In this chapter I want to introduce the concept of phantasy which is basic to the rest of the book.

Our heads are full of phantasies. Not just fantasies – by which I mean stories we make up to amuse ourselves – but 'stories' we are deeply involved in and convinced by and which go on independently of our conscious awareness or intention. Phantasies make up the background to everything we do, think or feel: they determine our perceptions and in a sense are our perceptions.

I do not at the moment intend to go into the evidence for this statement nor to try to define phantasy in a rigorous way. I want to show how I use the concept, and I ask you, the reader, to bear with me for a while by taking it on trust until you are in a position to look for your own evidence, make your own definition if you so wish, and - more importantly - learn to use it yourself. As I said in the introduction, this process may take a little time and you may need patience. Wilfred Bion describes the effect of an analyst giving a 'deep' interpretation to a patient in a way which may describe what happens to those coming across some psychoanalytical ideas for the first time. 'The immediate reaction, from my experience,' he says, 'is that it is so much nonsense, a foible of the analyst. I cannot see what other preliminary reaction there can be. But after a time you begin to think there may be something in it and to be suspicious that you do behave in this peculiar manner and that therefore there is much to be said for that theoretical formulation. But to speak of a theory as if it were "absolute truth" is ridiculous.' The ideas I am offering - including the idea of unconscious phantasy - I am offering for you to play with, to try out and to speculate about. Whether you find them convincing or not depends not only on my efforts to make them convincing, but also on whether you are prepared to do this with them.

All perceptions, so neurologists tell us, are in a sense 'interpretations'.

We receive very limited data in terms of signals picked up by our eyes, ears and other sensory organs: it is the brain which puts two and two together with experience and makes not only five but fifty. The brain relies to an enormous extent upon previous experience, expectations and the ability to spot a slight but sufficient likeness between widely varying situations. There are many experiments which show how easy it is to fool the brain into making a wrong interpretation. But without this ability to make immediate, automatic judgements about the world and to treat them as if they were the truth, we would be unable to go about our everyday lives with the confidence and competence we do. Normally we do not need to be concerned about the inaccuracies of our rather rough-and-ready estimations. It does not usually matter that straight lines may seem to bend or bent lines appear straight, or even - usually - that a conversation on the telephone relies to a very large extent upon guesswork by the listener. But what can matter very much is that we perceive ourselves and other people also in this rough-and-ready manner.

Using very slight data we jump to quite unjustified conclusions about people. Quite unconsciously, without turning our attention to it, we search around for an existing pattern or phantasy which has sufficient points of similarity for it to be used as a 'completion' for the new data. And this is very important indeed. I can get along quite well enough with my common-sense perception of tables and chairs, but I far more often find that my perception of other people - or myself - has led me wildly astray. Not only do we take one generous or one foolish act as evidence, for a few seconds at least and often for much longer, that we are very generous or very foolish in spite of our knowledge of our meanness or our good sense, but we also take very slight similarities between people as evidence, quite without questioning or even thinking about it, that these people are in other ways identical. And we then treat them accordingly.

Just as, presented with 'yesterday', we unthinkingly insert the 't' and may as rapidly find a completion for 'recnt' without perhaps noticing that there is a choice, so, presented with an old lady, a small child or a young man, we 'complete' according to what is already available in our heads and so endow them with a lot of extra characteristics which may or may not turn out to be justified.

Described in terms of how our brains work, this sounds plausible enough perhaps, but - you may be wondering - is it true? It may not feel like that; perhaps you are thinking how you see everybody as different and never mistake one person for another. On a conscious level this may be so. The fact that two people have red hair says nothing about what they are
like as people and nobody would claim that it did really. And yet there may be ways in which you do in fact, in part of your mind which is not so sensible, make some kind of identification between two people like this.

Let me show you this process detected in real life.

I worked for a while as a nursing auxiliary in a mental hospital on a ward for those physically ill. There was an old lady there I was drawn to and, after a while, I realized that she reminded me of a great-aunt of mine. I had stayed with this great-aunt as a child and she had accused me unjustly, I thought, of being ungrateful and inconsiderate. The old lady in the mental hospital was a heaven-sent opportunity to prove that I was not ungrateful and inconsiderate. I loved that old lady. I fed her and protected her from the other nurses' impatience. All the time she never spoke and I built up for her a character. To me she practically was my great-aunt, though I did not realize this at the time. She seemed a dignified, rather prim old lady: her mouth, which she would scarcely open, even to eat, was pursed up in a prissy way. I fondly imagined that, unlike my great-aunt, she was feeling gratitude and affection for me too. Then one day she did open her mouth - to emit a stream of obscenities in a foghorn-like bellow. The bubble burst and I learnt in a very practical way that I was 'transferred' to the old lady a whole character which had nothing to do with what she was really like. I had 'completed' my perception of her with my own phantasies. I never felt the same about her after that.

Throughout this book I shall be using examples from my own experience with myself and with other people (I have of course disguised identities at times). But clearly my experience is insufficient evidence for the processes I describe. I hope that you will 'complete' your reading of the book by being stimulated to think of your own experiences which have similarities to mine. It is these products of your own mind which will really make sense to you and change your perceptions. You may, for example, remember being on some occasion amongst a group of people you did not know and yet wanted to get to know. Did you find yourself drawn to some, wary of others, uninterested in others? You may remember some initial expectations you had about some of the people which turned out to be disappointed or to be confirmed later. If you think about it you may be able to discover where your expectations came from.

When I moved to a new area with a new baby I had to find other people to talk to during the day. Daily visits to the park finally provided me with a collection of people to look amongst. I liked the look of one woman with a child like mine and gradually got to know her. Over a period of time I made a series of discoveries about her which gave me quite a shock and which forced me to reassess both her and myself. In spite of my initially knowing nothing about her beyond her appearance and the way she treated her child and me, I had assumed that she would in certain ways be like the friends I had recently left behind. The reality of her age, her politics, her job and her education all made me do a 'double take' and gave me an immediate reaction of anxiety: had I done or said anything I would not have done if I had known? This was not simply a matter of what anyone would have assumed. Since the thing about her which might have been expected to surprise - the fact that she was not living with a man - did not surprise me in the slightest; it simply made her more like my friends and acquaintances. As far as that was concerned I had no expectations either way.

In the two examples I have given here we can see that I fitted new acquaintances into patterns which were already there. I did not at first consciously think 'she is like so-and-so'; I simply treated the new people as if they were people of my phantasy; hence the shock when I discovered that I was mistaken. There are in fact many different kinds of interpretation or completion we make where we may be quite ready to see our own contribution. But they can still subject us to this kind of shock, or by their inaccuracies or insufficiencies amount to quite serious errors of judgement.

We can quite consciously 'complete' by interpreting an ordinary conversation.

'I'm sorry, I can't come round tonight, I've got to wash the bathroom walls.' (Believe it or not, this was reported to me as a real incident.) This statement was understood to mean: 'I don't actually want to come round tonight'; and further: 'because I don't like you and I can't even be bothered to think up a more convincing excuse'. The interpretation may or may not have been justifiable; the person whose invitation was thus refused did not stay long enough to find out. She was so convinced by it that she did not expect to surprise - the fact that she was not living with a man - did not surprise me in the slightest; it simply made her more like my friends and acquaintances. As far as that was concerned I had no expectations either way.

Posy shows this process of interpreting conversations better than I can (see next page).
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home at three o'clock in the morning might be suspected of having an affair unless he had very convincing explanations to the contrary. A grandmother who talked incessantly of one grandchild to the exclusion of the others might be suspected of having a favourite, however much she denied it. A girl who stepped on the foot of a good-looking but unknown young man might be suspected of acting with intent, however profusely she apologized.

All these events are 'understood' to mean more than they ostensibly 'say', by being fitted into patterns of behaviour which make sense to us. We may have conflicting patterns so that the girl's behaviour may simultaneously fit into a pattern of 'clumsy' behaviour as well as a pattern of 'seductive' behaviour. In some situations we might perceive only one interpretation where other people might perceive the other or both. We can imagine a jealous father who might see his daughter simply being clumsy and therefore (or so he might say) be angry with her: an observer might suspect that his anger is more appropriate to the denied interpretation which suggests that the girl is seeking a lover who might replace her father in her affections. The observer is putting an interpretation on the behaviour of both of them, and the father would probably not like it.

The patterns we recognize and use every day vary considerably from person to person. Some people are very quick to see signs of pregnancy, or of distress or hostility in others with uncanny accuracy. Some people always interpret behaviour in the worst possible way; others are always giving the benefit of the doubt. Some see romances everywhere; others do not see the most obvious flirtation going on under their noses. Some people seem to have an enviable ability to see things realistically, without jumping to conclusions or missing significant clues. What you see depends not only on what you want to see - and 'there's none so blind as them as won't see' - but also on what you have learnt to interpret in a particular way. My son was prone to vomiting and I rapidly learnt to interpret the preliminary signs - other people were much more likely to have to clean the carpet. Psychoanalysts teach each other to extend their interpretative powers by showing each other what they have seen, just as a mother or teacher or friend might pass on their own interpretations of the world around. The peculiarities and the unacceptability of psychoanalytical interpretations arise more from what analysts see than from the way they look, which is itself no more than a refinement of everyday behaviour. Even in everyday life there is sometimes a feeling that it is not fair to take people literally or to assume that even a part of them intended to make a tactless remark or an embarrassing slip. (As my mother says, with people

Posy Simmonds, Guardian, 12 May 1980.
like me around you have to take out your words and look at them: you’re not safe any more. In fact you never were safe: the everyday need to ‘take out your words and look at them’ gave rise to the expression in the first place. I was frequently accused as a child of misinterpreting some remark which was not supposed to be taken seriously. As she also used to say: ‘You should know that when I say fridge I mean oven!’ One of the side-effects of understanding your own phantasies a bit better is that you are less likely to say fridge when you do mean oven, or, more seriously, yes when you mean no. However, I am straying from the point.

One of the ways analysts teach each other to observe involves what is known as ‘counter-transference’. The feelings a patient arouses in the analyst can be used as a sensitive response to something in the patient. Learning to distinguish between more appropriate or realistic feelings in the situation and less realistic ones, the analyst learns to use his or her own emotional responses not as immediate signals to act upon, but as a kind of diagnostic tool.

An important part of learning from experience through building up internal phantasies is that we can also learn what ‘ain’t so’. Having been twice usurped in love relationships by blonde girls, a friend of mine learnt to view all blonde girls with the deepest suspicion, though there was no reason to suppose that her husband should prefer them to dark-haired girls. We generalize from the particular; we say ‘I can’t stand people like that’, or ‘everybody says ...’ when the basis for the statement is no more than bad experiences with one or two people. We tend to judge a school by a few noisy pupils on the bus. We may judge communists by Stalin and Americans by their presidents or by their behaviour during a war. All this is obvious and not quite true. We do equate people who cannot realistically affect and distort all subsequent perceptions in a particular area.

Distortions can happen in other ways too. Since we always understand something new in terms of what we already know, our present-day adult phantasies must be related, however distantly, to phantasies I developed not only in childhood but also in earliest infancy when perception began. Sometimes there may seem to be a relatively obvious connection: my experience of seven-year-old boys was virtually limited to the experience of my brothers until my son reached that age, and this may contribute to my calling him by my brother’s name. In fact this is not enough as an explanation, but it has some part to play. But there are other ways in which childhood phantasies can set the ground rules which seriously affect and distort all subsequent perceptions in a particular area.

If I learnt at my mother’s knee that Men Are Not To Be Trusted, I might never trust one sufficiently to find out if it is true. If I learnt that I would never have anything unless I fought for it, I might never dare sit back long enough to find out that some things come of their own accord. If I learnt that everything I struggled for would be taken from me, I might give up struggling very early on. Equally, memories of being once loved might bear alien to you - often a younger brother’s, for example. When we do anything like this we are clearly making links between people at a level which influences our behaviour - what we call people - and this suggests that we are using phantasies which are somehow common to the linked people and which may be distortions of one or other of them. These distortions can arise in many ways.

One obvious way in which our phantasies of people may become less than realistic involves the way we carry on relating to them when they are not there. Many people away from their mother, especially in their twenties, find that their picture of her changes. They may have arguments or discussions with her in their heads, and experience some kind of shock on discovering that she has in fact had no part in the conversation. Many people have told me how they do this: parting from their mother perhaps in some bad feeling, they work on the relationship entirely in their own heads so that the next time they meet or speak on the phone there is the same hope and expectation that this time she will understand - only for the pattern of disappointment to be repeated all over again. Misunderstandings between husband and wife can happen in a similar way, where one is quite convinced that they have told the other something, only to find it was a conversation which was never spoken aloud.

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itself open to experiences and so to receive and give love. Too much early suspicion can prevent any reassuring experiences from 'getting through'; if the only expectation from the environment is harsh treatment, all attempts to break into the child's reverie will be experienced as frightening and threatening and to be determinedly resisted. Sometimes these expectations seem to come from inside the child's own mind: a child who is treated with only the utmost love and care may still have extremely terrifying phantasies about the world.

Children's phantasies are in fact often extremely unrealistic, looked at from the standpoint of an adult. Some have obvious roots: at the age of three, my sons both expressed the belief that they would have babies 'in their wombs' and were slow to give the idea up. Others are less obvious; one child told his mother, with a charming smile, that he wished she were dead so he could cut off her breast and have it all to himself. I came in from the garden once with my hand dripping blood from a cut, and Paul, then two, who had been sitting in the kitchen all the time, half asked and half stated: 'I didn't do it, did I mummy?' Such unrealistic views of the world betrayed in children's words may leave their traces in unconscious phantasies influencing our whole lives, if they have for some reason resisted being judged and tested by the common sense of the child or adult as they grow older.

I once saw a woman relieved of the phantasy that she had killed her brother forty years earlier. She 'knew' that he had died of diphtheria but she also 'knew' that she had killed him by giving him a 'poison' of Yorkshire pudding mixed with orange juice the week before. In a discussion she suddenly realized that she had carried this around as a secret burden of guilt all these years. Such ideas, which are so convincing and threatening and to be determinedly resisted. Sometimes these expectations seem to come from inside the child's own mind: a child who is treated with only the utmost love and care may still have extremely terrifying phantasies about the world.

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realm of thought and thus maintains its conviction in the face of knowledge that it cannot be so. Often with asthma, removal of some of the anxieties arising from such phantasies can be sufficient to prevent attacks recurring, however they arose in the first place. It is important to note here that I am not saying that asthma is caused by over-solicitous mothers: the phantasy of the intrusive mother may just as well arise from the child's own desire to get into or take over its mother's body, which the child uses to 'interpret' perfectly normal concern on the mother's part. Nor am I saying that the asthma has no physical origins: there are often physical triggers which affect the body and the subsequent phantasies. All I wish to point out is that physical behaviour and bodily symptoms are endowed with meaning by phantasies and that phantasies can be 'felt' as bodily symptoms. Mind and body are not independent of each other: changes in one may arise from and cause changes in the other.

Other phantasies which may be felt as physical symptoms are those expressed in such phrases as 'a burden of guilt', 'a stab in the back' or 'a slap in the face'. 'Stinging' words may cause the recipient to wince: some people seem to go around looking as if they are weighed down by a physical burden, or they walk furtively, looking over their shoulder both metaphorically and perhaps physically. Someone who goes to a counsellor feeling - on some level - that they are 'unloading a lot of shit' may leave feeling temporarily 'relieved'. Body language as well as metaphors can be seen as an expression of phantasies at work within.

In the next few chapters I shall be looking at some quite unrealistic phantasies people seem to have about themselves and about the world. One group of such phantasies are those which involve the idea that a part of you, or you yourself, can get inside someone else. A small boy I knew once said to his mother 'I shall get right inside your breast and snuggle up.' The idea of 'giving your heart' is an expression of such a phantasy: John Donne's poetry is full of it. The desire to put the most treasured and life-giving part of yourself into the person you love, and to receive theirs in return, is a desire which may in phantasy be enacted and satisfied: the wish and the action may not be distinguished. It is also, of course, a phantasy enacted in a practical way in bed.

The internal logic of such lovers' phantasies is in fact often detectable as it works itself out in real life. After the initial excitement of the 'putting in' has worn off, feelings connected with being trapped inside, or controlled by somebody who is inside you, or 'always on your back' may emerge. Married couples often say they feel their spouse is watching and criticizing everything they do as if they were inside their head; some people
feel like this about their parents or about other people who are important to them. Teenage children fight to ‘escape’ from the parents they previously were only too keen to keep near them. Mothers find that their delight in being a mother gives way at times to terrible feelings of suffocation and being caught in a trap where they must play the parts assigned to them by other people – of mother, daughter, wife – but are unable to hold on to any sense of their own identity apart from this.

There are many responses to this kind of feeling, just as there are many ways in which parts of yourself can be in phantasy put into someone. The putting in and the separating out can be done gently or violently, guiltily or kindly, harshly and destructively or carefully and with the eventual creation of something stronger and better. I shall be looking at these in more detail later on. Uncovering such phantasies in everyday life can sometimes be very enlightening, both in the sense of making a burden lighter and of throwing light on a gloomy situation. Phantasies are experienced as if they were reality; the feelings they arouse are real even if the events they portray are not. Finding and naming the phantasies can enable them to be changed and made more realistic so that they no longer add to the problems of daily life.

Partly because of these phantasies of putting parts of yourself into other people – as a gift, for help, for love, to keep hope alive or in order to spoil and mess something up, for example – there are many phantasies in which ownership of feelings or characteristics is confused. I may only recognize my own scorn, my own harsh critical eye, my own obstinacy, when I see it in someone else, and I may treat them the worse as a result of the phantasy that it is my scorn, or whatever, in them. This is of course projection, which occurs in many forms and which I deal with more in Chapter 4. Here I want to point out some of the powerful emotions which are involved in the process of creating and using phantasies.

Phantasies are selected, used and created under the influence of extremely powerful emotions. We do not ‘give our hearts’ unless we love passionately. When I sought out the old lady in the mental hospital part of me was still seething with rage against my great-aunt, and full of anxiety that she might be right about me. I would probably never make a fuss about someone else’s obstinacy if I were not somehow preoccupied with, and probably terrified of my own. But the emotions do not simply govern which phantasy will be brought into operation – whether the father will see his daughter being clumsy or seductive, for example, or which part of reality we will be interested in and which part we refuse to recognize; they also govern the nature of the phantasies themselves.
husband into killing her too. Such feelings are not to be considered lightly.

It may seem far-fetched that people might have phantasies such as this one about their mother being inside them and protecting them while laying them open to furious jealousy and attack from the outside. But there is a very common, perfectly conscious shared belief in something which is not so dissimilar. Christians believe that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing being, whose location inside or outside the self may be argued about, and who provides enormous help against internal and - to a lesser extent - external dangers. In phantasy, the mother's breast, just like God, may be deeply felt to be a real source of life and goodness and hope, giving strength which far outweighs the strength of the individual. Such phantasies can lend the most powerful force to adult experience and behaviour. Great deeds have been done, great sacrifices made and great crimes committed in the name of God the Father. Just as a phantasy of having the mother inside can be linked with terror of men, so the belief in God can be linked with terror of large categories of people, or with a desire to punish and attack them. The Infidel, Jews, Catholics or Protestants may all, in the name of 'the true religion', be fervently feared and attacked as 'the devil himself'.

Before I leave this chapter I have to make explicit an extremely important point. In talking about phantasies in the way I do I am rather in the position of a physicist introducing the subject of the nature of matter. To begin with and, under certain circumstances, later too, the analogy of billiard balls is close enough to give some idea of how electrons behave. But there is a lot more to electrons than this, and there is a lot more subtlety to the origins and nature of phantasies than my words so far have allowed. There is a particular distortion in the use of words to describe the most primitive phantasies. Christians agree that words are not enough to do full justice to the nature of God; they can at best only evoke something of him. Music and flavours too cannot be adequately described in words. But it is this which perhaps offends some whose understanding of scientific observation is different. The testing, the proof or the criticism has to be undertaken by you, the reader, and unfortunately your task is by no means easy. Phantasies are by definition unconscious fantasies: you

This phantasy was clearly active well before the words were. But part of the phantasy - the screaming terror which accompanied it - no longer belongs to the verbal version. This is very important when it comes to trying to imagine how things might seem to a tiny baby. The earliest phantasies are of incredibly dangerous, unnamed, seemingly unnameable dangers and powers - of perpetual bliss, of fusion with the loving and wonderful world for ever, of being suspended in total horror for ever, of disintegration into a million painful fragments - as well as relatively less powerful emotional states, when the world can be looked at and examined for what it actually contains. But in using words I am forced to reduce the horror and the beauty, and to describe something which cannot even be evoked easily since we have forgotten these experiences ourselves - for good reasons. What early infantile phantasies were like may very occasionally be glimpsed or physically felt in flashes, perhaps in response to playing a piece of music, watching a play, reading poetry, falling in love or in a religious experience, but, like the size of a subatomic particle, normally, for most of us, it is easier to talk of them than to imagine them.

In some ways perhaps it is unimportant if these experiences remain no more than words on a page. Some kind of information can be gleaned. But when it comes to being convinced by them, or to finding your own or someone else's phantasies, to sorting out those primitive perceptions of the world which are not only unrealistic but are also causing trouble in one way or another, the evocation of the experience is essential. Words which name phantasies are a tool which can make the experiencing of them in a more conscious way possible and bearable: it is this experiencing in a new and safer context which effects change, and also makes sense of the words.

Perhaps this explains partly why large generalizations are often of little help for those who work 'with people'. Generalizations are even further, it seems, from experience than concrete and detailed descriptions. The jump needed to translate from a generalization to personal experience seems to be larger than the jump we have to make, given one concrete experience, to translate it into something similar of our own. Our minds work naturally to seek out similarities and we can use this process to our advantage. I am trying to trigger off in you memories, and abilities to recognize them, before words could be used.

Susan Isaacs once described a little girl with poor speech development who at the age of one year and eight months was terrified of a shoe with a flapping sole her mother used to wear. She would shrink away and scream whenever she saw it, so her mother hid it away. Fifteen months later she suddenly said to her mother in a frightened voice: 'Where are mummy's broken shoes?' Her mother hastily said she had sent them away, and the child commented: 'They might have eaten me right up.'
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cannot simply look into your conscious memory and say 'Yes, I remember wanting to marry my mother and kill my father'; this does not constitute proof, nor its absence disproof, of psychoanalytical ideas. That you cannot see something does not, unfortunately, mean that it is not there.

Summary

I have tried in this chapter to give some idea of how we perceive by means of phantasies which we treat as if they were true representations of reality, just as a religious person may perceive the world through the beliefs of his or her particular sect. I have tried to show how some phantasies come quite close to reality (as the picture we have of long-standing friends may be a reasonably good approximation to how they are) and how others are wildly inaccurate as statements of fact, such as the phantasy expressed in 'I'll eat you up!' And yet these larger-than-life phantasies can have just as strong an effect upon our thoughts, feelings and actions as those which are more realistic. As we grow up we do not and cannot get rid of phantasies: all we can ever hope to do is to make them more realistic than they were before.

I have tried to show how phantasies derive not simply from 'pure' memories but from people and events 'taken in' or created under the influence of strong emotions, and that these emotions continue to influence perceptions in ways we simply do not notice. It is the relation between emotions and phantasies which I want to look at in the next chapter.