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THE WORK OF WILFRED BION ON GROUPS

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Since 1965 the Washington School of Psychiatry has sponsored a series of residential Group Relations Conferences in the tradition developed in England by the Centre for Applied Social Research of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. The focus of these conferences is the group, as a whole dynamic field in relationship to other fields. Their uniqueness lies in the highly disciplined concentration on the part of the staff upon this focus. The individual's personal life, his individual characteristics, and his dyadic relationships are not the subject of the study. A grasp of the work in this area by the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion can be helpful not only to participants in these conferences but to anyone who is occupied with groups. Since his work on first reading often seems obscure, a brief explication of his major ideas may facilitate understanding.

The shift in perspective from the individual to the group is difficult to make in actual practice although it is often given lip service. It is like a shift to a higher order of magnitude, which is not easy when the lower order is in itself very complex and by no means thoroughly understood. But the shift is necessary in order to grasp social phenomena. From this perspective it is often possible to see the problems of the individual or the pair in a new light. This is well known to family therapists, who find an individual child or a marital relationship more comprehensible when seen in the framework of the entire family.

The Washington School of Psychiatry-Tavistock Conferences provide opportunities for members to study behavior in large groups of 50-60, in small groups of 10-12, and in intergroup situations. No particular theoretical framework is prescribed, and staff members come with various theoretical points of view and from various professional orientations, including sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis, and business administration. But Bion's concepts have been especially useful to the staff since they formulate group psychological processes in integrative terms. A. K. Rice, who has directed most of the British and American conferences since 1962, was strongly influenced by his membership in a training group conducted by Bion in 1947-48, as well as by Bion's theories.

Much of the material on which Bion based his theories and many of the examples which he gives come from the small groups which he conducted at the Tavistock Clinic. He does not deal exclusively with these, however, but also discusses large

social institutions such as the army and the church. His interest in group processes was stimulated when, as an officer in the British Army during World War II, he was engaged in the selection of men for leadership roles and in charge of a rehabilitation unit of psychiatric patients. He began at that time to think of treatment of the whole society of the hospital not as a makeshift to save psychiatric manpower, but as the best way to get at the malady as he perceived it, namely the inability on the part of the patients to function adequately as members of society or, in other words, as group members. He saw this inability with reference both to the hospital community and to society at large.

Because Bion's name is so much associated with groups and because he emphasized the phenomena of total fields rather than of individuals he is sometimes thought of as having talked about the group as a mythical entity instead of talking about human behavior. This is not the case. He defines a group as a function or set of functions of an aggregate of individuals. It is not a function of any one part separately, nor is it an aggregate without a function.

For example, if a dozen strangers are lying by chance in the sun on the same beach they do not constitute a group according to his definition. But if someone in the water cries for help and the twelve individuals respond by trying to save the swimmer from drowning in some kind of concerted action, however rudimentary the concertedness may be, they have become a group in that they now have a function. This may last for only a few minutes or it may turn into an organization of life savers which goes on for years.

Although Bion thinks and speaks of instincts, he does not postulate a herd instinct or a group mind. He thinks that ideas of this kind are often developed by people in groups, but that when they occur they are symptomatic of regression. In his opinion groups bring into prominence phenomena which can best be understood if one has some experience of psychotic phenomena as well as of normal and neurotic behavior. The belief that a group or group mind exists, as something other than a function of a number of individuals, appears to Bion to be a distorted figment of the imagination which emerges when people are threatened with a loss of their individual distinctiveness.

He emphasizes that people do not have to come together in the same room to form a group. In his view a hermit in a desert is inevitably a member of a group and cannot be understood unless one knows what the group is from which he has separated himself geographically. People have to come together in a room in order that group phenomena may be demonstrated and elucidated but not in order that they should exist. This is similar to the situation in psychoanalysis in which the patient has to enter into a therapeutic relationship with the analyst in order that the analyst may demonstrate and analyze the transference, but not in order that transference phenomena should exist.

Bion's central thought is that in every group two groups are present: the "work group" and the "basic assumption group". This may all sound less mysterious if one says that in every group there are two aspects, or that there are two different ways of behaving. Bion's terminology is a short cut which may lead to the belief that he thinks of each group of ten people as consisting of twenty invisible people sitting in two separate circles and talking, now in normal rational voices and now in another voice as in O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. And in fact he does think in this kind of metaphor. At the same time he is quite clearly aware that it is a metaphor, which some of his less poetic readers tend to forget. He does not mean that there are two groups of people in the room, but that the group behaves as if that were the case, and he considers that this is the unconscious fantasy of the people in the group.

His concept of the work group will be described first and then that of the basic assumption group. The work group is that aspect of group functioning which has to do with the real task of the group. This exists in a committee which has come together to plan a program, or a staff of an organization which proposes to review the activities of the past year, or a small group met to study its own behavior. The work group takes cognizance of its purpose and can define its task. The structure of the group is there to further the attainment of the task. For example, if a group needed to collect dues it would appoint a treasurer. But it would not appoint a finance committee unless there were real matters of policy to be taken care of by such a committee. The number of vice presidents would be limited by the functions which vice presidents had to perform. The number of meetings would be dictated by the amount of business which had to be conducted. The leader of the work group is not the only one who has skills, and he leads only so long as his leadership serves the task of the group. The members of the work group cooperate as separate and discrete individuals. Each member of the group belongs to it because it is his will and his choice to see that the purpose of the group is fulfilled. He is therefore at one with the task of the group and his own interest is identified with its interest. The work group constantly tests its conclusions in a scientific spirit. It seeks for knowledge, learns from experience, and constantly questions how it may best achieve its goal. It is clearly conscious of the passage of time and of the processes of learning and development. It has a parallel in the individual with the ego in Freud's sense, in the rational and mature person.

Groups which act consistently like the one just described are very rare and perhaps even non-existent in pure culture. A large part of Bion's theory has to do with why groups do not behave in the sensible way just described as characteristic of the work group. Man seems to be a herd animal who is often in trouble with his herd. Ineffective and self-contradictory behavior seems

at times to be very common in groups — even though highly effective functioning is common at other times. The work group is only one aspect of the functioning of the group. The other aspect is the one which Bion calls the basic assumption group.

Bion is probably best known popularly for the names which he coined for the three kinds of basic assumption groups — namely, the dependency, the fight-flight, and the pairing groups. It should be emphasized that he himself used the word “adumbrated”—that is, vaguely outlined—to characterize his classification of these groups, and it may well be that the classification should be made differently or that other categories should be added. This is not the main point.

It is important to understand what the term *basic assumption* means, for otherwise one may get lost in the more important point, which is the commonality of all three. Basic assumption means exactly what it says — namely, the assumption which is basic to the behavior. It is an “as if” term. One behaves as if such and such were the case. In pre-Columbian days seafaring men operated on the basic assumption that the world was flat and that they might fall off its edge. Therefore they did not venture very far from the coast. So on many different levels, by observing the behavior of individuals and of groups, one can tease out the basic assumptions on which they operate. Bion uses the term to refer to the *tacit* assumptions that are prevalent in groups, not to those which are usually outside of awareness. Nevertheless, they are the basis for behavior. They are deductible from the emotional state of the group. The statement of the basic assumption gives meaning to and elucidates the behavior of the group to the extent that it is not operating as a work group.

According to Bion there are three distinct emotional states of groups from which one can deduce three basic assumptions. The first of these is the dependency basic assumption.

The essential aim of the basic assumption dependency group is to attain security through and have its members protected by one individual. It assumes that this is why the group has met. The members act as if they know nothing, as if they are inadequate and immature creatures. Their behavior implies that the leader, by contrast, is omnipotent and omniscient. A group of sick, miserable psychiatric patients, for example, and a powerful, wise, loving, giving therapist easily fit this picture. The power, the wisdom, and lovingness of the therapist are, of course, not tested. The patients are often united in the belief that if they sit long enough, the wise leader will come forth with the magic cure. They do not even need to give him adequate information about their difficulties for he knows everything and plans everything for the good of the members. In this emotional state the group insists that all explanations be extremely simple; no one can understand any complexity; no one can do anything that is difficult; but the leader can solve all difficulties, if he only will.

He is idealized and made into a kind of god who will take care of his children. The leader is often tempted to fall into this role and to go along with the basic assumption of the group.

But since no one really can fill this role and since anyone who is doing his job will refuse to fill it, he can never succeed in meeting the group's expectations. In failing to be omniscient and omnipotent leader of these people who are presenting themselves as inadequate weaklings, he inevitably arouses their disappointment and hostility. The members will try for a long time to blind themselves to this and will try not to hear what he says in interpreting their dependency to them. They often try quite desperate maneuvers to wring his heart and to force him to take proper care of them. One of the most frequent maneuvers is to put forth one member as especially sick and requiring the special care of the leader. Such a member may actually be pushed by the others into a degree of distress which he had not really felt at all, but the group needs someone who will wring the leader's heart or else show him up to be an unfeeling demon. The interesting thing is that whereas the group seems to be concerned about this poor person and his trouble, it is actually more concerned about the group aim to get the leader to take care of it and to relieve its feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. A person who falls into this role can very easily be carried away by it until he oversteps the bounds, and then he may find himself abandoned by the group.

When the leader of such a group fails to meet expectations, as he is bound to do, the group searches for alternative leaders. These are often eager to accept the role, and to prove that they can do what the original leader could not do. This is a temptation which the group offers to its more ambitious members. When they fall for it, they are usually in for the same fate as the original leader.

One of the frequent concerns in the dependency group has to do with greed. This is understandable enough since in manifesting the kind of childlike dependency characteristic of this basic assumption, the group members are perpetuating a state appropriate to an earlier stage of development and each one is demanding more than his share of parental care. There is often conflict in this group between the dependent tendencies and the needs of the individuals as adults. Resentment at being in a dependent state is present as well as a desire to persist in it. Although anger and jealousy are expressed, they do not usually arouse a tremendous amount of fear because of the basic assumption that a super-being exists in the form of the leader, who will see to it that the irresponsibilities of the members will not go too far and will not have dire consequences. There is often conflict between the desire to express feelings irresponsibly and the desire to be mature and consider consequences. The basic assumption dependency group in pure culture does not exist any more than the work group in pure culture. But the more it tends

to be dominant over the work group, the more the relationship of the members to the leader takes on the characteristics of a religious cult. The work function will often then be felt as a challenge to a religion. Some of the same phenomena will occur which have occurred in the world in the conflict between science and religion, as if the claims of science were challenging the claims of religion. The words or writings of the leader become a kind of Bible and the group engages in exegesis of his works. This tends to happen particularly if the leader has already demonstrated his human inability to satisfy the demands of the group for a deity. His written words or remembered words may then be taken in place of his person.

The outside world often looks cold and unfriendly to the basic assumption dependency group. Sometimes when the members feel deserted by their leader, they forget their internal squabbles, close ranks, and snuggle up to each other like little birds in a nest. A warm groupness develops which gives a temporary sense of comfort and security. To challenge this is heresy and is persecuted as such.

The second basic assumption group is that of fight-flight. Bion joins these together as two sides of the same coin. The assumption is that the group has met to preserve itself and that this can be done only by fighting someone or something or by running away from someone or something. Action is essential whether for fight or for flight. The individual is of secondary importance to the preservation of the group. Both in battle and in flight the individual may be abandoned for the sake of the survival of the group. Whereas in the basic assumption dependency group the sick person may be valued for his ability to engage the leader as a person who will take care of others, in the fight-flight group there is no tolerance for sickness. Casualties are to be expected.

A leader is even more important than in other basic assumption groups because the call for action requires a leader. The leader who is felt to be appropriate to this kind of group is one who can mobilize the group for attack or lead it in flight. He is expected to recognize danger and enemies. He should represent and spur on to courage and self-sacrifice. He should have a bit of a paranoid element in his makeup if he wishes to be successful, for this will ensure that if no enemy is obvious, the leader will surely find one. He is expected to feel hate toward the enemy and to be concerned not for the individual in the group but for the preservation of the group itself. An accepted leader of a fight-flight group who goes along with the basic assumption is one who affords opportunity in the group for flight or aggression. If he does not do this, he is ignored.

This basic assumption group is anti-intellectual and inimical to the idea of self-study; self-knowledge may be called introspective nonsense. In a group whose avowed purpose or work task is self-study, the leader will find when the group is operating in

basic assumption fight-flight that his attempts will be obstructed either by expressions of hatred against all things psychological and introspective, or by various other methods of avoidance. The group may chitchat, tell stories, come late, be absent, or engage in innumerable activities to circumvent the task.

In groups engaged in more overt action, it is possible to observe the close connection of panic and the fight-flight group. Bion contends that panic, flight and uncontrolled attack are really all the same. He says that panic does not arise in any situation unless it is one that might as easily have given rise to rage. When the rage or fear are offered no readily available outlet, frustration arises which in a basic assumption group cannot be tolerated. Flight offers an immediately available opportunity for expression of the emotion in the fight-flight group and meets the demands that all basic assumption groups have for instantaneous satisfaction. Attack offers a similarly immediate outlet. Bion thinks that if the leader of such a group conforms to the requirement of the fight-flight leader he will have no difficulty in turning a group from headlong flight to attack or from headlong attack to panic.

The third basic assumption group is that of pairing. Here the assumption is that the group has met for purposes of reproduction, to bring forth the Messiah, the Savior. Two people get together on behalf of the group to carry out the task of pairing and creation. The sex of the two people is immaterial. They are by no means necessarily a man and a woman. But whoever they are, the basic assumption is that when two people get together it is for sexual purposes. When this basic assumption is operative, the other group members are not bored. They listen eagerly and attentively to what is being said. An atmosphere of hopefulness pervades the group. No actual leader is or needs to be present, but the group, through the pair, is living in the hope of the creation of a new leader, or a new thought, or something which will bring about a new life, will solve the old problems and bring Utopia or heaven, or something of the sort. As in the history of the world, if a new leader or Messiah is actually produced, he will of course shortly be rejected. In order to maintain hope, he must be unborn. Bion emphasizes the air of hopeful expectation which pervades the group. He says it is often expressed in clichés — such as, “Things will be better when spring comes” — or in simple-minded statements that some cure-all like marriage or group therapy would solve all neurotic problems. Although the group thus focuses on the future, Bion calls attention to the present, namely the feeling of hope itself, which he thinks is evidence that the pairing group is in existence even when other evidence is not clear. The group enjoys its optimism, justifying it by an appeal to an outcome which is morally unexceptionable. The feelings associated with this group are soft and agreeable. The unborn leader of this group, according to the basic

assumption, will save it from feelings of hatred, destructiveness, and despair — both its own feelings and those of others. If a person or an idea should be produced by such a group hope will again be weakened, for there will be nothing to hope for. The destructiveness and hatred have not really been reduced and will again be felt.

These then are the three basic assumption groups which Bion describes. It is clear enough how different they all are from the work group. Although each one has its own characteristics, the basic assumption groups also have some characteristics in common. Basic assumption life is not oriented outward toward reality, but inward toward fantasy, which is then impulsively and uncritically acted out. There is little pausing to consider or to test consequences, little patience with an inquiring attitude, and great insistence upon feeling. Basic assumption members often are confused, have poor memories, are disoriented about time. They do not really learn and adapt through experience but actually resist change, although they may shift very readily from one basic assumption to another. Often there are reminiscences about the good old days. The language of such groups is full of clichés, or repetitive phrases, and of vague and loose generalizations. Another important aspect of the basic assumptions is that they are anonymous. They are not formulated by any one member in the group and cannot be attributed to any one member. No one wants to own them. There is a kind of conspiracy of anonymity, which is facilitated by the fact that identities and names get mixed up; statements are attributed falsely or vaguely. The basic assumptions seem to be the disowned part of the individuals, and individuals seem to fear the basic assumptions as if they might take over and leave nothing of the mature, rational persons in the group. Since the basic assumptions are anonymous, they can function quite ruthlessly, which is another reason why they are feared. There is much vicarious living in a basic assumption group, particularly through roles, so that often a person becomes fixed in a role which the group needs for its own purposes and then cannot get out of it. Basic assumption groups also constantly attempt to seduce their leaders away from their work function.

Neither the work group nor the basic assumption group exists in pure culture for very long. What one sees in reality is a work group which is suffused by, intruded into, and supported by the basic assumption groups. One can make an analogy to the functions of the conscious ego, which are suffused by, invaded by, and supported by the irrational and unconscious aspects of the personality. So it seems that the basic assumptions represent an interference with the work task, just as naughty, primitive impulses may interfere with the sensible work of a mature person. And this is one important side of the picture. There is another, more positive side to the basic assumptions, however, which Bion emphasizes just as much as the negative aspects, and

that is the sophisticated use of the proper basic assumption by the work group. For example, a work group such as a hospital can and should mobilize the basic assumption dependency in the service of its task of taking care of sick patients. Bion identifies the church as that major institution in society which mobilizes and uses in a sophisticated way the basic assumption dependency; the army as that one which mobilizes basic assumption fight-flight; and the aristocracy as that one which is most interested in breeding and therefore mobilizes pairing. Whether or not the aristocracy can still be considered to exist, even in England, as an important institution is an open question, along with what takes its place if it does not. Bion himself does not think that the aristocracy can be considered to be a real work group which uses its basic assumption in a sophisticated way, for if the work group characteristics were dominant in the aristocracy then the interest in breeding would be manifest in some such way as a subsidy of scientific genetics research. But this is obviously not the case. If we consider the army, for example, it is clear that the relevant basic assumptions badly interfere with its function if they get out of hand. Fight-flight when engaged in simply as irrational basic assumptions lead to panic or ill-conceived attack. However, when mobilized in a sophisticated way, fight-flight represents the motive force for battle and for organized withdrawal. As indicated earlier, both the work group and the basic assumption group are abstractions; they are concepts which are useful in thinking about ways of functioning which occur in groups. Bion's idea is that both are occurring simultaneously, but to varying degrees, in all groups.

It is necessary now to introduce another one of Bion's concepts, namely that of valency. This is a term which is used to refer to the individual's readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting on the basic assumptions. A person may have a high or low valency depending on his capacity for this kind of combination, but in Bion's view it is impossible to be a human being without having some degree of valency. The thing that Bion is trying to do with all his concepts and constructions is to produce useful ways of thinking about man in his function as a social animal. In his concept of valency he is saying that everyone has the tendency to enter into group life, in particular into the irrational and unconscious aspects of group life, and that people vary in the amount of tendency they have in this direction. Bion thinks of this tendency as something which is manifested on a psychological plane to be sure, but which is so basic to the human organism that it should not be thought of as purely psychological. He thinks of it as biological and speaks of it as analogous to tropism in plants rather than as analogous to more purposive behavior. By borrowing a word from physics rather than from psychology or sociology he emphasizes the instantaneous and involuntary aspects of the kind of behavior he is talking about, which he calls instinctive. Valency in the basic

assumption group corresponds to cooperation in the work group. But whereas cooperation requires thought, training, maturity, and some degree of organization in a group, valency requires none of these. It simply occurs spontaneously as a function of the gregarious quality in man.

Individuals vary not only in the degree of valency which they manifest but in the kind to which they have the strongest tendency. With some it is toward basic assumption dependency; some toward fight-flight; some toward pairing. Every human being has the capacity for all three, but usually one or another valency predominates. This has nothing to do with whether a person has been psychoanalyzed or not. It is not possible to analyze valency out of a human being as one is supposed to be able to analyze neurosis. For effective functioning in groups, however, and especially for leadership functioning, it is desirable to know oneself well enough to know to which valency one tends. An effective society uses the valencies of its members to serve its various purposes. For example, the educator can find a good outlet for his valency toward basic assumption dependency. The combat commander can use appropriately his valency toward basic assumption fight-flight. The valency toward basic assumption pairing finds a useful expression in individual interviewing and, of course, family life. There are various types of chairmen and directors of organizations. One type will be solicitous for the welfare of his members and will take a special interest in the weaker ones or in anyone who is sick or disabled. Another will see his main function as fighting for the interests of his organization against any outside or inside attack. Another will find that he does his job best by going around after hours to each one of his members separately, convincing each one of what he wants done. When the meeting takes place everyone is already in agreement and the decisions have all been made. Any and all of these ways can be effective, though each one may be more appropriate at one time than at another.

In the naive or unconscious fantasy, the leader of the dependency group has to be omnipotent; the fight leader has to be unbeatable and the flight leader uncatchable; the leader of the pairing group must be marvelous but still unborn. But in the mature work group, which is making a sophisticated use of the appropriate basic assumptions, the leader of the dependency group is dependable; the leader of the fight-flight group is courageous; and the leader of the pairing group is creative.¹

For effective functioning the basic assumptions must be subservient to and used in the service of the work task. They make good servants and poor masters. The various tales about fantastic machines, demons, genii, and so forth, who perform miraculous tasks for their masters until one fine day they take over and go on a binge of destruction, are mythical

¹ For these formulations the author is indebted to a personal communication from A K Rice, who wrote approximately these words in *Learning for Leadership*, p 72

representations of the capacity of human beings for harnessing tremendous energy effectively and at the same time of the danger of such energy when it is not harnessed. *The Lord of the Flies* provides another illustration of what happens when the work group is weak and the irresponsible basic assumption group takes over.

The work task is like a serious parent who has his eye on intelligent planning. The basic assumptions are like the fun-loving or frightened children who want immediate satisfaction of their desires. What Bion emphasizes is that both exist and that both are necessary. The basic assumption group, however, exists without effort. The work group requires all the concentration, skill, and organization of creative forces that can be mustered to bring it into full flower. The writers who derogate groups as tending to reduce the intellectual abilities of the individuals in the group are, according to Bion, talking about the basic assumption functions, not work group functions. Bion holds to a very consistent middle way between the glorification and the derogation of the group. The latter is to be found in Jung's statement, "When a hundred clever heads join in a group, one big nincompoop is the result, because every individual is trammelled by the otherness of the others."² Bion holds that a group, like an individual, may be stupid and cruel or intelligent and concerned. He does not hold that great achievements are always those of the individual working in solitude. He says that in the study groups he has been in he has made interpretations of behavior just because he believes that the group can hear them and use them, and experience has borne him out. In his own words, he attributes "great force and influence to the work group, which through its concern with reality is compelled to employ the methods of science in no matter how rudimentary a form" (p. 135).

Individuals seem to fear being overwhelmed by their valency for group life; or one might put it that they fear being overwhelmed by the basic assumptions. It is not uncommon in self-study or therapy groups to hear phrases like "the fear of being sucked in by quicksands," or "the fear of being homogenized," which express the fear of being immersed in the group and thus losing one's individuality. Bion thinks that there is not actually so much danger as people think there is of being overwhelmed by the basic assumptions. He has a healthy respect for people's capacities to function on a work level. He thinks that in groups met to study their own behavior, consistent interpretation of the basic assumption tendencies will gradually bring them into consciousness and cause them to lose their threatening quality. The parallel here to the psychoanalysis of unconscious impulses is clear. Presumably, the more the basic assumption life of the group becomes conscious, the more the

2 Quoted from a letter from C. G. Jung (Illing, p. 80)

work task can emerge into effective functioning.

But the individual in a group is not always convinced of this. Bion thinks that the task of the adult in establishing adequate contact with the life of the group or groups in which he lives is truly a formidable one. His first, second, and often third attempts are likely to be failures and to result in regression. When individuals in a group feel that they have lost or are about to lose their individual distinctiveness, they are threatened by panic. This does not mean at all that the group disintegrates, for it may continue as a fight-flight group; but it does mean that the individual feels threatened and very likely has regressed.

Bion says clearly that he thinks of the value of a group experience as the conscious experiencing of the possibilities of the work group. This must be differentiated from the coziness and so-called closeness of feeling in the basic assumption group. The work group which Bion is talking about does not depend upon great amounts of love or warm feelings or an oceanic oneness of the group members. It does depend upon the increasing and developing ability of each individual to use his skills responsibly in the service of the common task. It is not anything like the "togetherness" which is a function of the fear of being alone or on one's own. In the work group, each individual is very much on his own and may have to accomplish his own part of the task in a very lonely way, as for example someone who is sent upon a secret mission or someone who has to make the ultimate policy decision where the buck stops. The reluctance to take the final responsibility for decisions and actions can be seen as a basic assumption dependency phenomenon and is not characteristic of the work group member, especially not of the work group leader.

The anxiety which one tends to feel in groups and the difficulties with which group membership faces one stem from the double danger of either being isolated like a sore thumb of the total body which may be amputated, or being swallowed up by the total body and losing oneself. When the basic assumption group is strong, the individual tends to feel either in danger of being victimized and extruded, or swallowed up in the anonymous unanimity of group feeling. The usual case, even when work elements are present, is that the individual is wavering somewhere in between the two dangers, with an uneasy sense that he is in a dilemma out of which no right way can be found.

When anxiety becomes severe the group may, as Bion says, resemble the mysterious, frightening, and destructive Sphinx. The Sphinx was made up of disparate members. She had the seductive face of a woman and a body composed of parts of powerful and dangerous animals—the lion, the eagle, and the serpent. To those who wished to pass by her she posed the riddle: "What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?" Those who could not answer she

flung to their deaths over the cliff, and that included everyone until Oedipus came by and told her that it was man.

Oedipus had been to Delphi to try to find out who really were his parents; and later too, to his sorrow, he searched for the murderer of the king. He sought after knowledge even when it meant his own undoing. Not by chance was it this man who, as the legend has it, grasped immediately the concepts of time, change, and development implicit in the riddle of the Sphinx. So long as we think in static terms that there *is* an entity which walks on four legs or which *is* the personality or which *is* the group, we can never grasp the complex and apparently disparate phenomena of the world, in time, in which we live. When Oedipus grasped the complexity in an intuitive vision of the whole, the fearful Sphinx threw herself off the rock. But unfortunately she constantly climbs back up again and waits with a new riddle for a new Oedipus to come by.

When the Sphinx lies in wait with her dreadful question, representing the frightening complexity and uncertain behavior of the world, especially the world of groups, one feels terrified at what John Fowles calls "the eternal source of all fear, all horror, all real evil, man himself" (Fowles, 1967, p. 448). But the same man or the same group which has filled the world with horror at its capacity for evil can also amaze by its capacity for good. If the Sphinx were to ask, "What is it that on Monday is wrangling, cruel, and greedy; on Tuesday in indifferent and lazy; on Wednesday is effectively and intelligently collaborative?", one could easily answer, "That is man and it is also ten men in a group." If she asked, "What made the difference?", a few partial answers could be given. One of them is that on Wednesday the group had a clear goal to which all of its members wanted to devote themselves. Another is that the roles of the members were clearly defined and accepted. Still another has to do with the boundaries between this and other groups. But if the Sphinx were to go on and press about what to do in order that the Wednesday behavior should become more constant and the Monday and Tuesday behavior less frequent, we *might* find ourselves with no satisfactory answer hurtling over the cliff.

