 1973/1974/1999). For Bion, truth and reality do appear in the form K, especially in opposition to -K, but this appearance is mediated, as the psychic operations of K, what Bion calls alpha-function, have digested, and transformed truth and reality of original experience O into building blocks of K, alpha-elements out of which dreams, concepts, narratives, images, and theories are made. K discloses O only in a mediated form, providing us with valuable, nurturing ciphers of truth and reality, but not with truth and reality in its original being. Though confronting true reality in its being, facing up to unmediated O is daunting, and transformations in K seem like a safe escape, for Bion, psychological growth not only needs epistemological transformations in K, but, even more fundamentally, ontological transformations in being and becoming, i.e., transformations in O (Bion 1970). Leaving K and its ciphers behind, transformations in O require an imposing amount of openness and tolerance of ambiguity, doubt, uncertainty and unknowing, a freeing and letting go, an immersion into original experience. Incidentally, the central role of absorption into original experience connects Bion’s ideas with

those of Maslow on transformative peak experiences disclosing being (Maslow 1994). In the next sections, we will explore Jaspersian existential elucidation and Bionian epistemological and ontological transformation in their experiential, intellectual, and communicative dimensions.

5 Existential elucidation, transformation and experience in boundary situations

At the foundations of Jaspers' existential elucidation and Bion's transformation lies the experience of existence encompassed by transcendence, the experience of subjectivity and mind, embedded in O. In Jaspers, this experience becomes especially manifest in his existential analysis of boundary situations (*'Grenzsituation'*), foundational, inescapable situations in which existence is confronted by transcendence with existential givens inevitably transcending any human capability of overcoming or mastering them. Confrontations with death, the one of the beloved other as well my own, with inescapable suffering, physical and psychological, with struggle as our existence is always at the expense of the other, with unavoidable guilt towards the other arising out of this struggle and towards ourselves out of the necessary foregoing of existential possibilities, and with the contingency of our being, are paradigm cases of boundary situations. In *Philosophie II* (PhII), Jaspers provides a detailed account of these, and how the confrontation with them illumines our existence within the encompassing. Boundary situations restrict our possibilities and freedom without the possibility of escape. They always transcend our power to master or overcome them. In boundary situations, we cannot but fail and founder (*'Scheitern'*). They show us our limitations as human beings, in terms of potency and possibility, and, in them evading our understanding, our attempts to master them intellectually, they force us to face up to our epistemological limitations, too, and thus ask us to encounter them with what Bion would have called negative capability, the ability to endure doubt and unknowing.

Boundary situations can be illumined but not fully understood or grasped by knowledge. Nevertheless, the challenging experience of these existential situations sheds an illumining light on our existence. We must accept our being subjected to these situations and experience our existence in their light. They call us to existential contemplation and self-reflection, but they also summon our freedom to act, aware that we cannot but fail. Though relieved from consequentialist calculations, in them we can stay true to ourselves in our existential choices and actions, doing

what is right – a very Kantian thought – even though our choices and actions must, given our epistemological limitations, remain shrouded in doubt (PhII).

Though for Jaspers, these ways of coming to terms with boundary situations are not enough to prevent us from falling into nihilism, even if followers of Nietzsche, Sartre or Camus might believe so. Jaspers rather takes inspiration from Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky's Alyosha Karamazov in thinking that only recourse to transcendence, though understood in a non-denominational and mediated way, offers a deeper, though still faltering answer to the nihilistic challenge evoked by the experience of boundary situations. When existence becomes aware of encompassing transcendence, and attempts to illumine the beyond and itself through the creation, contemplation and reading of ciphers of transcendence (CH), this diminishes nihilism's challenge by anchoring existential elucidation in transcendence. Though this anchoring does not escape doubt, faltering and failing. As we cannot access transcendence directly, unless we enter the unifying path, we can approach the encompassing only through our human-made ciphers, and, though they are infused with the beyond, and while they provide us with existential shelter and guidance, they are, as human creations, subject to radical doubt rising from our human limitations.

Bion's point of view, too, rests on the experience of being. Our mind, self and subjectivity arise and are being constituted to cope with original experience (O). Our coming to terms with experience provides the frame within which all our understanding and constitution of ourselves and our subjectivity unfolds (Bion 1962; Bion 1965). This general line of thought will be explored in the next section when looking at Bion's theory of thinking. At this point, I want to focus on how the specific experience of boundary situations could be conceptualised from a Bionian vertex.

When looking at Jaspers' descriptions of successful and failing ways of coming to terms with boundary situations (PhII), it is curious, given Jaspers' psychiatric experience, that when we miss or lose ourselves in the encounter with death, suffering, struggle, guilt, or contingency, when we fall in despair, we still seem to retain a certain amount of psychic integration and maturity. Bion would expect, when investigating the intrapsychic coping with boundary situations and their impact on functioning and structure of the psyche, that these become impaired if we fail to meet the challenge experiencing boundary situations entails.

Bion's theory of the psyche rests upon Melanie Klein's theory of the two positions (Klein 2018) or modes of structuring and functioning of mind and psyche, i. e., the paranoid-schizoid and depressive position. In the paranoid-schizoid position, the developmentally earliest functioning of the mind, the psychotic mode of structure and functioning, the difference between subject and object has not been drawn, and mind and world are splintered in many parts, which Bion calls beta-

elements (Bion 1963; Bion 1967a). There is no integration of good and bad, no connections or linkages of note, just a split manifoldness filled with terror, hate (H) and greed (L). Due to the development of mind and thinking in contact with the mother over the first few months, the psychotic paranoid-schizoid mode or position gives way to the depressive position, a mode of psychic integration in which subject and object are separated, where we can see others as independent of ourselves, where good and bad can be experienced together within us and within others. It is a mode in which we accept our castration, i.e., our limitations, and we can experience ourselves as a potent self and subject, able to harm but also to feel remorse and make good. In this neurotic mode of functioning and structuring of the psyche, we fear losing the other instead of just scrambling in dread for our own psychic survival. In the depressive position, knowledge (K) is dominating, linking, and weaving our world together into conceptual webs of meaning and sense by transforming the beta-elements into thinkable and linkable alpha-elements (Bion 1967a). Nevertheless, we always can slide back into the paranoid-schizoid mode.

With this background, Jaspers' account of successful self-elucidation in boundary situations appears as the description of a very mature and developed depressive position, and even his accounts of failing in our existence and losing ourselves retain vestiges of the depressive mode. Bion's work with psychotic patients taught him that paranoid-schizoid functioning is an always open possibility even in the most mature human beings, hence, from Bion's point of view, and from clinical experience, one would rather expect a sliding back into paranoid-schizoid functioning, when we break and lose ourselves when confronted with boundary situations. In some ways, combining Jaspersian and Bionian perspectives, we can think of therapy and analysis, as well as spiritual care, as existential situations in which patient and therapist in communication try to come to terms with boundary situations. Because the issues patients bring to therapy, their problems in living, are almost always personal variations of boundary situations in which patients experience death, suffering, struggle, guilt and chance, and founder in this encounter.

6 Existential elucidation, transformation and thinking

In experiencing boundary situations, but also in coming to terms with experience in general, reason and thinking play a paramount role in both Bion's and Jaspers' conceptions. Jaspers distinguishes in a Kantian manner between rationality (*Ver-*

stand'), the analytic and calculating capability of consciousness, and reason (*'Vernunft'*), the synthetic capability employed by spirit but also utilized by existence in its quest of existential elucidation (VE). Reason goes beyond rationality in its ability to integrate and synthesise, to holistically create connections and coherence, to dialectically bring antinomies into conversation, to conceive meaning and sense, and to engage in self-reflection. As such, reason can reflect on its own limitations as well. It is free from vitalist preoccupations, in Bion's terminology from L and H, and from narrow and rigid conceptualisations of rationality. Reason is guided by truth. For Jaspers, truth lies less in specific truths or insights but in the very form of thinking shaped by reason (W). Reason interlaces all aspects of our being, our *'Dasein'*, consciousness, spirit, and existence, with each other, with the world, and with transcendence (VE). Most crucially, reason, infused by spirit, guides existence in existential elucidation, of thinking through the human condition and the antinomies encountered therein. Through reason, in which the subjective and the objective are interwoven, one realises oneself as a reflective self, discloses oneself as freedom and possibility, and understands, to the degree that is possible for us, one's human limitations (PhII). Reason even guides our encounter with transcendence by guiding our crafting of ciphers of transcendence. Though, as reason reflects on its own boundaries, it is always in the mode of doubt and unknowing, wanting to know despite awareness of knowledge's limits, always searching and questioning, wondering, pondering, and contemplating self, existence, and transcendence. Simultaneously, in this open-ended searching and free questioning of reason we encounter our being as possibility and freedom. Reason is a process of thinking through our existence, alone or, more profoundly, together in communication. For Jaspers, reason is the preeminent medium and guide of existential elucidation.

Its purest form reason takes on in philosophising, as rationality does in science. By devoting ourselves to philosophy, principally existential philosophy, and to existential philosophising in dialogue and communication, we engage in disciplined, thorough existential elucidation (PhII; VE). If we employ reason as philosophy to elucidate our encounter with transcendence by crafting ciphers of transcendence to mediate between existence and transcendence, reason as philosophy takes on the form of what Jaspers calls philosophical faith (PG; PGO; CH). Philosophical faith ties together disclosure of transcendence with eternal critical doubt and searching, and thus manifests the love of wisdom which is philosophy in its most pure form.

In Bionian analysis, Bion's theory of thinking is central to his approach (Bion 1963; Bion 1967a). For him, our mind, thinking, and consciousness (as well as our unconscious) gradually form and evolve from an unformed state by digesting and transforming unmediated experience, though this formation of our mind, think-

ing and self cannot be done on our own but only in a containing relationship and nurturing communication with another. Bion starts out from a Kantian inspired distinction concerning our experience. O, the origin of experience, unmediated experience, in a certain similarity to Kant's thing-in-itself (Kant 1781/1787/1998), though not as categorically inaccessible, tends to evade us. It becomes accessible to us mostly, and as infants exclusively, in the form of a manifoldness of beta-elements, evoking the Kantian sensual manifoldness. Beta-elements are O splintered into a vast number of sensations and perceptions, proto-emotions, and proto-thoughts. Splitting into separate minute beta-elements without linkage dominates experience at this point, emotionally manifested by splintered feelings of hate (H), destructiveness, greed (L) and fear. Now, Bion proposes the philosophical idea that thoughts, or more precisely proto-thoughts, are ontologically, epistemologically, and developmentally prior to thinking and to the mind. In this early stage, there is no or barely a mind to think these beta-elements, these proto-thoughts, since the psyche is still functioning within the psychotic paranoid-schizoid mode. To be thinkable beta-elements need to be transformed into alpha-elements, the basic building blocks of dreams, conceptions, images, words, concepts, narratives, and theories. In an empirical analogy to Kant's transcendental aesthetics and transcendental logic (Kant 1781/1787/1998), it is our alpha-function, our thinking capability, which transforms or digests beta- into alpha-elements (Bion 1963; Bion 1965; Bion 1967a). Alpha-function can process negativity, absence, and thus ushers in thinking and language, since both require the semiotic division or negation between things and their signifiers, i.e., that words and thoughts stand in for, though are not the things they signify. In addition, for Klein and Bion thinking originally appears when the infant is confronted with negativity in the form of absence, i.e., the thought 'breast' arises to stand in for the absent breast. Further, alpha-function links alpha-elements together, an activity fueled by the drive to knowledge (K), but threatened by -K. Mind now functions in the depressive mode, and true learning from experience (Bion 1962) can take place. Alpha-function operates on a basic level as analytic rationality, like Jaspers' *Verstand*, though on higher levels it functions as reason (*Vernunft*), too, synthesising opposites, employing binocular vision, transcending the caesuras, as Bion puts it, e.g., between the conscious and the unconscious levels of the mind (Bion 1970; Bion 1973/1974/1999).

Developmentally, alpha-function is not there in the beginning, it needs to form, develop, mature, and this can only happen with the help of another human being's developed alpha-function. Thinking is always social, dialogical, born in communication, not arising in monological isolation (Bion 1962; Bion 1965). The conception vessel and incubator of the baby's alpha-function is the containing relationship with its mother wherein the infant is contained. Within the

container-contained relationship the baby projects its undigested beta-elements into the mother in a communicative process Bion calls projective identification. Ideally, the mother receives these beta-elements in an open, dreamy state of *rêverie* – since for Bion dreaming is the basic form of thinking –, and with her alpha-function transforms these proto-thoughts and -feelings of the infant into alpha-thoughts, images, or words which she can feed back to the infant, e.g., by transforming the screams of the baby into the gentle, language-shaped reply “oh, love, your tummy hurts”. The more the baby’s mind is fed with alpha-elements, the more its own alpha-function develops and matures till it can function independently. Something very similar happens, according to Bion, in therapy and analysis when the analyst in her dreamy receptivity takes in beta-infused remarks of patients, transforms them into alpha-elements, and feeds them back to the patients in her interpretations to develop their alpha-function. Both times, the mind grows on alpha-shaped truth (K) (Bion 1965), be it truths about tummy aches or ciphers of transcendence.

Further, as reason, sophisticated alpha-function, is aware of its own limitations, and the limitations of epistemological transformations in K, at its most developed our thinking-function can transcend itself by employing its negative capability of enduring doubt, ambiguity, unknowing and foregoing quick conceptualization and epistemological transformation, by perceiving without memory, knowledge, or desire, and open us up for ontological transformations in O, where we do not encounter O anymore as a manifoldness of beta-elements, but immerse our mind and ourselves in O directly.

7 Existential elucidation, transformation and communication

Bion and Jaspers conceptualise thinking and reason as communicative, relational, and dialogical. For Jaspers, reason needs dialogue with others to develop its potential, as in Bion alpha-function and thinking only develops in container-contained communication. Since existential elucidation proceeds through reason, it needs to take the form of existential communication, whereas transformations in K rely on our alpha-function born out of container-contained communication, and therefore are deeply relational and dialogical as well.

For Jaspers, existential communication plays a decisive role in existential elucidation (PhII; VE). Though we can reflect existentially in monological isolation, only in existential communication with others we can truly elucidate ourselves, since not only reason is dialogical in its nature, but our existence is oriented to-

wards others, too. We can realise ourselves as self and self-being only in contact with other self, we develop our subjectivity only in exchange with other subjectivities, we realise our freedom, our being possibility and becoming only in confrontation and cooperation with the freedom and possibilities of others, and we can own up to our limitations at best in solidarity with our fellow human beings (PhII; VE). For Jaspers, existential communication is loving struggle, guided by reason, dialectically interlacing our different individual subjectivities with our shared existential truths. The accentuation of love in communication seems to present a difference to Bion's stress on K instead of L, though one must remember that L connotes more greed and attachment, Jaspers' love more empathy and *caritas*. Existential communication, akin to Buber's *I and Thou* relation (Buber 2009), melts away our individual rigidities and fixations and opens us up to our shared existence in possibility and freedom. As a loving struggle, existential communication allows us to discern our individual differences and commonalities, to partake in the existence of others, to struggle with each other in our shared quest for existential truth in questioning, critiquing, listening, and to change and transform in the existential encounter. Additionally, we might even understand our crafting of ciphers of transcendence as an opening up to the possibility of existential communication with transcendent Divinity.

Bion's theory of thinking already stressed the central role of relationality and communication for the development of thinking and mind itself. Our mind, ability of thinking and self are conceived and incubated in the container-contained relationship of mother and child. Communication between the two brings into being, nurtures and transforms the infant's mind, thinking, and subjective selfhood. The same holds true in the analytic container-contained relationship between analyst and patient (Bion 1965; Bion 1967a). Here too, the mind, thinking, subjectivity and self of the patient (and analyst) are nurtured and transformed in the analytic communication, though Bion believed that such transformations can happen in many forms of close communication. Hence, for Bion, communication lies at the root not only of our existential self-elucidation and transformation but of our self-being itself. In contrast to Jaspers' idea of equality in existential communication, an idea he shares with Buber (Buber 2009), Bion's conception draws attention to asymmetric forms of communication, and in distinction to Buber's scepticism whether asymmetric, e.g. therapeutic forms of relationships can have the characteristics of real '*I-Thou*' relations, Bion stresses that only, at least temporary, asymmetries allow for real psychic growth and transformation. Though the roles of container and contained might oscillate quickly between egalitarian partners in communication, nevertheless without these complementary asymmetries, like in sexual conception, no transformation or growth will happen. Therefore, Bion's thought highlights that this asymmetry of container-contained is mirrored in the asymmetry

between projective identification of undigested beta-elements as a form of communication and speech filled with digested, transformed alpha-elements. Given Jaspers' implicit bias towards adult, egalitarian philosophical communication, the importance of asymmetric, non-linguistic modes of communication, like projective identification, for existential transformation, elucidation and growth seems to escape him.

Further, though Jaspers notes that existential communication implies community, Bion, the founding father of group analysis (Bion 1961), shows in much greater concreteness that transformative communication in the container-contained relationship can occur in the free communication – group analysis' equivalent to free association in the dyad – of the therapeutic group, as well. For Bion, thinking is not just dyadic but also a group phenomenon, with our thoughts co-arising and intermingling with each other in conscious and in unconscious communication, and thus calling for our negative capability in all existential/analytic communication.

Though all these transformations in container-contained communication are mostly transformations in K, transforming original experience into alpha-shaped knowledge, and this holds true even when referring to O in its totality or transcendence by way of alpha-shaped ciphers. Therefore, finally, we might consider understanding not only epistemological transformations in K as rooted in communication, but ontological transformations in O, as well, since being or becoming in O and being transformed in O require our immersion in original experience, and hence, a communication or communing with being.

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