

NOTHINGNESS - a Seventh Basic Assumption?

The wall of devaluation, detachment and cynicism

This paper will further develop the idea of '**Nothingness**' as a group phenomenon (presented in a previous paper) in which group members or society share an unspoken idea by which nothing in the group has any meaning, nothing is worthwhile working or striving for, there is nothing to gain, nothing to learn. This shared idea (often unconscious, particularly in relation to its origins) functions as a defense against competition, fear of failing and other anxieties, but perhaps mainly against learning.

Bion (1961) referred to the hatred of learning by experience (pp. 86-91), yet he does not further articulate the source of this hate, besides connecting it to "this longed-for... arriving fully equipped as an adult fitted by instinct to know without training or development exactly how to live and move and have his being in a group" (p.89).

One may say that learning from experience embeds the ultimate other, for the very same moment in which we learn something new we are faced with otherness and with the painful reality of our lack of omnipotence, as well as with our need for the other in order to learn. From a narcissistic standpoint the mere existence of something which is outside of us already shakes the *terra firma* and the need for this other for our own learning is even more devastating.

This inherent conflict may be reflected in Goethe's quote: "From early on I have suspected that the so important-sounding task "Know thyself" is a ruse of a cabal of priests. They are trying to seduce man from activity in the outside world, to distract him with impossible demands; they seek to draw him into a false inner contemplation. Man only knows himself insofar as he knows the world - the world which he only comes to know in himself and himself only in it."

The paper will examine various examples of the phenomenon in different kinds of groups, as well as examples that illustrate how **Nothingness** can be seen in wider society in its socio-cultural manifestations, especially among the younger generation, Generation Y, or Millennials, and also with regards to involvement with politics or societal issues. The paper will make links to writings in the fields of sociology, contemporary literature, psychoanalysis of the individual and more.

Depending on the time the paper will then attempt to discuss whether this phenomenon can be regarded as a Seventh Basic Assumption. This discussion will refer to Bion's differential terms of basic assumptions, or group mentality versus group culture.

Regardless of the conclusion or outcome of this discussion, the paper's claim is that the phenomenon of **Nothingness** is a prevalent one and useful for the description and understanding of groups, organisations and society as a whole, as well as for working with groups, organisations and societies.

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