The Many Meanings of Play

Childhood Play and Adult Life

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> Man is made of God's playing and that is the best part of him. Therefore men and women should live life accordingly and play the noblest games.
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> —Plato, *Laws*

> All the world's a stage
> And all the men and women merely players:
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts.
>
> —Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

At a specific point in the child's development the term *make-believe* becomes significant. It is a wonderful term, to my knowledge not found in other languages. It connotes an activity that achieves a temporary suspension of disbelief without endangering the capacity of the ego to test reality. In adult life this capacity leads to our enjoyment of the theater. Kris (1943) called this "regression under the control of the ego." It matters a great deal whether the realm of make-believe is separated from what children know to be real and whether it is associated with pleasure. Only then can children make full use of the human capacity for symbolization. They can relive what has disturbed them without being overwhelmed once more by the trauma.

To the child's therapist, play offers two ways of intervention. The analyst can interpret the play by telling the child in secondary process language what the symbolic meaning of the play is. Or he or she can enter the play and suggest modifications within the play itself. Ekstein (1954) called this type of intervention "interpretation within the metaphor. " Many disturbed children who cannot respond to interpretations can accept them when they are made "within the metaphor." A rereading of Berta Bornstein's (1949) classic Frankie case suggests to me that she might have been more effective with her young patient had she entered into his hospital play where mother and children got burned rather than attempted to interpret the play to him.

Psychoanalysts are particularly sensitive to this point in development because, as Loewald (1979) has pointed out, the analytic relationship has a close relationship to play: "it seems to exist for its own sake and at the same time to be a rehearsal for real life" (p. 156). To undergo psychoanalysis, the analysand must be capable of participating in the analytic process, at the same time remaining aware that transference has a make-believe aspect.

Play and Work

After latency sets in, the capacity to play gradually fades. Rule-governed games replace the free play of earlier childhood. The games of latency children increasingly become adaptations to reality. Anyone who has played checkers or chess with children during the latency period will have noticed how tempted they are to move their figures in ways other than prescribed and how often they cheat. These tendencies represent a difficulty in transition from the realm of fantasy to the world of reality.

Unlike play, work requires a greater capacity to function according to the reality principle. The first five years can be considered the years of play, but after school begins, the area of work increasingly takes on a greater significance. We obtain evidence that the transition has not been successful when learning disabilities set in or the child is unable to concentrate or has a short attention span. Reports of analysands who have these difficulties usually indicate that psychologically they were not engaged in the school activity, but as a rule they cannot tell us about the fantasies they had. We surmise that in such children the capacity to fantasize was not conscious.

I must add, however, that fantasy is not as a rule absent from work. We know how important it is for many students that they are their teacher's favorite and how relationships to other children are governed by sibling rivalry. We also know how frequently oedipal fantasies are transferred to the workplace. But important differences remain. Work must yield a usable product. It has a coercive power by itself and disregards our wishes for pleasure. Nor can it be terminated at will like play.

Clinical Examples

How do we trace childhood play into adult life as related in clinical practice?

Case 1. The mother of a two-year-old son sought analysis for a variety of somatic complaints, phobic reactions, excessive drinking, and marital tension. What emerged in the course of the analysis was her inability to play with her child. She could minister to his bodily needs, but she could not play with him. She also recalled disliking the nursing experience and curtailing it as soon as possible. In the third year of her analysis she recalled the following dream: I am taking her out of the consultation room into a room full of boys' toys, trains, guns, and so on. As we are standing there, I begin to *play* with her breasts. She notices to her surprise that my advances are not as horrifying to her as she would have imagined and even to some extent are welcome. Associations to this dream revealed that the room was the room of her twin brother, a twin that she had felt was preferred by both her mother and her father.

The patient reconstructed her past as having been physically cared for by her mother and a housekeeper but was put into the playpen with her twin brother without anyone paying attention to them. A photograph existed in which the two of them were looking out of the playpen with a forlorn look. She did not believe that they ever succeeded in playing together; as far as her memory allowed, he played with guns and trains while she played with a dollhouse. For this patient, playing was associated with separation from the brother and the establishment of her own gender identity. Playing was a solitary activity associated with the pain of not being a boy.

In her adolescence, when the brother became rebellious, her own relationship to her father greatly improved and she became his favorite. She recalled envying her brother's toys, and we were able to connect her inability to play with her child to this early envy. As an adolescent she had won the love of her father, and my "playing" with her mitigated the envy. She herself did not "play" sexually with her husband, nor did he with her. The dream may have been a link between forgotten childhood play and her inhibited adult sexuality.

As an adult she was a lawyer by profession but awkward in company, relying on her husband for social contacts. I was impressed by the fact that the early failure to play with her brother reappeared in adulthood as an inability to initiate discourse as well as sexual relationships.

Analysis showed that the patient's husband was a displacement from the twin brother she

envied and wished to control. She recalled feeding and putting her dolls to sleep, and indeed she was a more devoted mother than her own mother had been. In analysis her capacity to care continually for children markedly improved, but I was unable to confirm Kestenberg's observation (1968, p. 471) that the recovery of doll play heralded a change in sexual frigidity.

Among analysands who are also therapists and parents of young children we encounter the opposite problem. Fearful lest they block their child's future creativity, they permit play to encroach upon reality. They do not tell their children that there are conditions under which splashing of water is not allowed or that going to bed cannot always be treated like a game.

Case 2. A young woman had led a life of stern duty, spending her days in the library while other children played. Eventually she succumbed to depression and was helped out of it by an older man. They established both a sexual relationship and a partnership. Recalling the first year of this relationship, she spoke of it as a year of play. Whatever they did together was considered not work but play. The case suggests that in a state of being in love, with regression back to childhood, the dichotomy between work and play so characteristic of adult life is undone.

Case 3. A middle-aged, professionally successful man had difficulty in arriving at work on time. He was tempted to read science fiction instead of attending to his professional duties. He recently had bought a computer and was trying to master it. He felt interested in the computer only as long as it was a toy, but when it came to solving a problem he lost interest. Whenever he was not working, he felt he was "stealing time." As a child he was burdened by the need to take care of severely traumatized parents. He did not recall having had any toys or engaging in any childhood play. In the course of the analysis he recognized that when he was "stealing time," he was making up for lost opportunities to play during his childhood. It slowly dawned on us that the computer represented a toy he wanted to play with, not share it with others and not allow it to become a tool for work. Claude Shannon was his hero. He brought me the following excerpt from the January 1990 edition of *Scientific American*:

> Claude E. Shannon can't sit still. We're at his home, a stuccoed Victorian edifice overlooking a lake north of Boston, and I'm trying to get him to recall how he came up with the theory of information. But Shannon, who is a boyish 73, with an elfish grin and a shock of snowy hair, is tired of expounding on his past. Wouldn't I rather see his toys?

> Without waiting for an answer, and over the mild protest of his wife, Betty, he leaps from his chair and disappears into the other room. When I catch up with him, he proudly shows me his seven chess-playing machines, gasoline-powered pogostick, hundred-bladed jack-knife, two-seated unicycle and countless other marvels. Some of his personal creations—such as a juggling W.C. Fields mannequin and a computer called throbac that calculates in Roman numerals are a bit dusty and in disrepair, but Shannon seems as delighted with everything as a 10-year-old on Christmas morning.

My patient envied Shannon; he saw genius as never having to give up play in favor of work. It may well be that the high value we all assign to creativity is at least due in part to the fact that insofar as we are creative, we do not have to go through the painful process of giving up play in favor of work.

Case 4. A professionally successful woman had great difficulty in doing the paperwork necessary for billing. Other activities that dealt with numbers also caused extreme displeasure. The symptom was overdetermined, but one of the relevant issues was that dealing with figures represented reality without any fantasy compensations. She eventually found a way of doing these chores provided she could listen to music at the same time. The case illustrates the difficulty many have with an activity that is entirely devoid of pleasure or one that is undertaken only on behalf of the reality principle.

Other Cases. My next two samples are composites of a number of cases. They pertain to the problem of the regulation of leisure in the life of a couple. A woman said, "It's the baseball [or football] season. He's glued to the idiot-box yelling and screaming. You can't speak to him and sex is out of the question until the season is over." Another woman: "I like to go to museums and would love to go to Paris, but he hates museums with a passion and can't stand visiting a country where he doesn't speak the language, so it's back to the boring seashore. I know from experience that if I fight him on this point, we will stay in the city and there will be only work."

Here are basic differences in the way couples use their leisure. Leisure is the adult's area of play. Many couples settle the problem of how leisure is to be spent before their wedding, but there are circumstances in which the choice of the partner based on pressing intrapsychic needs cannot be determined by similarities of interest, and this factor becomes a source of marital difficulty only later. In common parlance, the term *toy* has undergone expansion. Computers, cameras, and even cars are referred to as *toys*. If the partner does not participate, the term *toy* is often used with derision.

Discussion

Psychoanalysts today are heirs to two traditions. One comes from Freud (1920) and was reemphasized by Anna Freud (1965). Here play is in the service of mastery. In this view the main difficulty many people have is in relinquishing play and its manifold satisfactions for work under the jurisdiction of the reality principle. The other tradition comes from Winnicott (1971), who emphasized that play is a precious possession in danger of being overwhelmed when the environment of the child is not responsive. In his view, play is the beginning of all creative capacities. One of the functions of the analyst is to help analysands who have lost the capacity to play regain it. These patients can work, but they cannot enjoy life outside of work. With the loss of the capacity to play the ability to enjoy leisure has also been curtailed. The cases I have presented show difficulties in both directions.

I am led to differentiate four types of problems that therapists encounter in the area of play and fantasy. In the first group are very disturbed patients who never developed the capacity to use symbols or who lost the capacity to differentiate between signifier and signified. Among those will be the children who never reached the capacity to play on a symbolic level. Survivors of concentration camps often reported the cessation of all fantasy life. With the abandonment of hope fantasy ceased.

In the second group are those who repressed fantasy in their childhood and who, in order not to recognize the amount of hostility directed at them from their caretakers, repressed fantasies in favor of a monotonous existence. It is in this category that I would place those patients—often but not necessarily always perverse—whose sexual activity has a rigid form from which no deviations are allowed.

In the third group I would place those who function in real life, but reality pales in comparison to the world of fantasy. They must continually sacrifice possible real satisfactions to fantasy satisfactions.

In the fourth group are the healthy, who do not fear their fantasies and yet are not unduly dominated by them; by their capacity to use symbols, they can maintain a connection between the unconscious and the rest of their personality. In this group I would expect to find a capacity to use

humor that is not a disguise for aggressive wishes.

Fantasy

One of Freud's important contributions to the understanding of human nature was the awareness of the difficulty with which humanity makes the transition from the pleasure principle to the reality principle. The change takes place slowly, painfully, and incompletely. If we are better psychologists than the thinkers of the nineteenth century, it is due in no small measure to our understanding of the equilibria and disequilibria that take place in most people in their struggle between the pull of fantasy life and the push of reality pressures. As early as 1908, Freud noted that fantasies proceed from deprivation and longing. He observed that such fantasies can become unconscious; and once unconscious, they become pathogenic and find expression in symptoms. Such unconscious fantasies have a close relation to the sexual life and provide sexual satisfaction during masturbation.

Arlow (1969a), continuing Freud's trend of thought, concluded: "In one part of our mind we are daydreaming all the time, or at least all the time we are awake and a good deal of the time we are asleep. . . . Every instinctual fixation is represented at some level of mental life or by a group of unconscious fantasies" (pp. 5-6). In another paper (1969b) Arlow suggested that the outside world conveys to us a continuous screen of perceptual data, but at the same time another screen passes before our inner eye from our inner world. Because both coexist, outside reality can often be misinterpreted by the pressure of inner reality.

In discussing fantasy we face the same problem we encountered when I discussed play. At what level of development should we speak of fantasy? Must the child know the difference between fantasy and reality before we call his or her activity fantasizing? Melanie Klein and her followers such as Susan Isaacs (1948) and Joan Riviere (1936) speak of infants as fantasizing. At that stage they are clearly not capable of differentiating between fantasy and reality.

I would like to follow the lead of Sandler (1963, 1970), who emphasized that to deserve its name fantasy can only take place through the intervention of the ego. Only the ego can differentiate fantasy from hallucination. This differentiation is relevant not only for the Kleinian concept but also for Arlow's concept of unconscious fantasy. As long as the fantasy is unconscious, no differentiation

takes place between fantasizing and hallucinating. Only when the fantasy is made conscious and the powers of the ego are brought to bear upon it can an individual accept that some images are memories and others only fantasy. Clinical experience teaches us daily how painful it is to recognize that what is psychically real can nevertheless be a fantasy.

Along the same lines Sandler (1970) indicates that the sexual fantasies of children are not really fantasies but beliefs. When they undergo repression, as Freud had discovered, they retain in the unconscious the status of belief. Only when they emerge from the unconscious can they be worked over in such a way that the ego accepts, and then forces the id to accept, that these are fantasies and not reflections of reality.

Although the typical analysand's fantasies are connected with current or future wishes, this need not always be the case. I am familiar with a patient in whom narcissistic injuries played an unusual role: all his fantasies were directed toward the past. Typically he would recall a situation in which he behaved in a cowardly fashion or was rejected by a woman, and rework it to give it a happy ending. If this process is successful, it transforms painful memories into screen memories. Nietzsche's dictum, "Yes says my memory, no says my pride; my pride wins," is relevant here.

I recall a patient who had the fantasy that he would win a Nobel Prize. It took a great deal of work for both of us to realize that though in deference to me and the reality principle he called it a fantasy, it was in fact a belief. He expected to be treated by me and his coworkers as if he had already won the prize.

Neither Freud nor Arlow drew a sharp line of demarcation between fantasy and imagination. But to Winnicott fantasy is sterile, whereas dream and play and imagination are productive. An account by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa throws light on this difference:

> I have always, since a child, had the compulsion to augment the world with fictitious personalities, dreams of mine rigorously constructed, visualized with photographic clarity, understood right into their souls. I was only five years old when already, as an isolated child who wanted only to be so, I used to take as my companions various figures from my dreaming—one Captain Thibeaut, one Chevalier de Pas—and others whom I have now forgotten, whose forgetting, like my imperfect recollection of those two, is one of the great regrets of my life.
>
> This looks like simply the kind of childish imagination which amuses itself by attributing life to dolls. But it was more: I did not need any dolls to help me conceive those figures intensely. Clear and visible in my constant

> dreaming, realities precisely human to me—any doll, being unreal, would have spoiled them. They were people.
>
> What is more, this tendency did not go away with childhood. It developed in adolescence, took root as that grew, became finally the natural form of my spirit. Today I have no personality: all that is human in me I have pided among the various authors of whose work I have been the executant. I am today the point of reunion of a small humanity which is only mine. (Gibbons, 1979, p. 10)

To judge from this excerpt, imagination is not only more intense than fantasy but also populated with people. To imagine is to have an object relationship, albeit a purely internal one. This capacity must be developed not only among artists but among those who read fiction for pleasure, listen to music, or go to a museum; in fact it may well be the bridge between the play of childhood and the creativity of adults.

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Notes

1 This chapter was a paper read at the Division of Psychoanalysis (39), American Psychological Spring Meeting, Chicago, April 10-14, 1991.