

# Playing as Personal Ontogenesis

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Starting as we do from psychoneurotic illness and with ego defences related to anxiety that arises out of 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*. (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.133).

As Winnicott (1971/2005) foregrounds the primal encounter of meeting life beyond epistemic-optics (notions of health and pathology), he posits a surplus, as yet unimagined in psychoanalysis: “what life itself is about” (p.133).

Rid of its scientific-medical identification, pathology carries an intrinsic reference to *pathos*. As disease gives way to (existential) dis-ease, life itself becomes the event, poignant and evocative. Have we entered the aesthetic domain? Does the task of thinking life necessitate an aesthetic theory of psychoanalysis? The writing, as it attempts to locate itself in this surplus, makes a return to Winnicott via the problematic of playing. It speculates if the notion of playing as he has scripted it can enable a transition from psychopathology to expression and in the process refashion relations between the domains of psychoanalysis and aesthetics. Aesthetics is not envisaged here as a doctrine expounding beauty or taste but as *aesthesis* that “refers both to the phenomena of sensuous perception that relate to the five senses and to sensuousness in general” (Brudziska, 2010, p. 9).

Winnicott’s seminal work *Playing and Reality* gives to us an unusual coupling in the title. Winnicott (1971/2005) repeatedly underscores the need for psychoanalysis to study the subject of playing not as a derivative (sublimation or regression) but in its own right: “It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self” (pp. 72-73).

Conceived thus, one’s self is not already formed, it *comes to be*. It exists as a potential that *comes to be* expressed through spontaneous activity *in playing*. It *comes to be* composed in an amalgam of relations that get crafted when one is immersed in reality. As Winnicott (1971/2005) emphasizes a world that is objectively perceived, he opens the self to an outside, foregrounding its immersion in a *reality beyond* internal objects. Thinking this exteriority, I posit, is of increasing concern to Winnicott as he draws a continuum among transitional phenomena, playing and cultural experience, a consistent moving outward in “the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate but interrelated” (p.3). Ongoing acts of relating to the world will involve acting upon it and being acted upon in turn, building on the prior transition from “omnipotent control to control by manipulation” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.12). Playing involves this active encounter with the outside, an imaginative maneuvering of objects and contingencies in a “potential space” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.55) between the self and world where a self *comes to be* composed in the distinct ways with which it inhabits reality. Playing is thus accorded an epistemic status. I refer to Guattari’s notion of “personal ontogenesis” (Guattari, 1992/1995, p.98), to further accentuate this formative character of playing. Guattari (1992/1995) speaks of “personal ontogenesis” (p.98) while exploring the theme of the emergence and politics of subjectivity which is effectuated in the placing of an individual within a

social field, “in direct contact with social life and the outside world” (Guattari, 1992/1995, pp. 98-99). An active expressive nexus is thus set up between the individual and the world. Playing foregrounds a similar dynamic. In playing, the self is immersed in a vital encounter with the world which furnishes the material that the self uses in idiosyncratic ways of engagement, making way for the “development of a personal pattern” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.4). This creative-immersive experiencing that marks playing is an essential quality of the self’s dwelling in the world, “a basic form of living” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p. 67). It underpins the task of self composition through a lifetime as continual transitions and renewals shape a self’s contours in encounters both immersive and expressive.

Furthermore, Winnicott (1971/2005) emphasizes using “the whole personality” (p.73) in playing and this can be instructive in detailing its immersive-creative character. Could this gesture towards the simultaneous involvement of body and mind, inside and outside in the receptive absorption that characterizes playing? Rooted in sensuous perception as opposed to conceptual thought, the aesthetic domain underscores a similar modality of being. Playing transports one to a self ‘lost’ in a moment (just as one ‘loses oneself’ in a poem or song). This ‘lost-ness’ is the texture of immersive experiencing where it is not possible to separate thought from action or body, animated with vibrant intensity, from mind. This mode of being that foregrounds receptive *experiencing* has a determinative character, gestured to by Winnicott (1965) in speaking of the “true self” (p.140) as grounded in bodily aliveness. It opens up a field between apperception and perception, “between primary creativity and objective perception” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.15) where a self composes itself. “It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.87). A non-compliant sensibility is at work driven by what can “feel real” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 148) making playing intrinsically satisfying, even as the self is plunged in the creative labor of finding a language/medium in which to express the flavors of singular experience.

Can one say that playing is aesthetic in its character? Does it open up a “potential space” (Winnicott, 1971/2005, p.55) in which the domains of psychoanalysis and aesthetics can enter into a dialogue? Simply put, this refers to a space yet-to-come, which has the potential to exist. Here, an aesthetic theory of psychoanalysis is rendered possible, actively thinking of expressive singularity and existential intensification, as selves in ongoing metamorphoses and personal mythopoesis consolidate distinctive ways of being, of being real, in reality.

## References

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