

THE PLACE OF "PLAY"

by GERALD J. GARGIULO

"On the seashores of endless worlds, children play." With this metaphor from the poet Tagore, D. W. Winnicott, in a remarkable work entitled: *Playing and Reality*, sets the stage for a special inquiry into what he considers the psychological-environmental "place" which functions as the bedrock from which such human experiences as art, religion, philosophy and psychology—in other words, the foundations of culture, arise. Eschewing either inner psychic reality or, alternatively, external reality in his search for this "place", Winnicott instead steadfastly builds his thesis on the developmental environmental experiences which make human play possible.

Winnicott begins his study by describing the interaction between mother and child as they begin to experience their separation from each other; the mother refinding her capacity to be separate and the child just beginning to discover it. If this process is carried out in what Winnicott has previously called a good enough mothering-environment, that is, where both child and mother go from relating to each other in terms of need gratification to what he calls "using" each other as truly separate objects, then separation in a paradoxical way is not a separation which condemns one to loneliness, but a different form of union. This happens because such interaction between the mothering environment and the child allows for the possibility of a new "potential space" where separation and union both exist. Winnicott makes much of the necessity to tolerate paradox if we are going to understand how mind comes to be. Thus the child has to "give up" the omnipotence of creating his parents' existence—that is, in his psyche, in order to find them as truly existing. If he is able to do this because the mothering environment is constant in its care and presence, then other people become first possible, then tolerable and finally to everyone's delight, promising. Promising because sustained separateness is the basis of a growing capacity for experiencing this "potential space", from which, in Winnicott's understanding, human play arises. It is a type of play between mother and child (and also, analogously between patient and analyst) which consumes neither party but rather becomes prototypal for man's symbolic world, that is, a capacity to share in a common culture—because of a shared symbolic world.

Continuing his study of "play", the author employs a perspective usually reserved for the existentialists: he asks, what is life all about. In words which every Freudian should be able to agree with, yet which too few of us employ, he notes: "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 become seductions unless based on a well established capacity in the individual person for total experience, for experience in the area of transitional phenomena." A capacity, in other words, for symbolic play satisfaction as well as instinctual gratification.

In order to make his meaning clearer and in particular his understanding of play, Winnicott notes that "cultural experiences are in direct continuity with play, the play of those who have not yet heard of games." By contrast, "failure of dependability or loss of object means to the child a loss of the play area, and loss (consequently) of meaningful symbol." Thus I believe that by play Winnicott means that in this potential space the child does not have to hold himself together but can let himself go, as it were, in order to refind himself again at a new moment: achieving a new capacity to experience himself as real and spontaneous rather than as false and compliant. The paradox is that in finding this new place he is also creating it. A place where "make-believe" is possible yet not frightening, where role playing becomes fun without becoming engulfing or overwhelming. A "place," to take a prosaic example, where teddy-bears talk and accomplish great feats—and where no one asks, especially mothers, who made the teddy bear? (We may note in passing that obviously Erik Erikson's notions of basic trust have been used and expanded upon in Winnicott's treatment.)

Thus Winnicott speaks of a third area between inner psychic reality and external reality; a "potential space" between the child and the mother-environment which is the place of play and from

(Continued on page 4)

THE PLACE OF "PLAY" (Continued from page 2)

which culture, as a particularly human possibility, is a derivative. In this potential space "between the subjective object and the object objectively perceived, between me-extensions and the not me" the child has maximally intense experiences. The cultural life of any person has its roots in this potential space and implicitly in the adaptive or non-adaptive mothering-environment. Within this dynamic, genetic context we can also appreciate sublimation as an historical and progressive achievement. It is in this potential space that the use and/or abuse of man's symbolic world, art, religion, philosophy and psychology are foreshadowed. In fact Winnicott has given psychoanalysis a new perspective in its study of various cultural phenomena, as well as of itself. For example, studied in view of this "place" of play, philosophy can be seen as more than a potential pre-paranoid defense system and/or religion as more complicated in its psychological roots than the use of the term projective mechanism indicates. Shared "illusion" can be either an avenue for experiencing our common humanity in which case it is a "productive" illusion, or a prison from which there is no escape. And in order to determine which "illusion" we are dealing with, we have to understand it in terms of its relationship in either hindering or promoting the capacity for "playful" separateness.

The extent of Winnicott's contribution to psychoanalysis and its technique can merely be suggested here. The capacity for play, between analyst and patient, Winnicott maintains, is a necessary pre-requisite for any meaningful analytic work to be done. Within such a context the therapeutic endeavor can be seen as aiding the growth of this potential space out of which communicative play comes. (The analyst must allow the patient to create what the analyst is, in fact, providing—the paradox is to be endured—and he does this most, Winnicott maintains, by not rushing in and impressing the patient with everything he, as analyst, is providing. This means, for one, brilliant interpretations.) The analyst in aiding the growth of this potential space is furthering the capacity for the patient to symbolize, as we know; to sublimate, to use a familiar term; actually to find and to build a bridge upon which both analyst and patient walk.