

# TROPISMS IN SYSTEMS

**W. Gordon Lawrence, MA, Dr rer oec**

*Abstract .The meaning of ' tropisms' and 'matrix is given. Using Bion's binocular vision, first, the growth and incidence of tropisms in the individual are described through the Oedipus narrative(Bion 1961 ,p. 7-8 ). These are culturally manifest in systems as suggested in the Sphinx narrative, influencing role behaviour. This is followed by a description of the new collaborative trend of contemporary business giving evidence of the mobilisation of the tropism for creativity.*

**'The tropisms are the matrix from which all mental life springs' (Bion 1992 p. 35).**

**'The tropisms are...'**

From biology we know that plants lean in their direction of growth towards sunlight. This phototropism is essential for photosynthesis to take place to give the plant life.

Bion implicitly uses this analogy when he describes how we, as individuals in infancy, seek a breast, or substitute, as an object to relate to in order that we can sustain ourselves in our existence. The baby not only sustains itself through ingesting milk but also gets a sense of its being and what it might become through starting to think. A critical element in the latter is that breast has to be capable of tolerating projections, i.e. the feelings the baby thrusts into it. Repeated failures in this, results in the baby having an impaired contact with reality.

Tropisms can be of three kinds as they are seen to issue in seeking relationships by which individuals can be

- (1) an object to murder or be murdered by
- (2) a parasite or host
- (3) an object to create or by which to be created.(Bion 1992, p. 35).

Creativity is life-enhancing, but (1) and (2) are expressions of destructivity.

**'... the matrix from which all mental life springs.'**

The postulate is that the matrix is the undifferentiated unconscious from which all thinking and thought emerge. Tropisms can be seen as identifiable thought patterns emerging from relationships with the breast (or substitute) and subsequent symbols of breast..

These patterns of thought are essential for human consciousness.

The argument is that, if the circumstances are mentally conducive for thinking, these thought patterns of tropisms are an organising *ficelle* of our lives, both interpersonally and in systems; a thematic thread that is present in our dream life.

### **The Oedipal Narrative** **How are tropisms acquired?**

The richness, quality and perceptiveness of our adult thinking depends on the ability to transform the images, proto-thinking and thinking of our inner phantasy world by testing them against the external reality we experience. All our thinking and knowledge is transformed from the unconscious/infinite to the finite thinking of consciousness; from the unknown to the known. Human consciousness, I suggest, is that which can be known in awareness, belonging to finite knowledge while what we are unaware of and do not attend belongs to the infinite and, therefore, the unconscious.

This epistemophilic quest begins in infancy with 'an awareness of existence that demands an existence', 'a psyche seeking for a physical habitation to give it existence' (Bion 1965, p. 109). The tropisms begin from this intuition that will be brought ultimately to conscious, rational realization. By in It intuits that it is lacking an object, some physical habitation, so that it can have an existence tuition we discover, but by logic we prove.

The baby subjectively is aware of a psychic world of nothingness to which the baby can only respond genetically with sensations and feelings. It intuits that it is lacking an object, some physical habitation, so that it can have an existence. It is seeking a container to contain it. It occasionally feels it is running the risk of annihilation – no-being - of being murdered. This container will be the breast of mother, or mother substitute. The beginnings of life cohere through the ingestion of milk, or substitute; no milk, no life. Survival relies on the experience of breast, or no-breast.

At first the baby and mother are at-one, what the baby feels, the mother feels, and *vice versa*. As the baby separates from the mother and begins to have a life of her own the baby will develop an internal phantasy world. This begins when the breast is split into the ideal one and the persecutory one. The phantasied idea of breast starts to be tested against reality. The infant may feel benign or murderous towards the breast. Thinking evolves through the use of projection and projective identification. Projections are the attribution to some person the feelings towards oneself which derive from transference experiences with objects, as are projective identifications (Segal 1964).

But the reality of mother is never static. She may be prone to mood swings, depressive feelings and may not be able to contain the baby. So as the baby continually transacts, or negotiates, her idea/phantasy against the changing reality of breast (mother and milk) and significant others, the baby learns to think (Segal 1964, p. 24). Phantasy, in turn, is influenced by reality. Everything is in flux, nothing is static in experience.

Following Bion, projection is seen as being critical for the process of thinking, which is culturally learned. Mothers have learned how to relate to babies from their mother who, in turn, learned from hers, and so on. Babies learn from their mothers through play in the 'cultural space' between baby and mother (Winnicott 1972, pp. 95-103).

Mother and baby are two systems of internal feeling and thinking relationships. After they 'meet' they become part of something new which is larger than itself. In this way the infant comes to be inducted into the social and cultural thinking system of the world which has infinite possibilities.

This pattern of coming to know through reflecting and cogitating on our experiences remains fundamental to our adult thinking processes.

This is not the whole narrative. We go about our daily lives without thinking because we are suffused by a mass of undigested experiences. These raw elements of sensuous impressions Bion called Beta elements. They are transformed by the Alpha function of the mind which converts them into Alpha elements by being dreamed about, for instance. They have been described as 'something that may exist; not a thought, but that become what thinkers describe as a thought' (Bion 1991, p. 589).

The hypothesis is that these Beta elements are integral to the tropisms. Perhaps these Beta elements, imagining them temporally as physical entities and not mental, could be described as part of the 'sub-atomic structure' of tropisms.

These tropisms belong to the domain of tacit knowledge, in contrast to articulate knowledge (Polanyi 1967); are 'unthought known' (Bollas 1987) because they are never thought about, or spoken about, or articulated.

It is, perhaps, only in psychoanalysis that we start to be aware of projection and projective identification and, therefore, the tropisms.

Broadly, we each because of our cultures have experienced much the same tropisms. By the time adulthood is reached each of us will have

acquired a repertoire of tropisms made available to us because of introjection and internalization.

These tropism are projected unconsciously on to external reality and people act in relation to them as if they were real (Frankl 1989) so becoming features of our social unconscious.

To paraphrase Melanie Klein, grossly, as adults we co-create our systemic worlds on the basis of the tropisms we first learned in infancy.

The hypothesis for the growth and incidence of tropisms is:

Infancy: characterised by seeking the breast as an object to tolerate projections, to test phantasy against reality; to begin the induction into social and cultural thought as a system

Childhood and adolescence: seeking objects as symbols of breast, e.g. significant others, peers, family, to monitor projections and further the thinking processes through disentangling transference feelings.

Adulthood: encountering systems, awakening resonances of objects as breast, e.g. University, the Army (National Service), commercial and similar systems to find personal authority through using the tropisms to test transferences evoked for and by significant other role holders representing systems.

Systems, which humanity has brought into being through thinking, on the surface are rational and goal-orientated. Underneath the surface is the unconscious life of the people with roles in it. The supposition is that unconsciously systems symbolise breast. Consequently, the tropisms are evoked.

### **The Sphinx Narrative Tropisms in Systems**

The central hypothesis is:

**The unconscious, unspoken, narrative of all system is based on the tropisms (identified by Bion 1992, pp. 34-36) which are culturally and psychically acquired in infancy and childhood thought patterns of projection and projective identification.**

The second part of the working hypothesis is that:

**Systems will make use of unconsciously selected tropisms at different times in their history. The salient tropism of a system will evoke unconscious patterns of projection and related thinking that influence**

**how people behave in their role in systems. This will involve transference feelings.**

**There is a caveat to this hypothesis. The projections are not so much replicated from, and 'matched' to, systems from childhood, but are 'made' by role holders, based on their traces of memory of tropisms which are evoked by the system.**

**When envy and competition are present in a system, the primary task of the system will be subverted, or corrupted, because socially psychotic thinking begins to have a hold in the system.**

1. An example of the parasitic and murderous tropisms: the late 1970s, '80s and early '90s saw in British industry a growing incidence of the totalitarian-state-of-mind in British managers. How did this come about?

The overt reasons lay in the periodic economic downturns being experienced. It was a 'boom and bust', 'stop-go' economy. The environment was beginning to become more turbulent than ever experienced before. Globalisation, as we know it today, was just beginning to be acknowledged by business as a reality. Computers were first available for all. The Internet revolution was in its infancy demanding attention from business.

The covert result was that business people began to be more anxious than usual with employees feeling particularly insecure. The steel and coal-mining industries were virtually annihilated in Britain in the 1980s. Because of redundancies as a result, for example of 'slash and burn' tactics, the employee's question became, 'Will I be able to keep my job?' The feelings of workers, derived from interviews, were centred around being murdered and annihilated in their roles. Tracts of the UK became areas of non employment. Some still suffer from joblessness in 2006.

One consequence was that there was a phase in Britain when CEOs were recruited who could promise certainty and sureness to commercial systems. The systems wanted to be commanded and controlled in phantasy to keep psychotic anxieties of the death of a working role, for example, at bay. There grew an unconscious collusion, involving employees and managers, which evinced such autocratic leadership.

Here, we see the tropism – seeking an object to be a parasite or host – becoming manifest in systems. The totalitarian manager on behalf of the system mobilises the projective identifications and projections that keep him in position as host, who must never be killed-off, even though

it results in an envious systemic culture. This could be justified on the grounds of competition – survival of the fittest.

The cultural context of society unconsciously wishes for this leadership. The result of the ensuing bureaucracy is that reality thinking is diminished as socially psychotic thinking more holds sway

But, just like mother, the realities of society change for it is never static. New events happen which change the landscape of business; new moods emerge in a society. Thinking leaders begin to emerge in the world at large.

The totalitarian manager has made a system, postulated on command and control, which does not match the changing cultural context and realities of business, which are never static and always in flux.

Managers within the system re-find their wits and begin to think in line with the larger cultural context than their system. The result is that the totalitarian-state-of-mind leader, now prone to omniscience, omnipotence and hubris. Is removed, but it takes time. Temporarily, the totalitarian manager satisfied the unconscious wishes of the majority.

**A working hypothesis is that systems with a totalitarian-state of-mind style of management invoke in other role holders the tropism of parasite and host. Metaphorical murder is present in the system as competition, envy and rivalry increase. The mental life of the system is focused on the inner world of the system to the virtual exclusion of the outer environment. This contributes a diminishment in thinking to be in touch with reality. The paradox is that while such management is unconsciously mobilised to keep social psychosis at bay, it results in an increasing incidence of out-of-touch-with-reality thinking among all role holders.**

2. The illustration of all the tropisms – to murder, be a parasite or host, or to create or be created by– comes from an action-research project of Linda Hoyle and Jane Pooley (personal communication).

Deborah was recruited into a Government Department, which must remain confidential, to be part of a team managing a change programme.

The relationship of the Government Department to its customers was persecutory for its task was to enforce rigid legislation. The change programme was to establish a team that would work in a more collaborative and creative way with customers to help them understand the legislation and, thus, prevent them from feeling persecuted by it. There was a change in the primary task definition.

In short, the move was to change the tropism from being parasitic and arousing murder, to being creative, one by which the clients could experience creativity as part of their work.

Deborah worked part-time for the government department and part-time as a counsellor in a voluntary organization. She had taken the post in the department because she felt her training and experience in her counselling role would be apposite. The basic idea with which she went into the project was that the style of relating to the Department's customers would be client-centred and facilitative. Using my terms, she wanted to mobilize the projections of the clients in a creative way so that the system would be seen in a positive light.

The manager of the team in the Department was Jackie. Initially, Jackie encouraged Deborah, but Jackie's mode of management was autocratic and authoritarian which resulted in persecuted feelings in her team and with the clients. Jackie, if you will, had been driven into a totalitarian-state-of-mind for which she had a valency. The phenomenon tells us that Jackie's version of the primary task was to control and command through power. Consequently, Deborah became confused because Jackie's style was not in line with the revised normative task of the team, i.e. to have facilitative relationships with the customer.

At first, Deborah the counsellor challenged Jackie the manager about this and encouraged the whole team to confront this issue. Although the team privately supported Deborah, in team meetings they left her to voice the challenge and did not support her in public. Their transference feelings were embedded in the parasite/host tropism.

Jackie had been successful in making a parasitic culture and although this could lead to murderous feelings and rivalry her staff regarded these as the price they had to pay to keep their jobs.

Here, let me introduce the conceptualization of Bion (1970) when he implicitly uses tropisms to describe systems. Any system develops an Establishment. This refers to 'that body of persons in the State, who may be expected usually to exercise power by virtue of their social position' (Bion 1970, p.73). Bion extends this to apply to the ruling caste in a group such as a psychoanalytic institute, or an 'idea organization' (Fraher 2004). This can be regarded as a feature of any system to a greater or less degree. They attract tropisms.

The Establishment has always to nurture genius. 'A Freud can establish psycho-analysis but it must be maintained by a continual supply of genius' (p. 74). The Establishment comes to embody the predominant perspective and rules of the group.

The mystic/genius was the term that Bion used to describe the exceptional member of the group. The mystic/genius can be both creative and destructive – creative mystic, or mystic nihilist.

The relationship between Establishment (in this case the Government Department and Jackie the manager) and the mystic-genius (Deborah the exceptional counsellor) could be of three kinds: commensal, symbiotic or parasitic.

Commensal is one in which the parties co-exist and are harmless to each other. The symbiotic relationship is one in which both the Establishment and the mystic-genius grow through close scrutiny of the thinking of each other. This is the basis of the creative tropism.

Parasitic is one in which both parties come to be destroyed through the growth of envy. Envy begets envy leading to mutual destruction. This is when the tropism of murder is let loose.

To return to the case material: Deborah's response to the failed symbiotic relationship that she had tried to establish with Jackie was to move into a parasitic one. However, although Deborah felt murderous towards Jackie, she internalized her aggression and killed off her own creativity and authority.

After some time a third, Joanna, joined the team. She was also an exceptional person recruited as a consultant. In a similar way to Deborah, Joanna immediately became aware that Jackie with her behaviour as a manager was not congruent with the new task and having a negative impact on the team. Joanna, too, tried to create a symbiotic relationship with the Establishment by confronting and challenging Jackie's thinking. This was blocked by Jackie who neither wanted to open the issues in discussion nor deal with them in one-to-one situations. They recognised unconsciously that a symbiotic relationship would be the ground work for the tropism of creation to be mobilized.

Joanna and Deborah attempted to pair as they both had the desire to forge a symbiotic relationship with the Establishment represented by Jackie. However Jackie's response was to split the potential pairing by constantly setting Joanna and Deborah in competition with each other. Envy was mobilised to prevent the constant conjunction of facts on which Jackie operated being disturbed and which she feared

would be put into disarray.

Jackie also maintained that Deborah and Joanna's attempts to confront the issues constituted a competitive attack on her authority as a manager. Joanna's response was to move to a commensal relationship with the Establishment. She did her own thing and avoided contact with Jackie. This was self-protection but she also was aware that Jackie reminded her of her mother who had been bullying and persecutory. The tropism of childhood had been evoked in the system.

At about the same time Deborah and Joanna decided to leave the Department. When they discussed privately their experiences they both declared that they had a strong desire to reclaim their authority and creativity. But comforted themselves by saying that they had both tried to maintain the capacity to forge symbiotic relationships.

In the terms of this presentation they wanted to change the predominant tropism of the system from being parasitic, with its proclivity for rivalry and murder, to one in which creation could occur,

There is evidence that the tropism of Jackie's staff cohered around the parasite-host culture she had constructed, probably, mirroring other Government Departments. Competition, rivalry and envy leading to murderous feelings were kept in check by the culture. Most importantly, it was not a culture in which thinking could take place and the staff seemed to be functionaries of the persecutory bureaucracy.

**The working hypothesis is that an autocratic manager invokes the parasite/host tropism in the system. The staff is precluded from thinking of larger issues. Competition and rivalry are distributed around the system to keep the manager in the position of power.**

**Any change programme will be sabotaged by this tropism.**

## **Reflection**

The argument has been that tropisms exist in every system and are worth using in analysis of them, at least privately on the part of the action-researcher. To be sure, it might be more accurate to say that the shadows, or vestiges, of tropisms are always present in systems. Two historical examples have been offered,

At this time in history systems are undergoing dramatic change. The constant conjunction of facts on which societies have been posited are undergoing change, because of the growth of the mass-media, the internet revolution of the two last decades businesses no longer exist exclusively in physical space. We no longer manufacture objects exclusively and shift them from supplier to consumer. We now live in acoustic space as well. The internet has access to the 'unconscious dreaming mind of the world', and so thinking is being transformed. Human consciousness, and business, is being transformed.

In such a cultural climate new leadership is emerging in the world. Three examples: Andy Grove of Intel. He attacks the problem of business leadership by setting aside everything he knows, characterised by 'negative capability', and is always searching for employees who demonstrate growth capability. At Intel he fostered a culture in which 'knowledge power' would trump 'position power'. (The manager of the totalitarian-state-of-mind is devoted to 'position power'.)

Second example: Olympus (Japan), under its President Kikukwa, is truly inventing the future. The company is devoted to 'synchronised collaboration' (symbiosis) with other companies through its 'Olympus' Future Creation Laboratory. This programme is tackling bioscience, human-ware, optics and nanotechnology and, finally, ubiquitous energy. Its scale is staggering. It starts from the question: how can people live happier, healthier and richer lives? It is exploring the technology to do this.

The third example is the commercial revolution of China from an essentially totalitarian regime. When Deng, the leader of China, embraced trade and competition, universities scrambled to adapt. Now Tsinghua University's School of Economics and Management is now at the forefront of free market capitalism when once it was a bastion of Marxist dogma. The effects of Deng's *volte face* is seen throughout the commercial life of China.

This change is being fuelled by globalisation, is reliant on the interaction and relationship between commerce, culture, and community (the 3Cs of Ron Pompei). They are in a symbiotic relationship with each being dependent for their existence on each other.

**The working hypothesis is that contemporary businesses increasingly have to collaborate with their customers, if only because of the growth of peer power which is the new marketing phenomenon. Mass co-operation across time and space, made possible through the Net, is**

**suddenly economical. The symbiotic relationships with customers in the environment results in symbiotic relationships within the system. These changes in systems are mobilising the projective armature of role holders to create or by which to be created.**

The old parasitical relationship between producers and consumers, with its connotations of competition, rivalry and murderous undertones, is falling into desuetude. Look at how PCs are now telephones; regard how Lego cooperates with its customers to devise new products; regard how former competitors are cooperating on products that are to their mutual advantage. Consider how research into the genome is now done internationally. The current cry of business is 'the only way to predict the future is to invent it'. Innovation is a preoccupation of business as systems.

This is evidence of the growth of systemic creativity, living in the system to become self-generating. If one cannot create one is condemned to destroy. If the tropism of creativity cannot be present the only alternatives are murder and parasitism.

To mobilise the tropism of creativity and its associated projections is to recognise that our thinking is not only narcissistic and but also relies on the thinking of others, echoing Bion's narcissism v. socialism (Bion 1992, p. 122). It is also to move in systems from the basic assumption of me-ness (Lawrence, Bain & Gould 1996). When this is truly symbiotic, we re-awake the experiences of tropisms in childhood when we became something more than the sum of our parts – we become individual systems learning from other individual systems.

**4113 words (including bibliography).**

## **Bibliography**

- Bion, W.R. (1965). *Transformations*, reprinted London: Karnac Books.
- Bion, W.R. (1967) *Second Thoughts*, London: William Heinemann Medical Books.
- Bion, W.R. (1970). *Attention and Interpretation*, reprinted London: Karnac Books.
- Bion, W.R. (1991). *A Memoir of the Future*, London: Karnac Books.
- Bion, W.R. (1992). *Cogitations*. London: Karnac Books.
- Bollas, C. (1987). *The Shadow of the Object*, London: Free Association Books.
- Fraher, A. (2004). *A History of Group Study and Psychodynamic Organizations*, London: Free Association Books.
- Frankl, G. (1989). *The Social History of the Unconscious*. London: Open Gate Press
- Hoyle, L. & Pooley, J, (2006). Personal communication.
- Lawrence, W.G., A. Bain & L. Gould (1996). The fifth basis assumption, *Free Associations*, Vol.6 Part 1, No. 37.
- Polanyi, M. (1967). *The Tacit Dimension*, New York: Anchor Books.
- Segal, H. (1964). *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*, London: The Hogarth Press.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1972). *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications.
-