

# WORD, BODY, THING

## ON THE MOVEMENT FROM SOMA TO PSYCHE

“...look at it from one side; there is a psycho-somatic complaint; turn it round; now it is soma-psychotic. It is the same... but what you see depends on which way you look at it” (Bion 1976, p.244).

### Defining the Problem

How do we understand the body and its place in analytic theory and clinical practice? In this presentation, I will argue that although frequently silent and often unrecognized:

- The body is always tied to and present in regard to the psychic.
- Affect, emotions and impulse (actions) are the ‘red threads’ that connect psyche and soma and continue to announce the presence of the body, as they inform, enrich, reflect and enliven cognition (ideation).

In this sense, in regard to the body, analysts are like Monsieur Jourdain in Moliere’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, who desperately wanted to learn to speak prose and, much to his amazement, discovered that he had been doing so all along.

To illustrate the inevitable and inexorable connection between body and mind, I will examine ‘the word,’ reminding us that in addition to being a conveyer of ideational thought and semantic *meaning*, the

spoken word is also a concrete physical entity, a packet of energy in the form of sound waves, and therefore a manifestation of the physical universe, of the body, a '*thing*.' Although we may more commonly think of the words that we speak – and the thoughts that they reflect – as that which is written on the message tied to the leg of the carrier pigeon, there is a sense in which it is as if the meaning or message of the words are inseparable from some qualities of the pigeon itself. Here we may think of affect, volume, rhythm, tone, and other so called 'non-verbal' qualities of speech that reflect discharge and the bodily self, that reflect, transmit and induce emotion and that *act*, physically as well as semantically, upon one's audience.

Seen from a biological vertex, the physical brain (body, soma) is the foundation of the mind. Brain supports psyche; but the word psyche is derived from the Greek word for *soul*. Perhaps what psychoanalysis can offer us is a metapsychology of the soul. Not the soul of religious discourse, but the soulful (soul=*anima*), animated feeling of aliveness and meaningfulness that may be so painfully absent in today's patients: e.g., Winnicott's (1960) False Self, Green's (1980) Dead Mother Syndrome and the many manifestations of psychic void and unrepresented states (Levine, Reed, Scarfone 2013) that lie beyond neurosis and that we now encounter in our consulting rooms...

Freud's (1895) *Project For a Scientific Psychology* attempted to biologize psychological phenomena by using the (somatic) metaphor of the reflex arc and neuronal discharge to describe the management of excitation in and by the mind. In *Studies in Hysteria*, (Freud 1893-

1895) he reversed this strategy and gave us a way to understand the psychological determinants and meaning of certain physical acts and bodily disorders that had previously been thought of as only somatic symptoms and motoric discharge. Recall Emma's paralyzed arm or Dora's fingering her purse as she talked of her attraction to Herr K. Freud (1905) interpreted the latter as Dora's introducing the subject of her masturbation and commented that what the mind cannot stand to be conscious of, one's body and one's actions may well reveal.

But this model of bodily 'speech' and 'memory' is only one side of the problem. It best relates to neurosis (hysteria) and that which is represented, symbolically linked, repressed and expressed as action, gesture and physical symptom. At the other end of the spectrum, 'beyond neurosis,' there is the economic problem of the unrepresented (Levine 2012), in which a surplus of uncontainable emotion may erupt in affect storms, impulsive actions, perversions, addictions or somatic symptoms and the meaning of the eruption is only acquired secondarily, *apres coup*. (See De M'Uzan's (2003) 'slaves of quantity,' Marty et al's (1962) work on psychosomatics or my own work on Unrepresented States (e.g., Levine 2012, 2015, Levine, Reed and Scarfone 2013).

## Emotion and Affect

### The Body as Fundamental to the Mind

In the neurosciences and other branches of biology, there is little doubt that thinking and the mind (psyche) are anchored in and dependent upon the presence and functioning of the brain (soma). In psychoanalysis and the various psychologies, this relationship seems always to be in danger of being lost sight of. When we think of 'thoughts' or 'cognitive psychology,' we may (mistakenly) assume something split off or separate from 'feelings' or 'affect.' In so doing, we drive an artificial wedge between psyche and soma. To help avoid this inadvertent – and often unwarranted split – it may be useful to consider 'emotions' from a psychoanalytic vertex.

Bion (1970) reminds us that "... what takes place in the consulting-room is an *emotional* situation" (p. 118, italics added). In *Learning From Experience*, he classifies the emotions as beta elements, referring to them as "objects of sense" and placing them in a parallel position to that of other *sense impressions* (Bion 1962, p. 6). In so doing, he simultaneously disqualifies at least some part of 'emotions' as psychic elements – beta elements cannot be thought with or thought about – even as he locates another part of emotions in the domain of **K**: something that can be known (felt) and therefore experienced. Consequently, in describing affective life and experience, we need a term that can encompass something that is a psychic experience with a potentially knowable part, but is rooted in bodily sensations and in a level of inscription that is beyond sensation, full ideational saturation or accessible conscious awareness.

Aulagnier (2015) has called emotions “the visible part of the iceberg which is affect, .... a lived experience” (p. 1378). Building upon this, I have suggested using the term ‘*feelings*’ for the visible part of the iceberg and the term “*affect*” for the totality (Levine 2016). In doing so, I wish to remind us that in regard to the domain of feelings, there is continuity between what we can experience and know (emotions; Bion’s **K**), what is emergent and therefore not yet known and what is and may remain ineffable and unknowable (Bion’s **O**). According to this definition, the deepest part of the iceberg we call affect, is somatic; of the body; not yet named, not fully nameable (i.e., inscribed but psychically unrepresented). Our emotions demarcate and reflect something that forms a continuous bridge between soma and psyche, body and mind.

The story, however, is even more complex, because it cannot be fully told without considering our objects. Jacques Press (2016) writes:

“... affect always forms a complex network that directly or indirectly involves both the individual’s representational system and his object and body, and cannot be described other than in the context of this network.” (p. 99).

This view, that there is *a network of affect linking ideation, object and body*, concurs with that of Aulagnier (2015), who described the impact of emotion and affect on the body of *both* subject and object.

“Emotion [reflects and] modifies the somatic state, and it is these perceivable somatic bodily signs that move the person who witnesses them, triggering a similar modification in his or her own soma... Emotion thus makes two bodies resonate with each other and imposes similar responses on them. The body of one person responds to the body of the other, but as emotion concerns the [self], one can also say that the latter is *moved by what the body allows it to know and to share of the other person’s bodily experience.*” (p. 1379, italics added).

Emotions are continually in the background of our analytic explorations and considerations. At times, they may be lost sight of as a subject in their own right, because they can be subsumed by and appear to form an almost indissoluble ensemble with ‘thoughts’ or ‘ideas.’ Except under the most extreme conditions (psychosis and evacuative activities of the psychotic portion of the mind), when we speak of ‘thoughts,’ we understand them to be *ideas invested with emotions*. Thus, the contrast between what I (Levine 2010) have called ‘true thoughts’ - i.e., ideas invested with affect and meaning – and something that may superficially look and sound like thoughts, but are actually fragments, bizarre objects or other forms of ‘debris’ that are better categorized as imitations of human speech.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Paul (1977) and Eekhoff (forthcoming).

I think it safe to say that it is impossible to try to conceive of the development or functioning of the psyche without taking note of its connection to the body, one's own and that of one's objects.

## The Primal

Shakespeare famously asked, "What's in a word?" He also said, "A rose by any other *name* smells as sweet." Freud (1915) said that words ('word presentations') were essential in transforming 'thing presentations' and saturating their meaning, so that what begins as vague somatic (sensorial) turbulence and disturbances (drives) can acquire specificity, saturation and achieve a level of consciousness. The theory of representation (Levine 2014) links the ability to use words to name and thereby symbolize the absent or otherwise frustrating object to the capacity for thought and reality testing.

But Freud also talked about thought, which is dependent upon the anchoring of words - (word presentation 'taming' and giving shape to thing presentation) - as trial *action*. The work of Klein, Segal, Bion and others has added to our understanding of the word as thing, concrete object or symbolic equation. At this level, words may be used as an instrument of evacuation, concrete attack or other means - not of communicating, persuading, convincing or influencing - but of *doing to* one's self or objects, in phantasy or reality.

The foregoing descriptions imply the existence of psychic space and the unfolding of unconscious phantasy. But in order to consider the dual status of the word, it is necessary for us to imagine the impact of the word at a time of development prior to the creation of psychic space, before phantasy<sup>2</sup>, before objects have been securely recognized as separate from the self. This is the developmental epoch that Aulagnier (2015) has called *the primal*, in which experience that is registered or inscribed, even if it is caused by the external object, is felt as if it was “not of an object but of changes in bodily states... [that are taking place in] a self-referencing psyche.” (Flanders 2015, p. 1407). (In contrast, the *primary* is the next stage, in which self-object differentiation allows for recognition of the object and therefore unconscious phantasy scenarios).

At this earliest stage, “there is something much more embryonic in the unconscious than the word; .... a mixture of [bodily sensations that reflect] drive representations, memory traces and thing presentations” (Flanders 2015, p. 1405). This is the period in which sensoriality (the somatic) first brings to life or activates the infant’s psychic apparatus (Aulagnier 2015, p. 1384).

Initially, for the infant, “the object only exists psychically by virtue of its unique power to modify the sensory (and thus somatic) response, and thereby to act on psychic experience.” (Aulagnier 2015, p. 1384).

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<sup>2</sup> Traditional Kleinians may object to the idea that there might a time ‘before phantasy’, but this is a discussion for another occasion.

This means that in the first encounters, the induced somatic effects of that encounter stand in for and mark the place of that encounter.

“A bodily feeling occupies the place that will later be occupied by the mother: the anticipated I thus has its counterpart in an ‘anticipated mother’ through a bodily feeling.” (Aulagnier 2015, p. 1385).

Applied to words and speech, Aulagnier (2015) offers that:

“The first psychical ear does not pick up sounds and even less significations: it picks up the variations of its own state, of its own felt experience” (p. 1385) as these are influenced by the actions of its caretakers.

Expanding upon this description, Patrick Miller (2015) gives us the foundations of a theory of unconscious affect transmission and interaffectivity that is relevant throughout the life cycle:

“In the primal dimension there must be first a pleasure of hearing (*plaisir d’ouïr*) which is only connected to the sensory quality of what is audible, and not to the semantic meaning of the sounds carried by the voice. This essential cathecting to a pleasure of hearing must precede the pleasure and desire of listening, and renders them possible. The pleasure of listening belongs to the primary dimension where the psychic production

is the phantasy. The sound is then a sign of the presence or absence of the object". (p. 1363).

It is only after self-object differentiation has become more secure that "there is, apres-coup, the linking [of this sensory dimension of feeling caused by interaction with the object] with word presentations in the preconscious and conscious mind." (Flanders 2015, p. 1405). Thus, for Aulagnier, language and phantasy are separate from – and develop subsequent to – the primal. The latter appears first – or perhaps in parallel with the primary – is sensorial, of the body, and *will persist as a fundamental level of experience throughout life.*

Developmentally speaking, primal experience (sensori-motor) also precedes the creation of psychic space. Once self-object differentiation is secure and psychic space develops, then meaning can be known by its verbal, semantic and communicative referents. Prior to that, and then on-going, unconsciously throughout one's life, *meaning is conveyed and constructed affectively through the quality of shared bodily experiences within a topography implying the blurring of body boundaries.*

With this as background, let us look more closely at the singular word and what it is capable of generating.

### The Generative Word<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Sandro Panizza (2016) for this designation.

Each spoken word is a physical entity, *of the body*, a packet of sound waves and energy created by a physical act, concrete and thing-like, a “sound envelope in which the affective world of feelings, colours, smells and flavours is inscribed, and is put across since the earliest communications.” (Panizza 2016, p. 12). As conveyor of affect, or as act or action, the spoken word may function as an enigmatic signifier, an irritant in need of translation. The spoken word as physical event or presentation is capable of producing an evocative impact on the listener that may sometimes be linked to its manifest communicative content, but often reaches above and beyond its semantic meaning. This sense of the word is the flesh and blood ‘carrier pigeon’ that holds the semantic message written on the slip of paper tied to its foot.

Thus, Panizza (2016) writes that words can produce “an emotional effect that resonates both in the speaker and listener, favoring the evocative function of language, rather than its explicative, informative or discursive aims” (p. 1). The means of doing so include the various physical qualities of speech – tone of voice, prosody, rhythm, musicality, etc. - that invest the words used over and above their semantic meaning and add affective and sensorial elements to conceptual speech.

“The singular word ... is a bridge to sensoriality and feelings. Its sound can instantly capture visual and tactile sensations and emotions such as laughter, tears, pain, compassion, as though it travelled the scale of symbolization backwards, towards

sensory semiosis and emotional experience” (Panizza 2016, p. 3).

Rather than causing regression, the singular word “opens up a parallel universe to the symbolic order ... where the non-verbal, the pre-verbal and emotion coexist intertwined” (Panizza 2016, p. 3). This parallel universe, of the emergent, not yet represented and repressed, co-exists with the realm of semantic signification, sometimes reinforcing the message of the latter, sometimes contradicting it, sometimes introducing an entirely different quality or feeling to the manifest semantic meaning of the message.

As speech *act*, words originate in and reflect the physical body. They are

“created by the vocal chords, which articulate them, the mouth openings which shape them, and the encounter with the external world and the intersubjective context , which gives them their ultimate meaning.... [W]ords are metabolized in the journey from body to society, and acquire their expressive, somatic and relational capacities, all together, along the way. Such an intimate blend that hinges between body, mind, and the relationship with the world, supports the hypothesis that the origin of the word is located at the border between the somatic and the psychic and points to an ‘incorporated [i.e., embodied] mind’.” (Panizza 2016, p. 4).

The more abstract the word becomes, and the more it is strung in a conceptual chain, the further away it may seem to move from its original sensory-motor base, to reach a complex logical elaboration. However, no matter how complexly embedded in a communicative and discursive message, each word also retains and adheres to its origins as a physical entity with a direct, immediate sensorial and emotional impact. This impact, along with the *semantic meaning* of the word is responsible for its evocative function.

In analysis, in relation to the patient's free association and the analyst's internal reveries and interpretations,

“The evocative word ... releases visual images, feelings, sensations and memories of a Proustian nature ..., calls the speaker [and the listener] to the immediate present, at times almost catching him or her by surprise. The subject who meditates on the words he or she is speaking (I. Illich 1993) is inevitably placed immediately in the here and now of the session, while also calling the listener to inhabit the same present moment.”(Panizza 2016, p. 17).

Whereas the logical syntax of the intended interpretation usually “organizes the “state of affairs,” the internal events, in a coherent shape... [and] creates a reliable and orderly syntax among the chaotic assemblage of “affairs” in the mind [establishing] unifying links ... between past experiences and their present reverberations” (Panizza 2016, p. 1), each “singular word ... may release, within the

patient, in a direct, condensed and almost analogical manner, a world of meanings, affects and sensations.” (pp. 1-2). While the syntactical message of the interpretation moves towards the unwinding of diachronic linkages, the physicality (*presentation*) of the word tends toward synchronic condensation.

### Summary

“Psychoanalysis has consistently maintained the centrality of the body in the development of mental functioning.” (Lombardi 2008, p. 91). There is a fundamental connection and rootedness of the mind in the body. “[T]he psychesoma is at one and the same time a given – we are born with it – and the product of a construction that takes place in the course of development.” (Press 2016, p. 93). It does not make sense for us to try to conceive of thought as an abstract entity, removed from physical and affective reality.

Freud viewed the drives as the lynchpin between body and mind and described the arc of the process of achieving representation through which somatic disturbance becomes the stimulus for representation and the foundation for the emergence of thought. Bion (1962) viewed the somatic, sensory realm (sense impressions; beta elements) as the origin of all abstract manifestation of thought (based upon alpha elements) and later described “the body as the repository of a germinal element that can give rise to new thought which has never been thought before” (Lombardi 2008, p. 92).

I have tried to describe and elaborate upon these formulations, emphasizing the central role of affect and emotion in tying together the psychic and somatic and further illustrating the inexorable connection between mind and body by describing the dual status of the word as physical, corporeal entity and conveyer of semantic meaning.

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