

Truth as a therapeutic factor

Claudio Neri

Truth is usually invoked by those who possess political, religious or cultural power, by those who have many privileges and want to maintain them. Those who don't belong to the establishment, talk about the matter more rarely and the costs at stake for them are different.

Therefore, to talk of truth, can be rhetorical or even mystifying.

Nevertheless, I can't but notice that there is a spontaneous and universal need to have an opinion on oneself and on the situation in which one lives, and to ask if this be true. (Ogden 2003, p.596)

Hence, I will try to describe how I intend the function of truth and authenticity to be in analytic work.

In the first part of the paper I shall present Bion's notion of truth. This notion is central to his work, he grasps an innovative perspective in respect to both philosophical and psychoanalytic tradition. In the second part of my paper I shall describe and explain my thoughts and points of view on Bion's notion of truth.

The influence of a protestant environment: truth as durable consolation
I shall begin my presentation on the notion of truth in Bion with a quote by an English thinker, Samuel Johnson (that Bion didn't quote, but he could have quoted). This fragment gives us an initial idea of how truth was lived in a protestant environment, an environment in which Bion grew up. Bion came from a Huguenot family that settled in England from France, during the times of religious wars. Samuel Johnson writes:

« Whether to see our life as it is, will give us much consolation, I know not; but the consolation which is drawn from truth, if any there be, is solid and durable; that which may derive from error must be, like its original, fallacious and fugitive.»

Johnson clearly counterpoints *truth* and *error*. Furthermore he highlights the link between “truth” and “consolation” (moral consolation, spiritual, but also psychic consolation). Truth – he says – has a sustaining capacity, giving a durable consolation. It is something that we have all experienced: when we find ourselves faced with truth (seeing things as they are), however pitiful the situation may be we feel that we are able to confront the situation, if not even to resolve it. If instead, the situation is presented with uncertain and evasive traits, something ungraspable is added to the difficulty of the moment. We don't understand what is really happening. We feel as if we are standing on unstable ground.

Error and lie

As we have seen, Samuel Johnson, counterpoints truth and error. To define this, he uses a morally rich term *error*. The root of this term is in fact to “err”, to leave the right track.

Bion differentiates what is false (as it doesn't correspond to the truth) to a lie (as it is produced by a will of hiding the truth). Bion's definition of “lie” can be placed alongside Johnson's term “error”. Bion (1977) writes:

«[We need to distinguish] the false statement being related more to the inadequacy of the human being, analyst or analysand alike, who can not feel confident in his ability to be aware of the 'truth', and the liar who has to be certain of his knowledge of the truth in order to be sure that he will not blunder into it by accident.» (cfr. Bion, 1977, p. 5)

A lie has high costs for a liar: it requests an enormous amount of energy to be backed up, it needs to be updated and it needs to seem believable. On the contrary if the risks of truth are accepted, this energy becomes accessible. Truth is a gamble, but it widens the horizon of reality and it gives sense to what we are living.

Lies also have a high cost for those who are surrounded by liars, even more so for children who grow up in a lying environment. Working with highly

disturbed patients I have noticed a difference between those have been subjected to traumas that may have been important and continuous, but in which the family did not try to hide the truth, and those in which alongside the trauma a surplus of lies and falseness was also added. Those who grew up in families that created lies around a situation which was already in itself painful and penalizing. Psychotherapeutic work with these patients is much more difficult and the results are more uncertain. It's as if these patients had been attracted into a falsifying system and therefore found it difficult to understand what was happening to them.

It's as if the lack of truth in the environment had a depressing effect on their resilience. Resilience is the energy that allows an individual to not be discouraged, to not be disheartened. Primo Levi, who lived the terrible experience of the concentration camps, states that this resilience is linked with having faith in something, whatever it may be in which one has faith. I don't think it's possible to reach an authentic faith in something, if there is not truth; as everything is presented as uncertain, changeable and interchangeable.

Melanie Klein, Bion and other psychoanalysts discussed whether it be possible to undergo analysis with a patient that lies, and they asked themselves which methodology and technique could be used in these cases. However, I will leave this question open as I would like to proceed in the description of Bion's central ideas that regard truth.

Metaphysical anchorage: truth and “O”

There are numerous conceptions of the idea in both theological and philosophical thought.

Tommaso D'Aquino (1266-1273, I quest. 16, art. 2) gives us a classical definition:

«Truth is defined as a conformity between the intellect (of thought) and reality. Understanding this conformity therefore corresponds to knowing the truth.»¹

Descartes (Discourse On the Method, part IV) developed this idea:

¹ My translation.

«[...] for it is not a dictate of reason that what we thus see or imagine is in reality existent; but it plainly tells us that all our ideas or notions contain in them some truth; for otherwise it could not be that God, who is wholly perfect and veracious, should have placed them in us [...]» «[...] I concluded that I might take, as a general rule, the principle, that all the things which we very clearly and distinctly conceive are true [...]»²

According to Bion (1970), there is a correspondence between truth and reality. More precisely there is a correspondence between truth and ultimate reality. Truth and ultimate reality coincide with “O”.

«[...] O represents the absolute truth of any object.»³

Definition of “O”

The link between truth and ultimate reality, with God, is customary in theological thought and in a great part of philosophical tradition. In Bion's discourse on truth, there are however, two innovative characteristics (Gargani, 1996, pp. 16-25):

- a) Truth is “that which evolves”, it is “the non concluded”;
- b) Truth has a “transformative power” and a “performative character”.

The first of the two characteristics can be clarified, giving a more detailed definition of “O” and putting “O” alongside the notion of the Unconscious. Bion's notion of “O” can be placed alongside Kant's concept of “thing-in-itself”.

«In Kantian philosophy the thing-in-itself represents the unknowable, which remains by definition beyond the

² René Descartes, (Discourse On the Method, part IV).

³ Bion, 1970

knowledge of phenomenon. Such knowledge is susceptible to progress, but unable to draw from the same fundament of reality, precisely from the thing-in-itself.» (N. Dazzi, 1997, pp. 406-13, my translation)

“O”, however, isn't only unattainable, it is also evolutive, thus it has a spontaneous capacity of evolving and manifesting itself. “O”, is therefore the truth for Bion, truths are “that which evolves”, they are “the non concluded”.

There are therefore, links between the concept of “O” and the Kantian concept of the “thing-in-itself”, but there are also great differences, because the Kantian “thing-in-itself” is static, whilst “O” evolves itself. “O” is dynamic, it has an intrinsic force, that invests our lives.

Bion foresees the possibility that “O” can also evolve into different forms. “O”, as truth is one form, the evolved forms of truth are multiple. With the letter “O”, Bion refers to “the divinity that contains in itself all the distinctions that have not yet developed” (Neri, 1993, pp. 54-7).

The image is that of a Being in evolution that manifests itself in a complex pantheon like those in the Hindu religion.

I prefer to think – differing from Bion – that there isn't a unique truth, but different truths. These contradictory truths can build – as in the case of a novel – a course of truth. There is Isolde's truth and Tristan's truth. One is sustained by the other. These truths lead to an evolution when they are both in relation and in conflict with one another.

“O”, truth and unconscious

It is possible to determine distinctions, but also connections between truths, “O”, and the idea of the repressed unconscious.⁴

Jacques Lacan (1957, pg. 3) writes:

«In psychoanalysis, repression isn't the repression of a thing, but of truth. What happens when truth is

⁴ «The unconscious, in Freudian terms, can only be the repressed, [...].» «[...] the unconscious [...] that, for its “being different”, truly becomes “something in us”, an “inner foreign body”, an “Id”.» (Laplanche, 2004, p. e p. 14) my translation.

repressed? The whole history of tyranny is there to give us an answer: it expresses itself elsewhere, in another register, in a coded clandestine language.

Well! It is exactly what happens with conscience: truth, repressed, will persist transposed in another language, a neurotic language.

It's more or less at this point that we can no longer say that it is the subject speaking, instead we should say "He" (that is to say Id) speaks, Id continues to talk and what is said is decipherable wholly in the manner in which it is decipherable, that is to say, not without difficulty, a lost script.

Truth hasn't been annihilated, it hasn't fallen in an abyss; it is there, offered, present, but it has become "unconscious".

The subject that has repressed truth governs it no longer, it isn't at the center of his discourse anymore: things continue to function on their own and the discourse is articulated, but *outside of the subject*. It is this place, this outside of the subject that is precisely what is called unconscious.»⁵

⁵ « Or en psychanalyse le refoulement n'est pas le refoulement d'une chose, c'est le refoulement d'une vérité. Qu'est-ce qui se passe lorsqu'on veut refouler une vérité ? Toute l'histoire de la tyrannie est là pour vous donner la réponse: elle s'exprime ailleurs, dans un autre registre, en langage chiffré, clandestin. Eh bien! c'est exactement ce qui se produit avec la conscience: la vérité, refoulée, va persister mais transposée dans un autre langage, le langage névrotique. À ceci près qu'on n'est plus capable de dire à ce moment-là quel est le sujet qui parle, mais que «ça» parle, que «ça» continue à parler; et ce qui se passe est déchiffrable entièrement à la façon dont est déchiffrable, c'est-à-dire non sans difficulté, une écriture perdue. La vérité n'a pas été anéantie, elle n'est pas tombée dans un gouffre, elle est là, offerte, présente, mais devenue « inconsciente ». Le sujet qui a refoulé la vérité ne gouverne plus, il n'est plus au centre de son discours : les choses continuent à fonctionner toutes seules et le discours à s'articuler, mais en dehors du sujet. Et ce lieu, cet en-dehors du sujet c'est strictement ce qu'on appelle l'inconscient. » (Lacan 1957, p.3)

The unconscious is beyond awareness, it is however active, it determines our life. It can evolve and allow us to evolve when we relate to it.

Freud and the criterion of truth in psychoanalysis

I would like to deal with the same theme from a slightly different angle. Every discipline that would like to be inspired by scientific approach must elaborate its own criterion of truth, that must be verified, recognized, and discussed. The criterion of truth in physics and chemistry are not the same as those in psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology. In “Constructions in analysis” Freud questions the criterion of truth in analysis, more precisely he closely examines a particular and central aspect: how to define the criterion of truth of what the analyst says during the session. Freud's discourse (1937, p. 541, p. 545, p. 546, p. 548, and p. 545bis) is interesting and deserves to be displayed in full.

«It has always seemed to me to be greatly to the credit of a certain well-known man of science that he treated psycho-analysis fairly at a time when most other people felt themselves under no such obligation. On one occasion, nevertheless, he gave expression to an opinion upon analytic technique which was at once derogatory and unjust. He said that in giving interpretations to a patient we treat him upon the famous principle of ‘Heads I win, tails you lose’. That is to say, if the patient agrees with us, then the interpretation is right; but if he contradicts us, that is only a sign of his resistance, which again shows that we are right. In this way we are always in the right against the poor helpless wretch whom we are analyzing, no matter how he may respond to what we put forward.»

The outrageous and unjust statement, made by the worthy studier that Freud mentions, poses some questions on the guarantee of truth given by the principal instrument of psychoanalysis, interpretation. Freud is aware:

«And here, at the very start, the question arises of what guarantee we have [...] that we are not making mistakes [...].».

The answer – says Freud – doesn't come from the patient's explicit consensus and awareness:

«It is true that we do not accept the 'No' of a person under analysis [in regards to our interpretations] at its face value; but neither do we allow his 'Yes' to pass.»

It isn't possible to define the specific criterion of truth of the analyst's word, considering what is conscious, that is the answer that comes from reason, by the fact that the patient is rationally convinced by what the analyst tells him. The only criterion of truth to follow is to see if a certain interpretation determines an evolution or not, if it provokes an emotional situation that is different to the preexisting session, that, produces and presents other material. The criterion of truth of psychoanalytic interpretation, are not therefore founded on what is rational and conscious, but on the unconscious response. It is the response that the analyst receives from the patient in terms of free associations and development of the analytic situation. (Cfr. Also Ogden 2003, pg. 597)

«The indirect confirmation [is achieved] through associations [...].».

«[...] new material has come to light which allows [...] and, indeed, we often get an impression as though, to borrow the words of Polonius, our bait of falsehood had taken a carp of truth».».

Maybe we can express Freud's discourse in Bion's terms, saying that the truth of the actions carried out by the analyst bring to an evolution in “O” that occurs in the analytic situation.

The performative character of truth

I will now take into consideration the second innovative characteristic of Bion's concept on truth, that I briefly mentioned in previous pages: truth has “*a transformative power*” and “*a performative character*”.

Classic linguistic theory counterpoints the “*performative*” function of a linguistic act (talking as action), to the “*descriptive*” function (talking as stating: the simple statement). It is different to assert something (state something), from the saying of something that is action like (saying something that changes both the speaker and the listener).

The “*performative*” notion should also be differentiated from “*ostensive*”, thus from the linguistic act as if showing “here!!”, “here in front of you!!”. Ostensive has more to do with testimony; performative has more to do with transformation.

Truth – according to Bion – is capable of carrying out *performance*, therefore it is performative.⁶ Analysis itself therefore becomes a “*veridical process*”.

Analysis as a veridical process

I shall gradually approach this notion, by speaking first of all of the fear that is stirred by the possibility that analysis can be a veridical process.

On many occasions I have been consulted by people that have more or less asked: “everything is fine, only that I should be studying, getting a degree, not taking drugs...”. Sometimes it would be a parent or the spouse of the future patient, and the discourse would be something along the lines of: “Giovanni is a valid, able person, only he can't manage to get his degree, not to take drugs”. I perceived these discourses as if I was being told that something needed to change or be removed, leaving all the rest unchanged, that is the person, the relational and the family situation. What analysis does is the exact opposite: it can help someone become himself.

⁶ The idea of *performance* can be usefully linked to the notion of “false”, if we use this word with the meaning that it is usually given by humanistic studies, that is referring to the influence that every lived experience can exert on subsequent experiences. A memory, for example, has “force” in relation to the relevance it holds in our actual experience and actions. (Cfr. Turner, 1986) This meaning of the notion of “force” isn't contradictory to the notion used in physics.

What I intend to say – more precisely – is that analysis can help a person to free himself or (partly) transform anxiety and distress that oppress and limit his life. Anxiety and distress cover up the pain of what has been lost, in our failures, in what has been spoiled and ruined. Analysis can help the person find less self-wounding and limiting mechanisms to confront pain. Hence, some space is created in which the patient can express himself in a spontaneous manner and show his creativity, abilities, and inabilities. The patient tries to become more himself, and the analyst sustains him in this adventure.

I must add, that “becoming one self” doesn't necessarily encounter a great public success. On the contrary, the parents, the wife and those around the patient may not like this. Perhaps, even the patient himself may not like this. One of my patients, for example, after a few years of being in analysis started to become more assertive and even slightly aggressive. Those around him didn't like this change. Initially, he wasn't happy about this change and he told me that he preferred how he was before, that is an accommodating and a “chummy” person. Subsequently, however, he realized that when his relationship with someone was really important, the friend that had momentarily distanced himself from him would try to reestablish a relationship with whom he had become, and he would notice the presence of an authentic atmosphere that gave more life to their relationship. My patient had become more direct. There were less mediations.

The “*veridical process*” regards the becoming of truth; it regards the becoming of people (the analyst and the analysand) that are committed in search of truth: we become the truth, we don't hold it. A process through which a person becomes himself, whoever he may be. Once again we find Freudian wording in Bion's work:

«Wo Es war soll Ich werden»

A sentence that is useful to read in Lacan's translation from the German text:

«Where it was Id, becomes Ego».

Ego isn't a new construction, it has the same nature as Id.

How can these conceptions be translated into analytic work?

How can we prevent these ideas from just remaining at surface level, from just being an ethical request? How can we bring them into clinical practice? Bion answers:

«Saying exactly what one thinks in that moment of the session, carrying out only those adjustments that allow the patient (or members of a group) a better use of communication.»

The psychoanalyst – or the group therapist – must say exactly what is thought. I had the privilege of participating in workshops conducted by Bion and on two occasions, I directly experimented, what he intended with the expression “saying exactly what one thinks”. The first was when I asked him a question on basic assumptions. I asked Bion if at a certain point of group work, if it were possible to hypothesize that the basic assumptions (pairing, fight-flight, dependency) would get the upper hand and at the same time would evolve so much as to exercise a positive influence. Bion answered that maybe, at a certain moment, “the surrenals” (“the surrenals” - referring to glands that secrete adrenalin – is a highly imaginative expression that Bion used when talking about the fight-flight basic assumption, forasmuch he loved to use an image rich language but at the same time a scientific language) could have gained power. This could have determined the end of the human race. It wouldn't have been of great importance because at that point others would have taken over to allow life on earth to continue: probably insects, maybe ants.

I found it a shocking answer. I was confused and I felt guilty for having asked a question that must have evidently being very stupid to provoke such an answer. I would like to point out that Bion was an imposing figure, both in behavior and in physique. He was very direct and sincere, but he never answered questions in an arrogant or superior manner. He answered the question in that manner because he thought it was necessary to say the truth, and it was his duty to say it, in as much he was the person that was responsible for the development of the group.

Once that I'd recovered, a few days later, during another workshop reunion, I asked another question that I don't remember but I remember that I asked it in a very complex and elaborated manner. Bion answered the question referring to the Titanic: this grand transatlantic was the most extraordinary construction that the human mind had ever planned, but it encountered something (an iceberg) and it sunk! My construction, my desire of being noticed and liked by Bion, had encountered something (his adamant sincerity) and sunk to the bottom.

Truth at all costs

According to Bion, truth is the engine behind a healthy mental development, it is food for the mind:

«[...] healthy mental growth seems to depend on truth as the living organism depends on food. If it is lacking or deficient the personality deteriorates.» (Bion, 1965, p. 38)

It's the analyst's task to tell the truth even if this behavior can be of shock to the patient. What the analyst says can appear as unexpected. It can be difficult for the patient to believe that the analyst isn't provoking him. He may think that what the analyst says is excessive.

I think that these problems should be taken into account, I agree with López-Corvo (2002, p. 7) when he writes:

«[...] the search of incorruptible truth at all costs. However, truth has its consequences, its violence [...]»

Bion himself, wrote an interesting article on the arrogance of Oedipus. He states that when Oedipus searches for truth at all costs, he putting pressure on Tiresias, thus becoming arrogant.

This is a central point: truth cannot be possessed by the analyst, or by the patient. Truth cannot be extracted or imposed on anyone and nonetheless on a person that is looking for help. Truth cannot be given. It can only try to

become truth. When we demand that someone tells us the truth, we are being arrogant, and arrogance leads to violence.

An arrogant person thinks he can extract the truth from someone, without keeping in consideration the needs, sensitiveness, limits, rights, and truth of that person, that is in, that exact situation or relationship.

In certain moments – this research – leads us to recruit a real of phantasmal interlocutor.

A Japanese writer, Inoue Yasushi (1949, p. 21) explains in an effective manner what I am saying in *The hunting rifle*. Josuke – the protagonist of Yasushi's novel – recognized himself in a poem that the writer had published in a small journal. Josuke believes that the writer must have seen him whilst he was walking alone on the mountain, and afterwards the writer portrayed him in the poem. Therefore he sends him a note along with three letters that he receives from the three most emotionally important people of his life. In the note Josuke writes:

«[...] I have three letters that have been addressed to me. I had already decided to burn them, when reading your [...] poem, I have so to say made acquaintance with you, and all of a sudden I thought of having you read them. [...] I would like you to know what the place that my eyes have seen and that you [in your poem] defined “the white riverbed”.

Man is a [...] creature, that aspires after all, of being known by someone. I had never felt this need before, but in having discovered that someone like yourself exists, that has had the kindness of showing a special interest in me, I felt the desire that you should know everything.»

It's an almost unsustainable inner feeling of solitude that pushes Josuke to write to Yasushi. The inner solitude is however the other side of not having been in true and deep contact, and not having been intimately known by anybody. Josuke, would like “someone” to get to know him and discover

whether he is able to wound or kill with the rifle from which he is inseparable, or even if he is able to love.

Truth and empathy

In French, there is a beautiful expression: “there are reasons of heart that reason doesn't always know”. This expression counterpoints “the language of heart” to “the language of reason”. Taking into consideration only the truth of what surfaces during the session, and not taking into account the truth of the patient's sensitiveness, the analyst can be strongly committed in an effort of truth, but at the same time betray the truth of heart, of feelings, of the patient's sensitiveness.

Hence, the question is which space should be given to “the truth of heart”, alongside the “truth of things as they are” (to truth as an engine like something that evolves).

If there isn't truth in analysis, if during the therapeutic session there isn't an authentic feel. If there isn't an air of sincerity, whatever is said sounds flat, incapable of establishing a real emotional and knowing contact. If however the analyst doesn't manage to take on the emotional and effective condition of the person that is in relationship with him, he will wound the person by saying the truth.

How can we relate the veridical process and empathy?

The word *empathy* is the translation of the German term *Einfühlung*, that appears in the works of Freud. Initially the word Einfühlung was used by art critics, inspired by the romantic movement to point out a specific manner of looking at a painting or a work of art. Einfühlung implies looking and seeing the painting with an identification motion, leaving (momentarily) on the background the evaluation of its formal, technical and aesthetical characteristics.

In the psychoanalytical field, the term “empathy” has been enriched with psychoanalytic meaning by Heinz Kohut (1971):

«A specific contribution of psychoanalysis has been to transform the intuitive empathy of artists and poets into an observation tool used by scientifically trained researchers».

Kohut – speaking about empathy as an “observation tool used by a trained scientific researcher” - wants to underline how empathy doesn't simply mean putting one self in somebody else's shoes. On the other hand, empathy means feeling other people's feelings, their way of feeling, remaining oneself.

I would like to highlight at least another feature bound with empathy, that is particularly important: the non neutrality. I will underline this characteristic by writing about an incident that regards myself.

I took a friend of mine, Giuliano Briganti – a famous art history critic, mainly known for his knowledge of Italian baroque art – to see some paintings, whose attribution resulted being problematic. He immediately told me that with all probability the author was ... and he pronounced the name of a minor artist, that I didn't know and I don't remember. I asked him how he had recognized the artist with such suddenness. Briganti answered: “it's like meeting a friend, when you meet him you recognize him”.

Empathy – in my opinion – is the capacity of discovering the feeling of someone else, looking at them through the eyes of a friend. That is: feeling and discovering the positive elements, that are in his experiences and behavior.

Bion may have said: “Psychoanalysis can help you only to become yourself. I don't know if you will like this or if other people will like this”. Kohut, would have probably expressed himself by saying: “Psychoanalysis can help you become yourself. I am very enthusiastic about what you are becoming and I am quite sure that you will also like yourself.”

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