

**Discussion on
Desire, Demand and Psychotherapy:
On Large Groups and Neighbours by Stephen Frosh ***

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I really appreciated Stephen Frosh's paper. It is clear, flowing and well documented. The theoretical references are precise, first of all, Lacan but also Freud, Bion and Turquet. It is original and thought provoking.

Points of interest

Frosh covers many points that merit ample discussion.

- ✓ He strongly highlights the contradictions that come out in a large group. «[...] Belonging to the large group, [...], can produce [...] a kind of exhilaration mixed with a frisson of terror, or at least of anxiety. One can get caught up in something that makes one feel part of something greater, perhaps as a welcome release from the work of maintaining the coherence of the self; but this may also pose itself as a potentially terrifying dissolution of identity [...].»
- ✓ The idea that in a mass «[...] identification spreads laterally [with other participants] as well as vertically [with the leader...]» «[...] In subduing their Ego-ideal to the same object, each individual identifies with others [...], and the barriers between subjects become porous, so what one feels

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the other feels: my love and yours entwine, and, less fortunately, so does our hate.»

- ✓ The suggestion that at least one part of uneasiness, that is felt by the participants in a large group, is caused by «[...] a breaking of the [...] fantasy that a perfectly healing communication is possible [...]» «[.... In the large group] ‘desire’ and ‘demand’ are constantly called into play, the former as the irritation that appears as the latter is left unmet: the demand for love can never be salved, leaving an un-fillable ache or gap between hope and its realisation [....].»
- ✓ The indication that a large group could be an example of experience and trial that the individual has to endure in post and super-modernity. «[...] If one imagines the presence in a room of, say, eighty people sitting in a spiral or in embedded circles, each subject anxiously wondering what will happen, watching their backs, as it were, can this be a model of subjectivity under conditions of social fragmentation, in which it is exactly the postmodern experience of being in a space filled to overflowing that is so troubling?»

Something near, alien and uncanny

However, the point that is fuller of development possibilities is that of considering the phenomena of the large group, not only as being an effect of a breaking up of individual barriers (psychic skin) but also, and above all, as the activation of something uncanny and alien in the psyche of every individual. I will summarise this part of Frosh’s contribution beginning with his starting point that is Turquet’s paper, *Threats to Identity in the Large Group*.ⁱ

Turquet (1975, p. 119 and p. 115) highlights that:

«The apparent vastness of the group seems to give substance to a fantasy of [the group member's] internal world as [being] as vast, non-encompassable, or boundless, with the accompanying sense of becoming lost in an amorphousness that destroys one's sense of containment and integrity.» «The atmosphere of the large group carries a question with it: will the situation allow for differentiation as to degrees of engrossment in such a large and presumed totally absorbing situation, or will its demands for surrender be total?»

Frosh questions Turquet's approach. First of all, he notes that the experience of losing one's own sense of containment and integrity is neither characteristic nor specific of a large group situation. He then suggests that belonging to this kind of group activates something that is, in itself, universal and part of the human condition.

«[...] The break in the coherence of the subject that is produced by the identification processes at work in the large group may exaggerate this interruptedness, or bring it into focus in unwanted powerful ways, it is not in itself specific; we are fragmentary all the time, even when we are on our own.»

According to Frosh, the experiences of a large group are not as much an effect of a loss of a sense of self-containment and personal integrity, but much more of a presence of an uncanny "neighbour."

«[...] The disturbance of the large group is due not only to the dissolution of boundaries, [...] but to the claustrophobic presence of the neighbour who is close, yet alien, who sits beside one, yet is unknown [...].» «We are

no longer alone, however lonely we might be; we are too crowded out by [...] the neighbour who we cannot understand and whose very presence seems to make demands on us [...].»

The “neighbour” to whom Frosh refers, is not just the very person who sits near us in the large group but is also, and above all, a very complex notion. Frosh gives due weight to this by making reference to Freud and Lacan.

«[The “neighbour”,] the “*Nebenmensch*” [- who Freud describes in his paper *The Uncanny* -] is the neighbour as ‘the adjoining person’ standing between the subject and its primary maternal object [...].»

The “*Nebenmensch*” is familiar to us but it contains something that is radically incomprehensible: *das Ding*.

«[Lacan] defines *das Ding* as the encounter with something in the other that is completely alien - an intrusive foreignness that goes beyond the compositions of self and other, and their politicizations as ‘friend’ and ‘enemy’. The Thing materializes the constitutive ambiguity of the primal object, the trauma of its uncertain disposition between excessive presence and radical absence [...].»

At this point Frosh rounds off his reasoning.

«The Thing within the neighbour is also the Thing within each subject, its implantation, so that there is a carrying around of a disturbing alienness which troubles every subject [...].» «[...] Each of us carries the ‘Thing’ inside in the sense of an untranslatable residue [...]. Large

groups, precisely because of their disturbing, boundary-crashing, neighbour-intrusiveness, [...] reflect the problems of [...] such states.»

Trauma and fantasies to be healed

I will propose two series of questions. The first is on what Frosh dedicates to *das Ding* concept. I will not use Lacan's language and theory to express my questions but different theoretical points of reference and language. In my experience, it is very difficult to use only one single concept such as *das Ding* concept, taking it out of a strongly structured theory. Lacan's is surely one of these. I hope that Dr. Frosh and I will be able to understand each other despite these differences in the theoretical point of reference. Here, below, follows the first series of questions:

- May the large group phenomena be, at least in some measure, an effect of the reactivation in each member of a specific psychic and somatic area of high sensibility and fragility? An area that corresponds to their early exposure to repetitive trauma?
- May this phenomena be the result not only of activation of these areas of fragility but also of the activation of powerful fantasies that the trauma might be healed? Can this fantasy take some substance from the fact that the group experience is so large and is also a highly sensorial one? A bodily experience? ^{ii iii}

Group functions

The second series of questions arise from something that is missing from Frosh's paper. He only makes some small hint at the context (field, group space) and says very little about how the context may contribute in determining how we perceive the "neighbourhood." Secondly, he doesn't speak about the group way of functioning (group thinking, Gamma function, multi-

psychic group apparatus). All these group functions perform a substitutive activity when the thought and orientation functions of the individuals are blocked or momentarily suspended. So, I want to ask this...

- The fact that Frosh doesn't mention these two important issues, is only chance, or is it a result of Frosh's theoretical choice?
- Following Lacan's theoretical approach, is the essential point always in the encounter between the subject and *das Ding* without any regard for working in the traditional setting or the group setting? ^{iv}

Which truth?

I will finish up by saying something about the idea that Frosh touches upon in the final pages of his paper. He stresses that his approach to psychotherapy has a kind of "added ethical value."

«[...] An ethical practice of psychotherapy [is one] that does not reduce to consolation.»

«Consolation is definitely a human act, and it usually makes people feel better when they receive it; but it is not an ethical act in the sense of helping us face the truth.»

«[...] Hope [...] resides [...] in recognition of the possibility that as we learn to look the Thing in the face, we might then begin to see what is there.»

Not everyone would agree that consolation and truth are opposites. For example Samuel Johnson (1758) spoke about the consolation that may be given to us by truth.

«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.»

For Johnson, the point is not to choose between consolation and truth but to understand what kind of consolation is needed.

I believe that we have to understand not only which type of consolation we need but also the type of truth that we are looking for. Are we seeking abstract and metaphysical truth, that is above contingency, individual inclination and relationships, or a truth that is reconciled with affective closeness and empathy? ^v

It shouldn't be overly difficult to choose. We know that:

«[...] the inexhaustive wealth of human discourse is infinitely more important and significant than any Unique Truth.» ^{vi}

We know or should know that:

«The patient's expectations of being [...] understood, accepted and mirrored] deserve to be satisfied, even by paying the price of conceding some difference in our opinion with respect to his.» ^{vii}

We know all this in theory but during the session things are more difficult. We have to face the fact that yielding to our truth and criteria of deciding what is true and what is not true, is a substantial loss. The fact of having criteria in order to decide what is true, gives us a comforting feeling of being safe and well oriented in reality. However, during this effort we make in yielding to our truth and finding a space for the truth of the relationship, we are supported by the awareness of how great the stakes are. ^{viii ix}

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Notes

ⁱ For the notions “Psychic-Skin” and “Ego-skin,” see Bick (1968) and Anzieu (1985).

ⁱⁱ The references that I have in mind when speaking about “trauma” and “traumatic space” are Ferenczi (1931), Winnicott (1945), Fonagy (1997), Correale (2006) and Moccia (2007).

ⁱⁱⁱ I can give some idea of such fantasies by recalling two of the characteristics that Elias Canetti (1960) attributes to a mass: a) the mass always wants to grow, b) equality dominates inside the mass. It is opportune to recall what Serge Moscovici wrote (1987, p. 49) in an essay written in Elias Canetti’s honour: “Far from being squashed and ground down by the crowd, as is commonly supposed, the individual thus expands within it and is expanded by it. He goes beyond himself, and then returns within himself, transformed: how else can we explain that he so eagerly seeks out the crowd and derives so much pleasure from it?...”

^{iv} For the notions of “field” and “group thought,” see Neri (2008) and (2002). For the concept of “analytical space of the group” see Viderman (1971), for “multi-psychic group apparatus” Kaes (1976) and for Gamma Function” Corrao (1981).

^v “I am a friend of Plato, but even moreso, I am a friend of the truth,” this is the acclaimed phrase with which Aristotle held that truth has to come before personal relationships. I extracted the quote from a radio conversation of Hans-Georg Gadamer (2000).

^{vi} I took this phrase from the essay that Hanna Arendt (1972) dedicated to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

^{vii} This passage was taken from a recent essay by Pallier and Soavi (2008, p. 483).

^{viii} I would like to add that this decision depends not only on our determination and will, but also, to a large extent, on the emotional and intellectual atmosphere and quality of intellectual exchange that occur in the setting, including that of the large group.

^{ix} See also Neri 2007.

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