

From  
**PLAYING & REALITY**

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Chapter 7

**The Location of Cultural Experience<sup>1</sup>**

*On the seashore of endless worlds,  
children play.* Tagore

In this chapter I wish to develop the theme that I stated briefly on the occasion of the Banquet organized by the British Psycho-Analytical Society to mark the completion of the *Standard Edition* of Freud's Works (London, 8 October 1966). In my attempt to pay tribute to James Strachey I said:

'Freud did not have a place in his topography of the mind for the experience of things cultural. He gave new value to inner psychic reality, and from this came a new value for things that are actual and truly external. Freud used the word "sublimation" to point the way to a place where cultural experience is meaningful, but perhaps he did not get so far as to tell us where in the mind cultural experience is.'

Now I want to enlarge this idea and make an attempt at a positive statement which can be critically examined. I shall use my own language.

The quotation from Tagore has always intrigued me. In my adolescence I had no idea what it could mean, but it found a place in me, and its imprint has not faded.

When I first became a Freudian I *knew* what it meant. The sea and the shore represented endless intercourse between man and woman, and the child emerged from this union to have a brief moment before becoming in turn adult or parent. Then, as a student of unconscious symbolism, I *knew* (one always *knows*) that the sea is the mother, and onto the seashore the child is born. Babies come up out of the sea and are spewed out upon the land, like Jonah from the whale. So now the seashore was the mother's body, after the child is born and the mother and the now viable baby are getting to know each other.

Then I began to see that this employs a sophisticated concept of the parent-infant relationship and that there could be an unsophisticated infantile point of view, a different one from that of the mother or the observer, and that this infant's viewpoint could be profitably examined. For a long time my mind remained in a state of not-knowing, this state crystallizing into my formulation of the transitional phenomena. In the interim I played about with the concept of 'mental representations' and with the description of these in terms of objects and phenomena located in the personal psychic reality, felt to be inside, also, I followed the effects of the operation of the mental mechanisms of projection and introjection. I realized, however, that *play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality.*

Now I have come to the subject-matter of this chapter, and to the question: *if play is neither inside nor outside, where is it?* I was near to the idea that I express here in my paper 'The Capacity to be Alone' (1958b), in which I said that, at first, the child is alone only in the presence of someone. In that paper I did not develop the idea of the

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 48, Part 3 (1967).

common ground in this relationship between the child and the someone.

My patients (especially when regressive and dependent in the transference or transference dreams) have taught me how to find an answer to the question: where is play? I wish to condense what I have learned in my psychoanalytic work into a theoretical statement.

I have claimed that when we witness an infant's employment of a transitional object, the first not-me possession, we are witnessing both the child's first use of a symbol and the first experience of play. An essential part of my formulation of transitional phenomena is that we agree never to make the challenge to the baby: did you create this object, or did you find it conveniently lying around? That is to say, an essential feature of transitional phenomena and objects is a quality in our attitude when we observe them.

The object is a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother (or part of the mother). This symbol can be located. It is at the place in space and time where and when the mother is in transition from being (in the baby's mind) merged in with the infant and alternatively being experienced as an object to be perceived rather than conceived of. The use of an object symbolizes the union of two now separate things, baby and mother, *at the point in time and space of the initiation of their state of separateness*.<sup>1</sup>

A complication exists right from the very beginning of any consideration of this idea, in that it is necessary to postulate that if the use of the object by the baby builds up into anything (i.e. is more than an activity that might be found even in a baby born with no brain), then there must be the beginning of the setting up in the infant's mind or

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to simplify matters by referring to the use of objects, but the title of my original paper was 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena' (1951).

personal psychic reality of an image of the object. But the mental representation in the inner world is kept significant, or the imago in the inner world is kept alive, by the reinforcement given through the availability of the external separated-off and actual mother, along with her technique of child care.

It is perhaps worth while trying to formulate this in a way that gives the time factor due weight. The feeling of the mother's existence lasts  $x$  minutes. If the mother is away more than  $x$  minutes, then the imago fades, and along with this the baby's capacity to use the symbol of the union ceases. The baby is distressed, but this distress is soon *mended* because the mother returns in  $x + y$  minutes. In  $x+y$  minutes the baby has not become altered. But in  $x+y+z$  minutes the baby has become *traumatized*. In  $x+y+z$  minutes the mother's return does not mend the baby's altered state. Trauma implies that the baby has experienced a break in life's continuity, so that primitive defences now become organized to defend against a repetition of 'unthinkable anxiety' or a return of the acute confusional state that belongs to disintegration of nascent ego structure.

We must assume that the vast majority of babies never experience the  $x+y+z$  quantity of deprivation. This means that the majority of children do not carry around with them for life the knowledge from experience of having been mad. Madness here simply means a *break-up* of whatever may exist at the time of *a personal continuity of existence*. After 'recovery' from  $x+y+z$  deprivation a baby has to start again permanently deprived of the root which could provide *continuity with the personal beginning*. This implies the existence of a memory system and an organization of memories.

By contrast, from the effects of  $x+y+z$  degree of deprivation, babies are constantly being *cured* by the mother's localized spoiling that mends the ego structure. This mending of the ego structure re-establishes the baby's

capacity to use a symbol of union; the baby then comes once more to allow and even to benefit from separation. *This is the place that I have set out to examine*, the separation that is not a separation but a form of union.<sup>1</sup>

It was at an important point in the phase of development of these ideas in me in the early forties that Marion Milner (in conversation) was able to convey to me the tremendous significance that there can be in the interplay of the edges of two curtains, or of the surface of a jug that is placed in front of another jug (cf. Milner, 1969).

It is to be noted that the phenomena that I am describing have no climax. This distinguishes them from phenomena that have instinctual backing, where the orgasmic element plays an essential part, and where satisfactions are closely linked with climax.

But these phenomena that have reality in the area whose existence I am postulating belong to *the experience* of relating to objects. One can think of the 'electricity' that seems to generate in meaningful or intimate contact, that is a feature, for instance, when two people are in love. These phenomena of the play area have infinite variability, contrasting with the relative stereotypy of phenomena that relate either to personal body functioning or to environmental actuality.

Psychoanalysts who have rightly emphasized the significance of instinctual experience and of reactions to frustration have failed to state with comparable clearness or conviction the tremendous intensity of these non-climactic experiences that are called playing. Starting as we do from

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<sup>1</sup> Merrell Middlemore (1941) saw the infinite richness in the intertwined techniques of the nursing couple. She was near what I am attempting to state here. Rich material exists for us to observe and enjoy in this field of the bodily relationship that may (though it may not) exist between baby and mother, especially if in making our observations (whether direct or in psychoanalysis) we are not simply thinking in terms of oral erotism with satisfaction or frustration, etc.

See also Hoffer (1949, 1950).

psychoneurotic illness and with ego defences related to anxiety that arises out of the instinctual life, we tend to think of health in terms of the state of ego defences. We say it is healthy when these defences are not rigid, etc. But we seldom reach the point at which we can start to describe what life is like apart from illness or absence of illness.

That is to say, we have yet to tackle the question of *what life itself is about*. Our psychotic patients force us to give attention to this sort of basic problem. We now see that it is not instinctual satisfaction that makes a baby begin to be, to feel that life is real, to find life worth living. In fact, instinctual gratifications start off as part-functions and they become *seductions* unless based on a well-established capacity in the individual person for total experience, and for experience in the area of transitional phenomena. It is the self that must precede the self's use of instinct; the rider must ride the horse, not be run away with. I could use Buffon's saying: 'Le style est l'homme même.' When one speaks of a man one speaks of him *along with* the summation of his cultural experiences. The whole forms a unit.

I have used the term cultural experience as an extension of the idea of transitional phenomena and of play without being certain that I can define the word 'culture'. The accent indeed is on experience. In using the word culture I am thinking of the inherited tradition. I am thinking of something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw *if we have somewhere to put what we find*.

There is a dependence here on some kind of recording method. No doubt a very great deal was lost of the early civilizations, but in the myths that were a product of oral tradition there could be said to be a cultural pool giving the history of human culture spanning six thousand years. This history through myth persists to the present time in spite of

the efforts of historians to be objective, which they can never be, though they must try.

Perhaps I have said enough to show both what I know and what I do not know about the meaning of the word culture. It interests me, however, as a side issue, that in any cultural field *it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition*. Conversely, no one in the line of cultural contributors repeats except as a deliberate quotation, and the unforgivable sin in the cultural field is plagiarism. The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union.

I must pursue a little further the topic in terms of the baby's very early experiences, when the various capacities are being initiated, made ontogenetically possible because of the mother's extremely sensitive adaptation to the needs of her baby, based on her identification with the baby. (I refer to the stages of growth before the baby has acquired mental mechanisms that do soon become available for the organizing of complex defences. I repeat here: a human infant must travel some distance from early experiences in order to have the maturity to be deep.)

This theory does not affect what we have come to believe in respect of the aetiology of psychoneurosis, or the treatment of patients who are psychoneurotic; nor does it clash with Freud's structural theory of the mind in terms of ego, id, superego. What I say does affect our view of the question: what is life about? You may cure your patient and not know what it is that makes him or her go on living. It is of first importance for us to acknowledge openly that absence of psycho neurotic illness may be health, but it is not life. Psychotic patients who are all the time hovering between living and not living force us to look at this problem, one that really belongs *not to psychoneurotics but to all human beings*. I am claiming that these same

phenomena that are life and death to our schizoid or borderline patients appear in our cultural experiences. It is these cultural experiences that provide the continuity in the human race that transcends personal existence. I am assuming that cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games.

#### MAIN THESIS

Here, then, is my main statement. I am claiming:

1. The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play.
2. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experiences* that take place at the early stages of the individual's existence.
3. From the beginning the baby has maximally intense experiences *in the potential space between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived*, between me-extensions and the not-me. This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control.
4. Every baby has his or her own favourable or unfavourable experience here. Dependence is maximal. The potential space happens only *in relation to a feeling of confidence* on the part of the baby, that is, confidence related to the dependability of the mother-figure or environmental elements, confidence being the evidence of dependability that is becoming introjected.

5. In order to study the play and then the cultural life of the individual one must study the fate of the potential space between any one baby and the human (and therefore fallible) mother-figure who is essentially adaptive because of love.

It will be seen that if this area is to be thought of as part of the ego organization, here is a part of the ego that is not a body-ego, that is not founded on the pattern of body *functioning* but is founded on body *experiences*. These experiences belong to object-relating of a non-orgiastic kind, or to what can be called ego-relatedness, at the place where it can be said that *continuity* is giving place to *contiguity*.

#### CONTINUING ARGUMENT

This statement makes necessary an examination of the fate of this potential space, which may or may not come into prominence as a vital area in the mental life of the developing person.

What happens if the mother is able to start on a graduated failure of adaptation from a position of adapting fully? This is the crux of the matter, and the problem needs study because it affects our technique as analysts when we have patients who are regressed in the sense of being dependent. In the average good experience in this field of management (that starts so early, and that starts and starts again) the baby finds intense, even agonizing, pleasure associated with imaginative play. There is no set game, so everything is creative, and although playing is part of object-relating, whatever happens is personal to the baby. Everything physical is imaginatively elaborated, is invested with a first-time-ever quality. Can I say that this is the meaning intended for the word 'cathect'?

I can see that I am in the territory of Fairbairn's (1941) concept of 'object-seeking' (as opposed to 'satisfaction-seeking').

As observers we note that everything in the play has been done before, has been felt before, has been smelt before, and where there appear specific symbols of the union of baby and mother (transitional objects) these very objects have been adopted, not created. Yet *for the baby* (if the mother can supply the right conditions) every detail of the baby's life is an example of creative living. Every object is a 'found' object. Given the chance, the baby begins to live creatively, and to use actual objects to be creative into and with. If the baby is not given this chance then there is no area in which the baby may have play, or may have cultural experience; then it follows that there is no link with the cultural inheritance, and there will be no contribution to the cultural pool.

The 'deprived child' is notoriously restless and unable to play, and has an impoverishment of capacity to experience in the cultural field. This observation leads to a study of the effect of deprivation at the time of the loss of what has become accepted as reliable. A study of the effects of loss at any early stage involves us in looking at this intermediate area, or potential space between subject and object. Failure of dependability or loss of object means to the child a loss of the play area, and loss of meaningful symbol. In favourable circumstances the potential space becomes filled with the products of the baby's own creative imagination. In unfavourable circumstances the creative use of objects is missing or relatively uncertain. I have described elsewhere (Winnicott, 1960a) the way in which the defence of the compliant false self appears, with the hiding of the true self that has the potential for creative use of objects.

There is, in cases of premature failure of environmental reliability, an alternative danger, which is that this potential

space may become filled with what is injected into it from someone other than the baby. It seems that whatever is in this space that comes from someone else is persecutory material, and the baby has no means of rejecting it. Analysts need to beware lest they create a feeling of confidence and an intermediate area in which play can take place and then inject into this area or inflate it with interpretations which in effect are from their own creative imaginations.

Fred Plaut, a Jungian analyst, has written a paper (1966) from which I quote:

‘The capacity to form images and to use these constructively by recombination into new patterns is – unlike dreams or fantasies – dependent on the individual’s ability to trust.’

The word *trust* in this context shows an understanding of what I mean by the building up of confidence based on experience, at the time of maximal dependence, before the enjoyment and employment of separation and independence.

I suggest that the time has come for psychoanalytic theory to pay tribute to this *third area*, that of cultural experience which is a derivative of play. Psychotics insist on our knowing about it, and it is of great importance in our assessment of the lives rather than the health of human beings. (The other two areas are inner or personal psychic reality and the actual world with the individual living in it.)

#### SUMMARY

I have tried to draw attention to the importance both in theory and in practice of a third area, that of play, which expands into creative living and into the whole cultural life of man. This third area has been contrasted with inner or

personal psychic reality and with the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived. I have located this important area of *experience* in the potential space between the individual and the environment, that which initially both joins and separates the baby and the mother when the mother’s love, displayed or made manifest as human reliability, does in fact give the baby a sense of trust or of confidence in the environmental factor.

Attention is drawn to the fact that this potential space is a highly variable factor (from individual to individual), whereas the two other locations – personal or psychic reality and the actual world – are relatively constant, one being biologically determined and the other being common property.

The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.

By contrast, exploitation of this area leads to a pathological condition in which the individual is cluttered up with persecutory elements of which he has no means of ridding himself.

It may perhaps be seen from this how important it can be for the analyst to recognize the existence of this place, the only place where play can start, a place that is at the continuity-contiguity moment, where transitional phenomena originate.

My hope is that I have begun to answer my own question: where is cultural experience located?