The Many Meanings of Play

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Its Role in Child Analysis, Its Fate in Adult Analysis

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Table of Contents

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Freud's masterful analysis of the little boy's play in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) is so convincing that one begins to take the insight for granted, as if it were obvious even before genius stumbled on it. In the Freudian world we live in, originality and cliché often become confused, as if the original texts had been irretrievably lost and only jargon remained.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud, like an anthropologist in a primitive setting (childhood in this instance), observed the social rituals and then tried to make sense out of what he saw. A boy confronted with the reality of temporary separations from his mother amused himself with an object attached to a string, a pull toy. He threw the object away from himself and then by pulling on the string retrieved it. The observation seemed simple enough. The interpretation, now well known to jaded psychoanalysts after many readings of this particular text, requires complex reasoning and is not at all obvious until eyes have become steeped in Freudian ways of looking. If the play is seen as a condensation of the manifest and the latent content, what is being "said" directly can be sifted from what is being implied. From this Freudian perspective the child's overt behavior and the covert inner dialogue can be reconstructed as follows:

> I am alone. Mommy has left me. I am suddenly sad, angry, bereft, but also hopeful of her return; and besides, I have resources of my own. What if I throw this thing away and pull it back again? As I throw it, I will release some of my anger. My sadness will diminish as I take control and lord it over a thing that is even littler than I am in relation to grown-ups. I can even pretend that I am the thrown-away thing about to be rescued by the heroic human (myself, to be sure, in one of my many alter egos) who controls the string. I can even pretend that I am throwing my mother away, and I may or may not rescue her, depending on how forgiving or unforgiving I feel. Play is wonderful. Mother will never guess the intrigues I've been scheming up behind her back.

This partial reconstruction of the play reveals a wealth of complex mental mechanisms that may not be visible at first glance. The play's manifest gymnastics seem to express, but also disguise and even hide, the unconscious mental *activities* of the player. To do justice to the complexity of its meanings, psychoanalytic concepts such as identification, unconscious fantasies, symbolism,

displacement, repression, the translation of passive experience into active, have to be invoked. Is play therefore a melange of psychic activities that includes all facets of the mind, conscious and unconscious (symbolism, affects, defense mechanisms)? Such a comprehensive definition would tend to obscure what is unique about play, not differentiating it sufficiently from its mental bedfellows—fantasy, dream, defense. Before going any further, I shall attempt to define play, emphasizing its unique qualities rather than what it shares with other mental phenomena.

Toward a Definition of Play

Whereas the modern definition of *play* as "games, persion" captures the ludic nature of the activity, the word derives from the Old English *plega*, which implied a less sportive intent—to strike a blow (*asc-plega* = playing with spears, that is, fighting with spears; or *sword-plega* = fighting with swords [Skeat, 1910]). How etymology shifts the meaning of a deadly earnest word used to describe warlike activity to the totally new sense that implies action as "only playing," so to speak, is one of the ironies of the history of language. Even *playing* the cymbals or the piano owes its meaning to violence, in the sense that one *strikes* the instrument. The history of the concept of sublimation may lie hidden in these shifting meanings: the psychological journey from swordplay to the bloodless percussion of musical instruments.

If we follow these etymological leads, play would seem to have begun with actions that were anything but "playful" in the modern usage of the word. *Action*, however, would seem to be the hallmark of play in ancient or modern usage, certainly common to swordplay or child's play—but action of a unique kind. *Action*, for a psychoanalyst, is a complicated, intriguing word. If we borrow one of Freud's early insights about source, aim, impetus, and object, new light will fall on this discussion. Freud (1915) said that human psychological events could be broken into components that would allow a dissection of the phenomena that might otherwise escape attention. Human motivation has a source (in erogenous zones), an aim (in the actions that bring about satisfaction), an impetus (the quantitative factor), and an object (the least stable of the variables, according to Freud). The subject matter of play would seem to be primarily aims and their vicissitudes. This is not to say that play and action are synonyms. Sucking, one of the aims of the mouth, is not an example of playing. And yet an infant can "play" with food, much to the exasperation of mothers who overvalue

nutrition and undervalue exploration. The difference between eating, sucking, and swallowing and activities of the mouth that might be called playful (such as blowing bubbles, whistling) surely lies in the *aim* and its vicissitudes. "You can't whistle and chew grain" captures the conflict between aims of instant gratification and aims in which postponement, delay, experimentation, detour, and compromise lead to other horizons of pleasure.

Although we can speak of play according to its multiple functions, or according to developmental aspects (presymbolic or symbolic), or according to its contacts with other mental activities (fantasy, drives), the essential ingredient in the definition from a *formal* point of view would seem to be *action*—not all of action, but discrete types of action in which immediate gratification of instinct is not the goal, and exploration and even creation of reality above and beyond immediate gratification take precedence over desire. In this sense, play, which ironically is not supposed to be "for real," is the greatest ally of the reality principle in its struggle with the pleasure principle.

A working definition of play, therefore, would suggest that play in humans or animals is actions that do not seek immediate gratification of desire or the obvious solution of a problem but seem rather to explore alternate or multiple possibilities of experience. If reflex is the shortest distance—a straight line between the two points, stimulus and response—play would seem to be the opposite of reflex, a protean defiance of the reflex arc in favor of expanded horizons, in which new meanings, new experiences, can be explored. In humans, as opposed to animals, play can explore its options with the assistance of thought and fantasy. It is this cooperation between the actions of play and the other psychic realms of thought and fantasy that makes play the great window into the psyche that the child analyst can exploit so profitably. In the strictest sense, however, play should not be confused with thought or fantasy, even when it is inextricably bound up with them. A psychoanalytic definition of play would narrow the meaning to the realm of aims and their vicissitudes. Even the concept of playing with words or playing with ideas (the hallmark of formal thought, according to Piaget) should not intimidate us or force us to relinquish the core of the definition, since these examples imply internalized *actions* (thought itself being compared to trial action by Freud). If action has a complicated history from its birth in the reflex arc to maturity in decisive behavior, becoming a slave of the unconscious all too often in periods of acting out, it

nevertheless has a creative workshop called play where the future can be worked on before it happens. To confine the definition in this manner need not restrict it: if play is neither acting out nor fully realized action, it is nevertheless the crucible in which make-believe reaches toward belief and doubt advances toward conviction.

My thesis gets support from developmental facts: when the adolescent mind develops the more sophisticated hypothetico-deductive reasoning or, as Flavell (1963, p. 202) would put it, when preoperational and operational cognition yield to the higher level formal operations, play also recedes, and playful thought takes over. Play has become *internalized* as the action-oriented childish mind grows up.

To illustrate this definition in action, I shall construct a metaphor of the mind at play. Consider a pond in moonlight. The light plays with the surface of the water, illuminating facet by facet as it studies the subject (I have anthropomorphized the scene in the interest of making a point). Let us go a step further with this metaphor. Let us compare the moon with the mind and the surface of the pond with reality. Let us add one further complication and we will be ready to put this metaphor to work. Let us assume that the moonlight comes not only from the surface of the moon but also from hidden depths of the moon. The mind (moon) with all its conscious and unconscious surfaces (structures) explores (plays with) the textures of reality. One could argue that the essential element in play (whether mind or moonlight) is not moon or mind or light or pond but the action of the beam that allows multiple points of contact to be compared, contrasted, explored, integrated, processed, *played with*.

In strict psychological terms, the play of the boy in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not the sum of the defense mechanisms (repression, displacement, identification) or the use of fantasy or symbolization per se but the action that creates a loss and then undoes it. If the boy were not two but twenty- two years old, the reaction to the loss would have been different. If we compare and contrast two- and twenty-two-year-old adaptations to reality, the meaning of play will become clearer. The twenty-two-year-old, confronted with separation from a loved one, will not represent his loss with a thrown-away inanimate object that can be retrieved by pulling a string. Why not? When we can answer that question, we will have gone a long way toward understanding the function and

unraveling the mystery of play.

Before we can understand the maturity of the twenty-two-year-old, we need to consider the immaturity of the fifteen-month-old approaching the final stages of sensorimotor intelligence. Jean Piaget (Flavell, 1963, p. 85) defined six stages of sensorimotor intelligence between zero and eighteen months of age. A fifteen-month-old who is developing normally will be approaching stage 5 or 6, cognitively speaking. A description of one of Piaget's classical experiments will illuminate the essence of these critical stages of cognitive development. Picture a fifteen-month-old, a ball, a tunnel, and an adult testing the intelligence of the youngster. The ball is thrown through the tunnel. If the child has reached stage 5 on the sensorimotor development scale, she will crawl through the tunnel following the path of the ball to retrieve it. If the child has reached stage 6 on the sensorimotor scale, she will not need to trace the path of the ball by mimicking its journey through the tunnel with her own body. She will simply go around the tunnel and retrieve the ball at the other end. By eighteen months (stage 6 sensorimotor) the child's mind has achieved a simple yet astounding sophistication. It has internalized the action of the ball in the tunnel, deconstructed it sufficiently that it no longer has to retrace the ball's journey with the child's body; she can retrace the journey figuratively with the mind and save the body the extra effort. The eighteen-month-old mind has learned to grasp two displacements at once, Piaget would say, something the fifteen- month-old mind is incapable of.

It is this startling facility of the mind to juggle several ideas at once that makes human beings *the* symbol maker and separates them so dramatically from other species. (Even the most intelligent animals reach stage 5 on the sensorimotor intelligence scale, but never complete the leap into stage 6, which would put symbolism within their grasp.) What is symbolism, after all, but the mind's parsimonious way of getting one mental product to stand for many? Humanity's highest achievement, symbol production, has a humble origin in sensorimotor manual labor. If the symbol crawls out of a crucible of action when the mind is eighteen months old, what is its relation to action afterward? If thought is trial action, the mind seems to become more *thoughtful* as it matures, less prone to impulsive action. There does, however, seem to be a major transitional period from the dawn of symbolization at eighteen months to its full maturity in adulthood when the mind takes an intermediary position between impulse/action and symbol/reflex, which seems to be characterized by a symbolizing process that is half thought, half action.

Play and a child's deliberations about the nature of his own needs and the dictates of reality do not take place in some inner psychological theater that is removed from the experiential props of everyday life. On the contrary, a child sets up his proscenium arch in full view of parents and peers and rehearses his symbols and actions out in the open. In this prototype of all repertory theaters the mind rehearses the first drafts of dramas that will engage its attention in revised forms for a lifetime. If the mind at stage 5 of its sensorimotor life needs to drag the body through the tunnel for a period of time until at stage 6 it finally gets the point and learns to do it figuratively rather than literally, the mind, in this transitional period characterized by *playing*, insists on action as if symbol alone could not express the full story of the child's experience. The symbols, after all, are an *inheritance* and can seem to be passively received until the child acts on them, plays with them, and makes them his own.

In this intermediate, transitional period of playing, the child *takes action*. Everything that might be perceived or received passively has to be taken possession of *actively*: the Oedipus complex, for instance, to oversimplify it greatly, can be experienced as a *humiliation* at the hands of sexual aggressive giants or as an *education* by loving pedagogues, a leading forth of the child's sexual aggressive energies in a socially acceptable manner. The child relies on play to accomplish these active aims. The adult uses other resources.

The intermediate phase I am proposing has no boundaries, but by adolescence and adulthood, play as the significant mode that young Homo sapiens uses to titrate emotion with—play as one of the major yardsticks of reality—will wane and formal thinking, as Flavell (1963, p. 85) has called it, will take over. Formal thinking, or hypothetic-deductive thinking which is the hallmark of adolescent cognitive development, allows "action" to take place within the confines of the mind rather than partially outside the mind in concrete manipulations of the environment. If thought is trial action as Freud (1911) so felicitously named it, it is only in adolescence that the "trials" really take place in fantasy alone, not bolstered by the external props of the environment. That is not as absolute as these statements would suggest. I would like to introduce the reader to two examples of play, one in child analysis, the other in adult analysis, to extend this discussion further.

Consider action and affect and their development. The infant's major if not only communicative signals lie in this realm of action-affect. As Wolff (1967) has shown, the cries are orchestrated either to alarm the mother with an emergency appeal or to just nag her with fussy sounds. Out of these fussy or alarming appeals develops what Spitz (1965) has called the archaic dialogue, that preverbal mixture of love and mime out of whose soil basic trust sprouts and flourishes. Symbolism will inherit this protosymbolic world; ideally the archaic dialogue will pass the communicative baton to the much less archaic linguistic dialogue; and development will proceed, though not as smoothly as this outline suggests: the world of action-affect does not surrender itself so totally to its new master (language). Skirmishes, tantrums, even rebellions are the developmental rule, and these outbreaks get resolved in the courtrooms of play, a small claims court, if you will, where the Lilliputian Homo sapiens airs grievances and recovers pride.

The above paradigm of child development is a stick figure that bears about as much resemblance to the real thing as a child's figure drawing does to the complexity of anatomical structure. But I want to find a place for *action* in development, and I need to talk in caricature for a moment or the complexity of psychoanalytic detail will obscure my argument. Rather than talk of action-affect I could have focused on id-ego and the mutuality of influences or on instinct and its vicissitudes (aim primarily), but my intention is to stay focused on action for a moment and one of its tributaries— play. In a nutshell (a modest container that seems, however, to have little trouble holding immodest human-size ideas), my only point is that when archaic dialogue and linguistic dialogue go awry, the actions that support them feel false and a human being feels disenfranchised from herself, from her own center of action. The sole purpose of play is to recover this *sense of agency* so that the child feels rooted again in her own power to communicate effectively and adequately.

Alex was a boy whose developmental vessel got battered from all sides. His archaic dialogue with his mother was endangered from the beginning, his mother confessing that the ordinary acts of holding him, rocking him, reading him a bedtime story, were often in conflict for her, given her own memories of childhood. The maternal instinct was supplied vicariously by a loving primitive housekeeper who, however, left suddenly when Alex was three never to return despite promises to the contrary. The father was well-meaning, but his lifelong unresolved oedipal battle with his father

found a new home in his relationship with his son, an arrangement that fanned the flames of Alex's preoedipal disappointments with the bellows of oedipal sexuality and aggression. When analysis began, this little boy was a boastful, hungry, hyperactive hellion close to expulsion from nursery school for grabbing the penises of his peers in a wild effort to find some power—some place to bolster his nonexistent self-esteem. He desperately needed to play with an adult and relearn how *to be* and how *to act*. His analysis, which was conducted in the classical Freud-Bornstein manner, could be described in terms of defense, resistance, transference, but again I wish to focus complete attention on play and action only, to the extent that this is possible.

Throughout the analysis, which lasted until he was ten years old, play with boats was a most significant activity that reflected his conflicts vividly. Their first appearance in the analysis was heralded as the transference began to take hold: the analyst was Dr. Doolittle, a wheelable bookshelf became a boat, and Alex at the helm of this makeshift vessel explored the foreign terrain of the playroom, taming the wild things that transference threw up on the shores of consciousness. The wild things that invaded his dreams at night could be leashed to play in this manner, calming this frantic child's anxieties considerably. A few months later, he brought a toy boat from home and began to play with it. A storm developed. The boat was in great danger. But we managed to get it to port —"the terminal," as he called it. Alex turned to me after the boat was safely in the terminal and said, "Maybe you can become a person terminal for me." This was Alex's most direct statement of trust in the transference to date.

As months went by, Alex began to trust me more and more, relying on play as much as language to carry the ball, emotionally speaking, for him. A major revelation, for instance, was introduced in linguistic form, but the working through in affect and action required play. Let me be clearer. The emotional revelation was that Maria, the beloved housekeeper, had left him, never to return. He counted the days. Analyst and analysand shared the poignancy of these revelations not only through dialogue but through play. Alex made a boat out of wood, carving it for many sessions, using the playroom as a miniature workshop. He carved, he painted, and then he named the boat *The Catch-up*, painting the red wood proudly with white letters. *The Catch-up* had multiple meanings, multiple voyages to sail into the past, so to speak, to revisit old psychological reefs and developmental rapids, to repair old wounds, and to plan new trips into the future. The analysis made several psychic

voyages in the ensuing years and eventually termination was the last port of call, a very emotional final voyage. Alex was by now a socially competent, academically superior ten-year-old boy.

Termination was a graduation, an achievement, but it was also, when perceived neurotically, an abandonment, a rejection, a repetition of Maria's treachery. Once again Alex relied on play, not merely dialogue, to represent his conflicts. At first he thought he had no say in the matter of termination. He would be told after the fact. The analyst would abandon him. His rage at this state of affairs made him hate the analyst so much that he believed the relationship would be utterly destroyed. We would become strangers to one another. This is the way his relationship with Maria had ended, and he expected it would be the same with me. This murderous rage needed to be harnessed to language, to art, and to play. He made a portrait of me with a broken hand, a graphic attempt to hold onto me even while dismembering me. He also made another boat out of wood. With typical latency intrigue this boat was given a name in code—1160 5 413, numbers that represented his initials and mine and my office address. Significantly, this boat was left unfinished unlike *The Catch-up*, which had been modeled rather well and painted completely.

The boat surely had several meanings, all of which it is not necessary to analyze in this context. The point being stressed here is that making a "termination" boat was an *act* that gave Alex an extra modicum of control over the fate of his analysis that mere language would not have afforded him. Clearly, this boat did not hold as much emotional significance for Alex as *The Catch-up*. Language and thought were fast becoming the abstract "vessels" that could contain most of his affects and conflicts. The concrete boats of play would perhaps soon be unnecessary.

From the Analysis of a Twenty-three-Year-Old Man

If Alex was ready to relinquish his concrete hold of play, relatively speaking, Philip, at age twenty-three, seemed to be holding on to an aspect of play that was alarming to himself and a puzzle for him and his analyst to unravel.

As a boy, Philip had tried to resolve his considerable oedipal rivalry with his father and incestuous closeness to his mother with extreme passivity and masochistic tendencies: he seemed to relish being the butt of jokes, the victim of pranks. If there was a banana peel to slip on, he was sure

to locate it. One game he loved to play in latency was "lost child." He would hide. A girlfriend would seek and eventually find him. When his girlfriend wished to reverse the order of the play and have Philip pursue and find her as the lost child, he was unable to relinquish his passivity even briefly and lost many a friendship because of his inflexibility. The alarming part was that now as an adult Philip was repeating his pattern in his relationship with women: he had three lengthy relationships with women who loved him for his many endearing qualities but became exasperated when the sole sexual activity involved going to bed and Philip quickly falling asleep, much to his partners' consternation and frustration as they attempted to arouse the lost child from his neurotic slumber. Massive castration fears, panic at the thought of the female genital, premature ejaculations, all were kept in abeyance by this insistence on a kind of foreplay whose sole purpose was to derail the more adult versions of sexual play with neurotic persistence of infantile games. The term *pathological play* could be assigned to this variant from the usual developmental waning of infantile schemas (Steingart, 1983).

For Philip *action* seemed inextricably linked to oedipal crime and massive oedipal retaliation. The whole subject was repressed so deeply in his unconscious that his abhorrence of the female genital was the mere tip of a hidden iceberg whose configurations were totally unknown to him for years of analysis. Again I am stressing action and its meaning rather than all the other components of this complex psyche. In this context it is significant that Philip remembered his childhood as devoid of football or baseball, as if he sensed that only in the rough and tumble of playful rivalry with his family could his oedipal demons have been exorcised. Whereas Alex could use play to redefine his own sense of agency, Philip's play seemed to betray a triumph of passive aims over active ones that would persist into adulthood.

Conclusion

One of the major developmental and psychological tasks of the human animal is to take action out of the realm of infantile omnipotence, strip it of its primitive magical qualities, and make it a tool of the rational mind. This developmental line could be called "from impulse to volition and decision." Action and symbolism seem to grow up together, so to speak, in the sensorimotor period of development, so well outlined by Piaget. But the story does not end at eighteen months obviously.

The mind and the body continue to express themselves in symbols and in actions throughout life. Freud, in many papers, particularly in "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (1914), outlined the links between memory recovered in words as opposed to memory repeated in neurotic action. The whole psychoanalytic theory of acting out is based on the connection between transference and memory, acting out being that portion of the transference that the patient is unable to put into words.

In childhood, play is the vessel into which affect and action can be poured when the vessels of language are not able to contain the entire psychic volume. In adulthood, play does not hold such a developmental urgency for the mind in conflict. It is, however, a psychological attitude that never vanishes completely and can probably be invoked by the human mind under normal or pathological circumstances whenever symbolism gets weary of pure abstraction and needs to remind itself of the action world of sweat and blood it sprang from.

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